

Monasticism and the City in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages 1**Introduction**

Monasticism flourished in a variety of forms and landscapes. Between the third and the eighth century it took root in environments as diverse as the rolling hills of northern England and the valley of the Nile. Each of these microcosms tells a different, if connected, story about nuns and monks, their concerns and their lives. But one surrounding, one geographical setting, proved to be crucial: monasticism as a social movement was dependent on its success in the urban landscape. The role of the city in monasticism goes a long way to explain the movement's astonishing success in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages. Theirs was not an easy marriage, a union marked with friction. Monks and nuns were bound by their aspiration to find loneliness and seclusion, to pursue asceticism and find a way to God. And yet it proved to be not only possible but also desirable to combine these aspirations with the city. A productive tension emerged between the various shades of monasticism and the various forms of urbanism. In this Element, we will investigate this peculiar relationship and its underlying mechanisms.

This is, then, not a history of monasticism.¹ It is not a phenomenology of its various shades or an all-encompassing analysis. Whether there is really such a thing as a core, unified monasticism, or whether we should really speak of different monasticisms is disputed.² After all, solitary stylites in Syria bore little outward resemblance to the brothers in Monte Cassino, or the sisters in a monastery in southern Gaul. We posit, however, that a certain peculiar relationship to cities is a widespread aspect of all forms of ancient Christian monasticism.

This world of Christian monasticism stretched from the Atlantic Ocean to the Persian Gulf, and it influenced and was influenced by a region even broader, stretching as far as Aksum in Ethiopia and Chang'an in central China (see Figure 1). This was not exclusively a Roman world. Other cultures and other modes of political organisation played a crucial role between 300 and 700 from Ireland to Mesopotamia. We use the term 'Broad Mediterranean' – for this inland sea remained a central infrastructure of exchange at the core of this region. What did it mean to be a monk or a nun in this world? There are arguably two main characteristics of this calling: personal asceticism and an impetus to leave the human world behind to find spiritual perfection. Monks and nuns saw themselves as full-time salvation seekers, which coincided with an urge to move away from civic society. These were prevalent *attitudes*, traceable mainly in monastic texts, that did not always translate into prevalent *practices*. For example, the Pachomian rules brought communal living to the fore, their coenobitism deeply rooted in the

¹ For an introduction to the history of monasticism, see Vanderputten 2020, pp. 1–2.

² Beach and Cochelin 2020.

