

## THE DAILY LIFE IN THE COPTIC MONASTERIES (ANALITICAL STUDY)

SHERIN SADEK EL GENDI<sup>1</sup>

### ABSTRACT:

During the less complex and less sophisticated ages, man was in closer contact with God and a sort of fellow-feeling bound them. Nowadays, if we go to visit the Coptic monasteries, we can live a different and a very interesting experience. Several are the visitors of the Coptic monasteries in Egypt and abroad. Sometimes, visitors want to spend several days in these spiritual places to enjoy the monks' life and to follow their system. Why these monasteries attract the visitors? Is it only to worship? How is the daily life inside these religious foundations? How are living the monks together? What are their different activities? I would like to focus my on the details of the daily life of these monks. I'll start my study by describing the scientific meaning of the words monastery, monk and nun. Then, I'll speak about the main reasons that caused the appearance of the Coptic monasticism. I'll deal also with the various categories of the monks who lived inside the Coptic monasteries, their grades, their clothes and their different activities.

---

<sup>1</sup> Associate Professor of Coptic and Islamic art and archeology in the faculty of arts/Ain Shams University. Cairo (EGYPT).

## الحياة اليومية في الأديرة القبطية

د. شيرين صادق الجندي<sup>٢</sup>

### ملخص:

منذ بدء الخليقة، وجدت علاقة حميمة دائمة بين الإنسان وخالقه. وقد أخذت هذه العلاقة أشكالاً متعددة بسبب اختلاف المعتقدات الدينية. وعند زيارة الأديرة القبطية، يعيش الزائرون تجربة متميزة وفريدة. ويتوافد الزائرون من مصر وخارجها على الأديرة القبطية لقضاء بعض الأوقات في هذا المنشآت الدينية والتي شيدت منذ القدم في الصحارى المصرية. ولكن ما الذى يجذب هؤلاء الزائرون لهذا الأديرة البعيدة؟ هل السبب فقط هو العبادات؟ وكيف تكون الحياة اليومية داخل هذه الأبنية؟ وكيف يتعايش الرهبان متعددى الجنسيات معاً؟ وما هى أنشطتهم اليومية المختلفة؟

لذا حرصت الباحثة على الإجابة على كل هذه التساؤلات من خلال توضيح المقصود ببعض المصطلحات مثل الدير والراهب والمكرسات إلى جانب دراسة الأسباب التى أدت إلى ظهور حركة الرهبنة القبطية. كما تناولت هذه الدراسة أنواع الرهبان الذين عاشوا داخل الأديرة القبطية ودرجاتهم الكهنوتية وملابسهم وأنشطتهم اليومية المختلفة.

<sup>٢</sup> أستاذ مساعد الآثار والفنون القبطية والإسلامية بكلية الآداب - جامعة عين شمس

During the less complex and less sophisticated ages, man was in closer contact with God and a sort of fellow-feeling bound them. Nowadays, if anyone goes to visit the Coptic monasteries, he can live a different and a very interesting experience. Several are the visitors of the Coptic monasteries in Egypt and abroad. Sometimes, visitors want to spend several days in these spiritual places to enjoy the monks' life and to follow their system. Why these monasteries built away within the deserts attract the visitors? Is it only to worship? Why do men join the monastic movement? How is the daily life inside these religious foundations? How are living the monks together? What are their different activities? In this paper, I would like to focus my attention on the details of the daily life of these monks. On the following notes, I'll start my study by describing the main reasons of the appearance of the monastic movement in Egypt, the meaning of the words monk, nun and monastery. Then, I'll speak about the main aspects of the Coptic monastic life. I'll deal also with the various categories of the monks who lived inside the Coptic monasteries, their grades, their clothes and their activities. This will be the second part of my study as the first one was a paper that I wrote about the Coptic monasteries<sup>3</sup> and that was presented in the conference of the Papyrology Center in Ain Shams University in March 2012.

### 1- Coptic monasticism and its different forms in Egypt

According to G. GABRA, Coptic monasticism found its origin in the Bible as follow: "*Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight*"<sup>4</sup>, "*Living on the margins of society and calling on society to repent*"<sup>5</sup>, "*To which he would often return to pray in solitude*"<sup>6</sup> and "*If you want to be perfect, go sell all your possessions and give*

<sup>3</sup> SHERIN SADEK EL GENDI, *L'architecture des monastères coptes autrefois et aujourd'hui (Étude comparative)*, "The Third International Congress, The Mutual Influence Between the Ancient Civilizations", BullACPSI, I, Cairo, 2012, pp. 59-73.

<sup>4</sup> Is. 40: 3-5; G. GABRA, *Coptic Monasteries. Egypt's Monastic Art and Architecture*, with a Historical Overview by T. VIVIAN, Cairo-New York, 2002, p. 20.

<sup>5</sup> Lk. 3:3; G. GABRA, *Monasteries*, p. 20.

<sup>6</sup> Lk. 4:42; G. GABRA, *Monasteries*, p. 20.

to the poor, and come follow me, and you will have treasure in heaven”<sup>7</sup>. To live the world and to be only with God means to be alone with the Alone. This was the main idea of the monastic life which appeared in Egypt in the third century AD. as a result of the cruel persecutions that took place during the roman period. It is to be known that Egypt offered the monastic life to the entire world. Monasticism appeared at first in Egypt and later it was known abroad.

G. GABRA added also that: “*The first known monk, however (that is, the first ascetic known as a monachos), was not a solitary but, rather, was a village monk, one of the apotaktikoi or “renunciants”... A papyrus dated to 324 CE cites a monachos named Isaac, along with a deacon named Antonius*”<sup>8</sup>. The same author added that the monastic life erased in Egypt, Syria and Palestine by the virgins, the widows and the village ascetics<sup>9</sup>.

The Egyptian monasticism consists of three different types: The first one is the complete solitariness in which man lives alone for the rest of his life in a natural cave totally cut into the desert. The famous outstanding between men was Saint Paul the first Hermit and the originator of the asceticism who spent about ninety years in the desert away from people during the third century AD. According to the Coptic Orthodox Tradition, a crow used to bring to him half bread every day. There was also a palm tree near the entrance of his cell. A short time before his death, Saint Anthony the Great visited him. In this day, the crow brought complete bread for the two Saints. After the death of Saint Paul the Hermit, Saint Anthony the Great buried his body after digging his grave<sup>10</sup> helped by two tigers which appeared to him miraculously in the same place over which was built later his monastery in the Red Sea. The

<sup>7</sup> Mt. 19: 21; G. GABRA, *Monasteries*, p. 20.

<sup>8</sup> G. GABRA, *Monasteries*, p. 21.

<sup>9</sup> G. GABRA, *Monasteries*, pp. 21-22.

<sup>10</sup> G. GABRA, *Monasteries*, pp. 87-94.

biography of Saint Paul the Hermit was written by Saint Jerome during the fourth century AD.

One cannot neglect to mention the name of Saint Mary the Errant or the Repentant which is the feminine image of the solitary life. Being with a wonderful beauty, she spent the first half of her life in sin. After visiting the Resurrection Church in Jerusalem, she decided to withdraw into the Jordan desert being twenty nine years old to live in a complete solitariness for about forty five years. Saint Zosima who was an abbot in one of the monasteries of the eastern desert met her suddenly. She asked him to bring her the Holy Communion the following year. When he returned back to see her, a year later, she was died after leaving a slip of paper beside her body with the following words: “Return unto the earth what belongs to the earth, and pray for me”<sup>11</sup>. Because she was wandering throughout the desert without living in a cave, she was called the Errant.

The second type of the monasticism is the semi-solitary life founded by Saint Anthony the Great by the end of the third and the beginning of the fourth century AD<sup>12</sup>. Being a member of a rich family originated from the village of Qimn al-Arus in Bani Swaif, Saint Anthony the Great is the real founder of the anchorite life. Being twenty years old, his parents passed away leaving to him a young sister. One day, he went to audit the mass in the church and he heard the biblical text mentioned before<sup>13</sup>. Then he distributed all his fortune to the poor and he left his sister with several religious women. He lived in a small cell in the desert and when a big number of disciples became to live around him, he decided to go

<sup>11</sup> F. NAU, “Histoire des solitaires égyptiens”, *ROC*, XIII, Paris (1908), pp. 57-60; IRIS HABIB ELMASRY, *Introduction to the Coptic Church*, 1977, pp. 22-26; E. WIPSZYCKA, “Les clercs dans les communautés monastiques d’Égypte”, *JJP*, XXVI, Oxford (1994), pp. 135-166; R. S. BAGNALL, *Egypt in Late Antiquity*, Princeton, 1996, pp. 293-303; J. E. GOEHRING, “Monasticism in Byzantine Egypt: Continuity and Memory”, in: (Ed.) R. S. BAGNALL, *Egypt in the Byzantine World 300-700*, Cambridge, 2010, pp. 390-405.