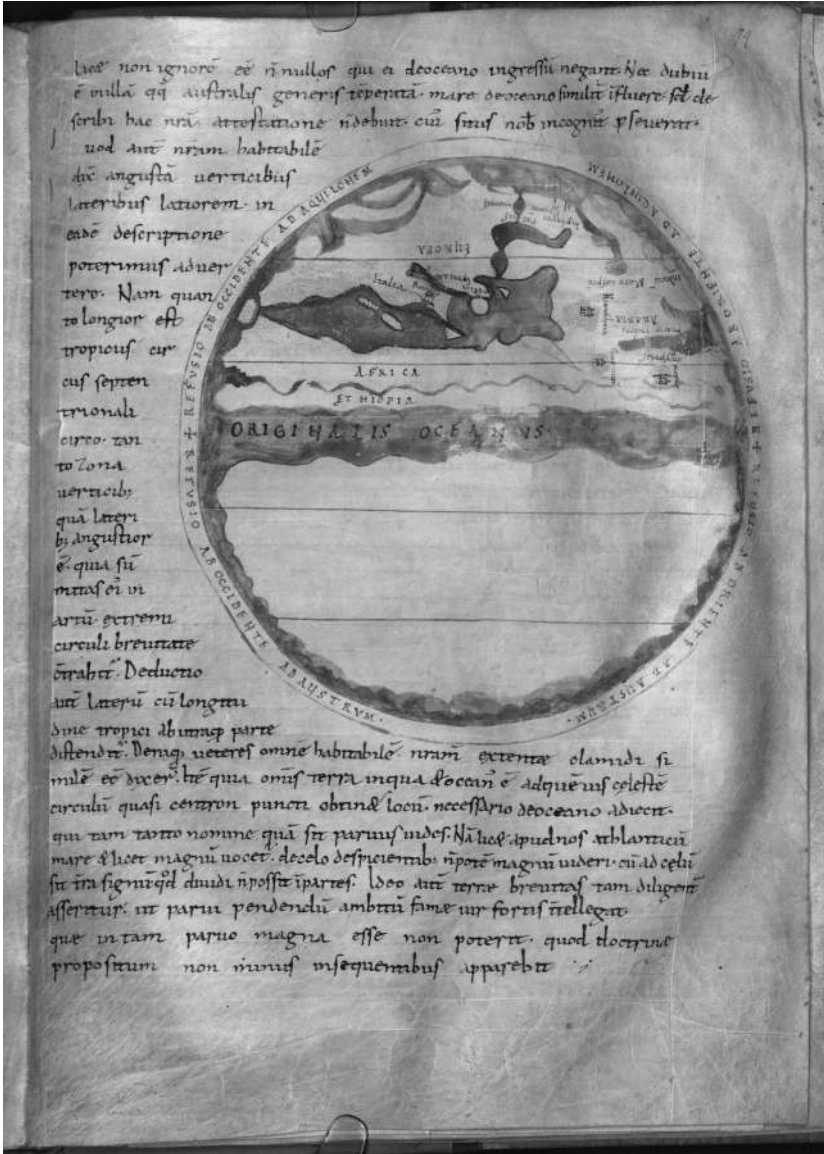


Figure 1 The Afroeurasian world, with the Mediterranean Sea at its centre. An eleventh-century map showing the world divided into climate zones. Bayerische Staatsbibliothek München, clm 6362, fol. 74r.

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urbanised world of Late Antiquity.³ Pachomius' (c. 292–348) contemporary Anthony (c. 251–356) on the other hand was accepted from early on as the figurehead of eremitism. For him and his followers, seclusion and loneliness were paramount. These were not traits exclusive to Christian monasticism.⁴ Similar attitudes and practices were common in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages, such as wandering Cynics, Jewish ascetics, and Islamic mystics.⁵ Opinions about who was or was not a monk or nun varied and these discussions were formative for the monastic movement. We should think of monasticism as a diverse, rhizomatic social movement, depending on a high degree of self-assertion and variable strategies of distinction. Already the earliest propagators of monasticism allowed for regional adaptability, frequently apart from institutionalising church structures.⁶ As with many social movements, monasticism's inherent differences made it necessary to invest part of its energy 'in the effort to bind such differences together'.⁷

Monasticism was as diverse as cities. Thousands of pages have been devoted to defining urbanism and its various manifestations. From functionalist to categorist approaches, this forest makes us often miss the trees. No doubt it is necessary to consider individual and local circumstances – the bar is obviously different in fifth-century southern Gaul than it is in Egypt. The patterns of settlement differed greatly inside the Broad Mediterranean. In the East, many regions remained heavily urbanised, and cities even continued to expand in some cases. In the West, the scale of towns tended to be smaller, and the landscape overall less urbanised. The impact of economic and social changes was no doubt more visible in the West. 'The city' remained a diverse phenomenon when it came to size, economic standing, or prestige. Scholars today have to frame the late antique city not only through its physical appearance but first and foremost through the functions it fulfilled for its inhabitants.⁸ As long as its observers and inhabitants saw it as something different, as long as it was capable of providing forms of surplus (not necessarily material), and as long as there was indication of marked internal organisation, we might call it a city.⁹ In this frame, the city remained a focus of religious activity, elite representation, and political administration. This broad framework allows us to consider settlements ranging from classical

³ Oexle 2011, p. 489.

⁴ We concentrate on Christian monasticism. There were other non-Christian ascetic movements in this period as well. See Wimbush and Valantasis 2002.

⁵ Livne-Kafri 1996.

⁶ The church in our period was a collection of diverse structures and beliefs that were regionally specific. See Brown 2003, pp. 355–80.

⁷ Melucci 1996, p. 13. ⁸ Humphries 2019, p. 31.

⁹ See Liebeschuetz 2001 and Grig 2013 for an overview of recent approaches.

civitates like Caesarea in Palestine to administrative capitals like Mainz, and to regional metropoleis like Alexandria.