<sup>12</sup> OTTO F. A. MEINARDUS, *Monks and Monasteries of the Egyptian Deserts*, Reviewed ed., Cairo-New York, 2002, pp. 1-4.

<sup>13</sup> *Mt.* 19:21, p. 1 in this article.

into the oriental desert near al-Qalala plateau and he lived within a small cell totally cut into the rock in the Rea Sea. The fame of Saint Anthony the Great crossed the sea and several persons came from everywhere to live with him according to the Anthonian system<sup>14</sup>. He lived in the desert surrounded by his different disciples. Each one was living in a cell from Sunday evening to Saturday noon. At midday on every Saturday, they were meeting each other and they were spending the time until the evening of Sunday. According to the famous historian ABU SALIH THE ARMENIAN, Saint Anthony the Great is called the Star of the desert. In the Coptic Orthodox Church, he is also the first one to have disciples gathering round him to learn and to be directed<sup>15</sup>. The life of Saint Anthony the Great was written by Saint Athanasius the Coptic patriarch who lived in Alexandria during the fourth century AD.

Regarding the third type of the monasticism, Saint Pachomius who had pagan parents is considered to be the first leader of the coenobitic life<sup>16</sup> in the end of the fourth century and the beginning of the fifth century AD. Being a soldier in the roman army, he was made to encamp with his colleagues in the north of Aswan. Some natives from Esna came and offered to them food and water. When he knew that they helped them because they were Christians and Jesus Christ encouraged them to love and to help people, he decided to become Christian should he return safely home. He went to Esna where he met Palamon the aged ascetic with whom he spent about three years in one of the desert's caves. Later Saint Pachomius gave himself wholly to God by leaving alone in a

<sup>14</sup> BANUB HABASHI, *al-Rahbana al-qibtiya*, Alexandria, 1948; KIRULLUS AL-ANTUNI, Hegumenos. *Kawkab al-Barriyah, al-Qiddis al-Anba Antuniyus*, Cairo, 1948; OTTO F. A. MEINARDUS, *Christian Egypt. Ancient and Modern*, Cairo, 1965; OTTO F. A. MEINARDUS, *Christian Egypt Faith and Life*, Cairo, 1970; G. GABRA, *Monasteries*, pp. 21, 73-87.

<sup>15</sup> E. WIPZYCKA, "Saint Antoine et les carriers d'Alexandrie: Remarques sur le chapitre 46 de la Vita Antoni d'Athanase", *ÉtudTrav.*, XIV, Varsovie (1983), pp. 460-463.

<sup>16</sup> A. VEUILLEUX, art. "Monasticism, Pachomian", *CoptEnc.*, V, 1664b-1666a; J. E. GOHRING, "Withdrawing from the Desert: Pachomius and the Development of Village Monasticism in Upper Egypt", *HThR*, LXXXVIII, Chico, California (1999), pp. 89-108; G. GABRA, *Monasteries*, p. 21.

new cave. In his communal or coenobitical life, he lived all his time with his disciples, praying for them, teaching, advising and guiding them. Saint Pachomius built the first monastery in the world for men in Tabenissi near Denderah. After the visit of his sister Mary to him, he built two monasteries for the women. The Pachomian rule charmed not only the Egyptian men and women but also the foreigners who came to live in his monasteries for some years or forever. In the Coptic Orthodox Church, Saint Pachomius is the Father of the Cenobites. In 404 AD., Saint Jerome translated the Pachomian rules from the Greek and Coptic into the Latin, which caused the spreading of the monastic movement throughout the world.