Cities also had their own hinterlands that were functionally, ecclesiastically, and administratively connected to them. While the influence of a capital of a *pagus* might stretch for little more than a couple of kilometres, Constantinople had, arguably, a territory stretching thousands.¹⁰ These *territoria* could intersect and mix, making some monasteries adjacent to more than one urban space. Monasteries and even individual monks often lived in what we will call ‘spiritual suburbs’: territories of urban settlements that were bound to them by religious concerns and routine interaction. These affiliations formed according to geographical proximity but also according to political, intellectual, and symbolic needs. The description of Oxyrhynchus in *Historia Monachorum in Aegypto* highlights thousands of monastics within the city walls and then even more in its territory. The text recognises the division between the city proper and ‘the outer city [that] forms another town alongside the inner’, made up from monasteries in its spiritual suburbs.¹¹ In some areas this concept was almost formalised. Sabas (439–532) was ordained the archimandrite of all the monasteries of the province of Palaestina Prima in 494. Even if the capital of the province was technically Caesarea, Sabas became in effect the superior of all the monasteries in the spiritual suburb of Jerusalem. In others, especially in the West, it remained less defined. Indeed, it is hard to find an expression of monasticism in Late Antiquity that did not find itself in a spiritual suburb of an urban space.¹² Even the only known stylite of the West, Wulfilaich (fl. c. 590), built his column in ‘territorium Trevericae urbis’.¹³

Isidore of Seville (c. 560–636) in his *Etymologies* wrote: ‘A city (*civitas*) is a multitude of people united by a bond of community . . . Now *urbs* (also “city”) is the name for the actual buildings, while *civitas* is not the stone but the inhabitants’.¹⁴ In the post-classical world a city was, from a perspective of a bishop and writer on monasticism, first and foremost a group of people living together. Therefore, in his mind, inhabitants of cities were not really that different from monks living in a monastery. Isidore writes: ‘Cenobites whom we call those living “in a community”, because a convent is of several people’.¹⁵ We cannot go to Isidore for an analytical definition of a city. But we can read

¹⁰ See Ward-Perkins 2000.

¹¹ *Historia Monachorum in Aegypto*, 5; see also Elm 1994, p. 329, f. 45.

¹² Peter Brown has seen Holy Men as living always close to settlements but more in the rural setting, and yet, as soon as they gathered followers, they would gravitate towards towns. They would also fulfill functions of a town for the villagers, like for example, litigation, see Brown 1971, pp. 84–5.

¹³ Gregory of Tours, *Histories*, VIII, 15. ¹⁴ Isidore, *Etymologiae*, XV.ii.1.

¹⁵ Isidore, *Etymologiae*, VII.xiii.2.

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him to understand what it felt like to live in one in Late Antiquity – it was as much a way of life as it was a group of buildings.

No city remained the same for the 400 years that this Element covers. Cities were transformed and were adapted to new circumstances. The uses of public spaces changed, the role of the church in cities' internal organisation increased, focal points of cities shifted, and authorities evolved new expectations of what cities were supposed to do. All the adaptations and transformations had effects on monasticism. Not only the city influenced monasticism, but the movement influenced the city as well. For 'cities are not simply material or lived spaces – they are also spaces of the imagination and spaces of representation. How cities are envisioned has effects'.¹⁶

Cities and monasteries found themselves in a field of tension. Changes to one side had reverberations on the other. To grasp these reverberations, we need to engage with a variety of sources with different outlooks on the problem. Aspects of this field of tension come out only in comparison. Therefore, this Element is built on a varied set of sources. It ranges from hagiographies and monastic rules through synodal acts and historiographies to archaeological excavations. They cover Greek, Latin, Syriac, Ge'ez, and Chinese texts from Ireland to China. Our hypothesis is that in all these sources we see the productive tension of monasticism and the city.

We invite the readers to come with us on an interpretative journey to trace how monasticism is illuminated by its persistent links to the city and how the late antique city was transformed by monasticism. We start by presenting a key metaphor – that of monasticism as a *genre* of society. In Section 2, we see how urban institutions influenced the conventions of monasticism. Late antique urban societies and the monks and nuns accommodated each other; from their arrangement the monastic *cives* was born. In Section 3, we look at monks and nuns *in* cities. Monastic writers and trendsetters figured out the correct distance to the busy markets and streets and came to terms with monastic presence on those very streets and markets. Monks and nuns were also a political force to be reckoned with, strategically adapting between life in the city and the monastery. Section 4 illuminates how the life of a monk or a nun required a considerable amount of daily study. Feeling that cities failed to deliver on the front of education, individual monks, nuns, and monasteries took matters into their own hands. This was a crucial step in their quest for a different, if not better, city. Section 5 takes us beyond Late Antiquity and the world of the Mediterranean shores. How can this urban-monastic framework help us understand what was going on in Sasanian Persia, Tang China, or the Islamic

¹⁶ Bridge and Watson 2000, p. 7.

Caliphate? What was left to do for monks and nuns in worlds without cities or with weak ones like Ireland or post-Roman Britain? We close with a discussion of whether the monastery can be read as a *translatio* of the late antique city.

1 Monasticism as a Genre of Society

The first day when he came to stay there, he found a small piece of wood that had been inscribed thus by the brother who had lived there before him: 'I, Moses son of Theodore, am here and bearing witness.' The brother set the piece of wood before his eyes every day and asked the one who wrote it as though he were present, 'Where are you now, oh man, that you say, "I am present and bearing witness"?' What kind of world are you in at this time? And where is the hand that wrote this?'
Apophthegmata Patrum N. 519–520

Monasticism was not a monolith but rather a network of currents – a variety of strands that formed a tapestry woven sometimes tighter, sometimes looser. For all strands of monasticism, your *community* was as important as asceticism – even if this community was sometimes experienced by living apart.¹⁷ Becoming a monastic meant becoming a member of a community, and this community was never apart from broader society. Just like genres are categories of literature, so was monasticism a category of late antique society. Much like in a genre, be it romance or science fiction, to participate in monasticism you had to respect certain conventions. You could push them, changing the movement in the process, but there was always a horizon of expectation that you had to keep in sight if you did not want to lose your fellow monks and nuns or your lay audience. Over time the rules of this monastic genre became more rigid and the interpretative elbow room smaller. This process had an important gender dimension: female monasticism remained a space of experimentation longer and to a greater extent than male.¹⁸ As with a good sonnet, there is real artistry in operating within a set of literary rules. And, in the twist of textual fate, this progressive institutionalisation was also expressed as a text: the monastic rule. The history of monasticism could then be read as a history of women and men that operated within a societal genre.¹⁹

This notion seems to be contradicted by ascetics that do not busy themselves with literature of any form or kind. Monks and nuns were, sometimes, seemingly far away from the literary world. As if they were simply not interested in taking part in the wider movement. The story of Mary of Egypt is a case in point. Mary did not write anything. Her character in the *vita* by Sophronius (c. 560–638), patriarch of Jerusalem, initially appears ignorant of all conventions that

¹⁷ Goehring 1996. ¹⁸ Diem 2013.

¹⁹ Explaining social reality through textuality and using literature as a metaphor for society has precedent. See Brown 1987.

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Figure 2 Mary of Egypt, holding the three loaves of bread. From St Germain l'Auxerrois in Paris, sixteenth century. Photo © mbzt / Wikimedia Commons / CC BY-SA 4.0

would make monasticism. She lives in Alexandria in the fifth century and hers is the life of promiscuity. She joins a group of pilgrims to Jerusalem, not with the intention of seeking salvation, but for getting sexual pleasure from the other travellers. Salvation and asceticism find her nonetheless. It is on Golgotha where she finally repents. She buys three loaves of bread and leaves for the desert (see Figure 2). For forty-seven years she does not encounter a single living soul. Finally, a monk named Zosimos finds her and listens to her story. Mary dies soon after, leaving a note in the sand, and Zosimos goes on to tell her

tale. Her apparent obliviousness to literature, monasticism, or community did not hinder her story from becoming one of the staples of early medieval asceticism. Quite the contrary, from initial short remarks about a female ascetic by earlier authors, her story grew and evolved into the version that Sophronius so successfully put to parchment.²⁰ Mary did not intend to become part of the community and it would change nothing if she never existed in the first place. But she was taken in through progressive re-workings of her story, adapting her deeds into what was expected from an ascetic character. She became a staple of monasticism – her *vita* reached all regions and languages of the Broad Mediterranean, including Old English, Latin, and Syriac. This process of being taken into the genre is one key function of what we call literarisation.²¹ The other function of this concept is exemplified by Jerome.