Moreover, Saint Macarius the Great and his friend Saint Amonius were the founders of the monastic life in Wadi Natrun<sup>17</sup> in the Lybian Desert during the fourth century AD. According to several historians, Saint Macarius the Great is the Father of the patriarchs at the She-heat Desert.

Furthermore, Saint Pishoi and Saint Shenute the Archimandrite founded the monastic rules in Upper Egypt during the fifth century AD. In Sohag, their monasteries known as the Red and the White monasteries are visited till now. Saint Samuel the Confessor was also one of the biggest monastic figures who founded monasticism in Fayyum during the seventh century AD.

In general, female ascetics were also famous in Egypt like Saints Theodora and Sara. The monastery of Saint Jeremiah at Saqqara was in relation with a nunnery. The historical sources and the manuscripts mentioned about 1800 nuns who were living in the time of Saint Shenute the Archimandrite<sup>18</sup>. As the female monastic

<sup>17</sup> OMAR TOUSSOUN, *Sur le Wadi Natroun, ses moines et ses couvents*, Alexandrie, 1931; H. G. E. WHITE, *The Monasteries of Nitria and Scetis*, 3 vols., New York, 1933.

<sup>18</sup> G. GABRA, *Historical Dictionary of the Coptic Church*, with Contributions by B. A. PEARSON, M. N. SWANSON and YOUHANNA NESSIM YOUSSEF, Cairo, 2008, p. 205; G. GABRA, *Cairo the Coptic Museum & Old Churches*, Cairo, 1999, 31-33.

population was very distinguished<sup>19</sup>, from the fourth to the seventh century AD., a considerable number of Coptic women disguised themselves as monks. Many of them escaped from marriage like for example Saint Hilaria (21 Tuba/29 January) who was the daughter of the roman emperor Zenon and who lived in the desert of Sheheat. There were also other daughters of notables, governors and kings like Saints Marina (15 Misra/21 August), Theodora (11 Tut/21 September), Pelagia (11 Baba/21 October), Matruna (14 Hatur/23 November), Anastasia (26 Tuba/3 February), Talida who founded a convent in Antinoë in addition to Alexandra (7 Amshir/14 February) and Martha (3 Baouna/10 June)<sup>20</sup>. The Coptic *synaxarion* lists a total of eighteen mothers and their children suffering martyrdom in the pre-Nicene persecutions.

Moreover, the word monk derived from the Greek word *monos* which means the one who lives alone to worship away from the world perhaps as a hermit or as a coenobitic monk *monacws*. In his reference published in 2002, G. GABRA wrote the meaning of this word as solitary<sup>21</sup>. The word nun means the female figure of the monk in the monastic life. The word monastery derived from the Greek word *monasthion*<sup>22</sup>.

## 2. The four main aspects of the monastic life

In the monastery, the monks know well the seven sacraments of the Coptic Church which are: the baptism, the Chrism (confirmation), the Eucharist, the confession or repentance, the unction, the matrimony and the holy orders<sup>23</sup>. The monks are not

<sup>19</sup> A. GUILLAUMONT, art. "Monasticism, Egyptian", *CoptEnc.*, V, New York, 1991, 1661a-1664b.

<sup>20</sup> SHERIN SADEK EL GENDI, "La femme copte ses rôles et ses fonctions de l'antiquité au vingtième siècle", *BSAA*, XLVIII, Alexandrie (2009), 147-191, pls. LI-LIII; OTTO F. A. MEINARDUS, *Coptic Saints and Pilgrimages*, II<sup>nd</sup> ed., Cairo-New York, 2003, 46-49.

<sup>21</sup> G. GABRA, *Monasteries*, p. 21.

<sup>22</sup> R. G. COQUIN, art. "Dayr", *CoptEnc.*, III, 695 a; SHERIN SADEK EL GENDI, *L'architecture*, I, p. 3.

<sup>23</sup> IRIS HABIB ELMASRY, *Introduction*, p. 39.



only praying, fasting and teaching but they are examples to be followed in everything. In the Christian faith, without work, the person is dead<sup>24</sup>.

In the Coptic monasticism, there are four main aspects to be monk. Chastity is the first aspect and it means that the monk must be a purer and more engaged in the spiritual life by mortifying his body<sup>25</sup>.

Regarding the requirements of monasticism, the absolute obedience and isolation from the entire world and the human being is a second important aspect in order to be a monk. One must come back to the speeches of Saint Anthony the Great: “*Just as a fish would die out of water, a monk would perish if he tarried long away from his cell*”. Saint John the Short was one of the most important paragon of virtue. From these few words, it is evident that the monk is devoting himself to pray, to learn and to read literature and contemplation. It seems that in the beginning of the appearance of the Coptic monasticism, monks followed this rule without any exceptions. Sometimes, the monk may leave his monastery for a specific time to accomplish a certain service to the church or to the monastic life. In all cases, he must obey to the abbot of the monastery.

The third aspect is the voluntary poverty and to be engaged in fulfillment the Teachings of the Christ<sup>26</sup>. This matter requires from anyone who wants to be a monk to forget about all the pleasures of the life and to be ascetic. The last aspect to be a monk is to the manual work and to earn daily bread as it is mentioned in the Holy Book.

<sup>24</sup> “You believes that there is One God; thou doest well ... show me my faith without thy works, and I will show you my faith by my works ...”. *Jm.* 2: 4-26.

<sup>25</sup> *I Cor.* 7:7, 38; *Is.* 56: 3-9; *Mt.* 19: 10-12; 22:30; ARCHBISHOP, art. “Monk”, *CoptEnc.*, V, 1667b-1668b.

<sup>26</sup> *Mk.* 10:21; *Mt.* 19:29.

### 3. Why men decide to live alone into the deserts or within the monasteries?

Through the different periods, many people decided to join the monastic life. There were some reasons behind their decisions. May be it was because a vision or a dream. Some people believed that by asceticism, praying, fasting and meditation, they may atone their sins. For others, Teaching of the Holy Scripture was the most important thing: The case of Saint Anthony the Great when he heard the biblical text<sup>27</sup> may be the most significant. For many persons, the ascetic life is spiritually superior to all the pleasures of the world. They decide to be an ideal example to be followed. For those who have ambition and desire for leadership, they may find monasticism means rather than as an end<sup>28</sup>. They know well that patriarchs and bishops are usually chosen from the monasteries that's why it is not surprising to find medicines, pharmacists, engineers and businessmen among the monks of the Coptic monasteries. Furthermore, economic problems may encourage people to withdraw into the deserts. They want to escape from the heavy responsibilities and the bad economical crises as they are not able to continue in the ordinary life.

### 4. Steps to be a monk

There are no age limits to be a monk. According to G. GABRA, the new candidate is usually left with the gatekeeper for several days to learn various prayers<sup>29</sup>. At the first stage, the person spends from one week to a month in the retreat house after wearing gray clothes. If the abbot of the monastery accepts him for his chastity and obedience, the candidate starts the second stage which may be from one year to year and half. During this period, the candidate is wearing blue clothes and he lives in a cell. He receives the title of "Brother" and he is given one of the names of the

---

<sup>27</sup> Mt. 19: 21, p. 1 in this article.

<sup>28</sup> W. Lyster, *Monastery of Saint Paul*, Cairo, 1999, pp. 9, 14, 20.

<sup>29</sup> G. GABRA, *Cairo*, p. 32.

famous Coptic saint to follow his system. In the third stage which may be from two to three years and half, the candidate wears white clothes. All the Coptic Synod supervises him. If he is accepted, he becomes a monk and he wears the black uniform of the monks consisting of a linen tunic, girdle, goatskin, cowl usually decorated with the sign of the monastery. These clothes are washed in fixed regular times. The monks may have also a staff and sandals. Speaking about monks' grades in the Coptic Orthodox Church, there are deacons, archdeacons, priests, *hegomenos*, bishops and patriarchs.

### **5. The most interesting categories of the monks in the Coptic monasteries through the different eras**

Some important writers, historians, philosophers, travelers and saints of the early Christianity came from Armenia, Asia Minor, Ethiopia, Italy, Spain, Sardinia and Syria to live with the Egyptian monks such as Saint Basil the Great (330-379 AD.), Saint John Cassian (360- 435 AD.), Saints Maximos and Domitius who were the sons of the roman emperor Justinian (364-375 AD.), Saint Caesarius of Arles (470-542 AD.) and Saint Benedict of Nursia (480-550 AD.). Immediately after his visit to Egypt, Saint John Cassian started in Marseilles the foundation of several monasteries dedicated to Saint Victor and also to Saint Salvador<sup>30</sup>.