Jerome (c. 347–420), church father, translator of the Bible and prolific author, came from a wealthy family and had lived in Rome, Trier, and Aquileia. After years of studies and life as a young urban professional, he left everything behind to be alone, to fast, and do penance. He peddled a vision of that experience in his letters as eremitic and desert-like, characterised by isolation, in complete opposition to the pleasures of Rome. Jerome uses his connections and status to become a member of the monastic community: he spreads the story of his own ascetic experience. ‘In the corner of the desert which stretches between the Syrians and the Saracens’,²² his monastic pedigree could take shape. Jerome takes his monastic credentials into his own hands. In Chalcis, he boasted having scribes at his disposal and a library.²³ He received correspondence and supplies, took language lessons, and annoyed local monks and clergy.²⁴ He also kept a watchful eye on the episcopal affairs in nearby Antioch.²⁵ Jerome desired to stay relevant and persuasive to others, like other prominent monks. Isolation and contemplation lent authority and lineage but their positive effects on any career were squandered when they led to irreversible social isolation.

This is also why ‘going into the desert’ was for Jerome a reversible act. Jerome stayed some three years in Chalcis, but he never lost touch with church politics and left the desert to get involved in those politics in Antioch and Constantinople. Whether he intended to make the desert his final home is difficult to say. The retreat to the desert was a never completed process or a singular act. The *monastic* desert was not fully attainable – one could only work towards it. It remained a pillar of monastic thought nonetheless.²⁶ As the

²⁰ Sophronius of Jerusalem, *Life of Mary*. ²¹ See Fafinski and Riemenschneider 2022.

²² Jerome, *Letters*, Ep. 7; a line that he repeats often, see Ep. 5.

²³ Jerome, *Letters*, Ep. 22.7, 5. ²⁴ See Rebenich 2002.

²⁵ Schlange-Schöningen 2018, p. 81.

²⁶ Rapp 2006. See Eucherius, bishop of Lyon in the fifth century, and his *In Praise of the Desert*.

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example of the Coptic *Life of Onnophrius* shows, desert asceticism consists of stages – and you could always go even deeper into the desert.²⁷ In this, the *Life of Anthony* might well have served as an example. The desert was not the ideal destination but the ideal direction: it was literarised at the hands of such authors like Jerome. While it might express a real experience, it ultimately expressed an ideology.²⁸

To be a monk meant to engage with texts, be it through writing, interpretation, or enacting in practice. Literarisation allows you to become a member of a social movement either through getting written into the genre, writing yourself into it, or acting along its rules. All monastic literature is at least to a certain degree prescriptive.²⁹ Therefore, a concern with books, letters, and rules can signal who is in and who is out on monasticism.³⁰ This also meant an incentive to participate in a monastic history – an attempt to coordinate various strands of the monastic past. Monastic rules even prescribed writing down ‘every deed and every word that occurs in their domain’.³¹ The multivocality of monastic rules alone in Late Antiquity was immense.³² The movement consequently had a semblance of coherence only as a set of texts in dialogue and in contradiction with each other.³³

While ambitious authors and monastic activists like Jerome could use this to their advantage, it was not solely used by career-oriented elites. If we look at the anonymous *Historia Monachorum in Aegypto* (written around 400), we can see more modest pilgrims and monks deploying the image of the *eremos*, equally open to creative interpretations of what constituted loneliness and desert. The *Historia* is a fascinating report of a group of seven monks who visited the most renowned eremites of Egypt. The travelling monks were likely members of the monastery on the Mount of Olives founded by Jerome’s close acquaintance and ‘frenemy’ Rufinus (345–411). These monks were keen on gathering the wisdom of the desert fathers, but they were also fascinated by the desert experience. In the prologue, the author exclaims that ‘they [the Egyptian eremites] do not busy themselves with any earthly matter’ but ‘live as true citizens of heaven’. Some, the author says, ‘do not even know that another world exists on earth, or that evil is found in cities’. Instead, they dwell ‘scattered in the desert waiting for Christ’.³⁴ Therefore, it seems strange that the account of their first encounter with another monk – John, said to be a clairvoyant – describes anything but a secluded hermit, waiting for Christ. John used his gift to predict the tide of the

²⁷ *Life of Onnophrius*. ²⁸ Goehring 2003, pp. 441–2.

²⁹ See Jonas of Bobbio, *Life of Columbanus*. ³⁰ See Williams 2006.

³¹ Shenoute, *Rules*, n. 474. ³² Diem and Rousseau 2020.

³³ A fact that late antique authors were consciously engaging, see Westergren 2018.

³⁴ *Historia Monachorum in Aegypto*, prologue 6–7.