PALLADIUS was also the traveler historian of the early monasticism who spent many years in Egypt as a monk. He described all what he saw and heard about the Coptic monks and monasteries in his book entitled *Historia Monachorum in AEGYPTO*. RUFINUS who wrote the *Historia Lausiaca* in 419 AD., reported the most important details of the early Coptic monastic life. The title of his source derives from the dedication of the book to Lausiaca who was the chamberlain of the roman emperor

---

<sup>30</sup> G. GABRA, *Dictionary*, p. 203.

Theodidios II. This work was translated in Latin, Syriac, Armenian and Ethiopian in addition to some fragments which are in Coptic<sup>31</sup>.

Through its long history, the Coptic Orthodox Church kept good relationships with both the Syrian and the Ethiopian Churches. The famous historian AL-MAQRIZI mentioned that there were about forty five different monasteries in Wadi Natrun like the Ethiopian, the Armenian, the Nubian monasteries<sup>32</sup> as well as the monastery of Saint John Kame and the monastery of Saint John the Little.

In the Syrian monastery, there is also the tree of Saint Evram the Syrian who came to visit Saint Pishoi during the fourth century AD. From the earliest times most probably from the sixth century AD., the Syrian monks were established in the Syrians monastery in Wadi Natrun because of the cultural and commercial change existing between Egypt and Syria<sup>33</sup> and because of the byzantine persecutions that took place in Syria during the sixth century AD. ANBA MARTYROS, mentioned that they went also to visit Abba Hydra at Aswan<sup>34</sup>. The Syrian monks lived together with the Coptic monks for a long period that's why visitors can see the Syrian art influence in some wall paintings decorating the interior walls of the main archeological church dedicated to the Holy Virgin Mary within this monastery.

From the eleventh century AD., the Armenians monks who escaped from the byzantine persecutions came to Egypt and they are living till now in Cairo. The Copts left to them several monasteries. Pope Cyril II gave the monastery of Saint George in Torah to the Armenian monks in the time of Badr al-Gammali the famous Armenian vizier during the Fatimid period. The same monastery returned back to the Copts in the time of Pope Mark. The

<sup>31</sup> G. GABRA, *Dictionary*, p. 219.

<sup>32</sup> AL-MAQRIZI, *Kitab al-Mawa'iz wa'l-i'tibar bid'ikr al-Khitat wa'l-a'tar*, II, II<sup>nd</sup> ed. of Bulaq, Cairo, 1835, pp. 508-509; AL-MAQRIZI, *Tarikh al-aqbat al-ma'ruf bi'l-qawl al-ibrizi li'l-'allama al-Maqrizi*, étudié par 'ABD AL-MA'UD DIYAB, Le Caire, 1998.

<sup>33</sup> ANBA MARTYROS, *Ruhban min ginsiyat mukhtalifa*, Cairo, 2007, p. 6.

<sup>34</sup> ANBA MARTYROS, *Ruhban*, p. 8.

Armenians had monasteries in al-Basatin, at Wadi Natrun and in al-Hammam in the district of Abnub in Asiyut<sup>35</sup>.

In the mid-sixteenth century AD., i. e., in the ottoman period, there was a large Ethiopian community in the monastery of Saint Anthony the Great in the Red Sea and also in the Syrians monastery<sup>36</sup>.

From medieval times, the Franciscan Friars stayed in some Coptic monasteries especially in the monastery of Saint Anthony the Great in the Red Sea. During the seventeenth century AD., they learned Arabic and they were preparing for their religious missions in the Orient and also in Ethiopia. According to ANBA MARTYROS, the Nubian monks came also to live in Egypt especially Saint Moses the Black who lived in Wadi Natrun<sup>37</sup>.

It is important to know also that the introduction of the Catholicism in Egypt took place because of the political influence of the French advisors under the rule of Mohamed Ali pasha (1805–1845 AD.) who endeavored the unification of both the Coptic Orthodox Church and this one of Roma. In 1845 AD., there was an attempt from the Russian Archimandrite who desired the union of the Coptic Orthodox Church and the Jacobi Copts. In 1854 AD., the Presbyterian Church of North America sent its religious missions in Egypt and in 1863 AD., the first theological evangelical school was founded to prepare pastors in Egypt. During the Ottoman period also, the Jesuits were established in Upper Egypt most probably in the beginning of 1879 AD<sup>38</sup>. Together with the Franciscans, they started the foundation of several schools and colleges in Egypt.

Apart from the most important direct influence of the Egyptian monks in the occidental Christianity, some Coptic monks and nuns had given a considerable veneration in the European countries. For example, Saint Verena the Theban went with Saint

<sup>35</sup> ANBA MARTYROS, *al-Arman fi Misr*, Cairo, 2007, pp. 3, 6.

<sup>36</sup> ANBA MARTYROS, *Ruhban*, p. 22.

<sup>37</sup> ANBA MARTYROS, *Ruhban*, p. 34.

<sup>38</sup> G. GABRA, *Dictionary*, pp. 9-10.

Maurice to Switzerland and she taught the natives cleanness. She suffered persecutions there during the rule of the roman emperor Diocletian (284-305 AD.) Some of her relics are at Zuzach in Aargau. Other parts were transferred in 1986 in the cathedral of Saint Mark in Cairo. Saint Victor was venerated in Geneva. Saints Felix and Regula who were members in the Egyptian legion of the Thebaid in Upper Egypt, became martyrs in Zürich<sup>39</sup>. It is important to mention that the Coptic monasteries provided the international churches with monks and outstanding abbots who were called to fill the See of Jerusalem. Others were chosen to be bishops of the Ethiopian Church.

## 6. Monks activities in the Coptic monasteries

Last time, the one who decided to enter the monastery was considered as a dead, i. e., he will not leave it anymore and he will not need anything from the external world. The ancient monk considered the desert as a cell. In this way, he lived in a cell within a cell. This concept has lately step by step developed. The geographical position helped the monks to well manage their affairs. From ancient times, the monastery was considered as a school. The monk was called our teacher ΠΕΝ ΣΑΞ. The most important two features of the Coptic monasticism are work and residence in a cell.

Concerning the religious activities, the Coptic monk's daily life starts early. The monk's day begins at midnight after he was slept during the first half of the night, with the service of the midnight psalmody and its prayer, followed by readings from the scriptures until daybreak. He may attend the Divine Liturgy if it is celebrated. He engages himself in the particular vocation to which he is suited on which has been assigned to him. He is also supposed to be silently praying or attending other prayers according to the

---

<sup>39</sup> OTTO F. A. MEINARDUS, *Monks*, 4.

time of the day. Then he begins one of the different activities in the monastery.

Today, they aren't anchorites monks in the Qalala plateau. From time to time, several monks go up to the mountain cave of Saint Antony the Great for praying and asceticism. They may spend one or two days but not more. Nowadays, the monastic movement consists of community worship which means that when monks sit together in the refectory to take the *aghabi*, they don't engage in conversation about worldly or social topics in order to listen silently to another monk who usually reads in front of them passages and texts from the book entitled *Bustan al-ruhban (Paradise of the monks)* and other same references of edification (Pl. I).

Sometimes, the Coptic patriarch sends some of the monks and bishops to serve in the Coptic Orthodox Church built in several other places in Egypt and abroad without abandoning prayer and the other religious duties. This means that the monastic life is still going on today but with some modifications in the monks' style of life.

Regarding the scientific activities within the Coptic monasteries, during the second half of the twentieth century AD., monks who now take their vows are young people who finished studies in the universities specially the monks of the monastery of saint Macarius the Great in Wadi Natrun and in this why they presented a big benefit to their communities and to their monasteries. Some of them prepared also MA and Ph. D. Thirty of them became Coptic patriarchs. Christian sculptures and doctrine's instruction are provided for the monks each week on the two fast days. Some of the Coptic monks were and are usually excellent scholars. Discussions about spiritual and religious topics may take place after work. The manual work in the library is one of the responsibilities of many of the monks in the monastery (Pl. II). In the library, they may spend several hours to read, to study and to borrow books, to prepare scientific researches as they take part in the international conferences and symposiums in Egypt and abroad

(Pl. III). It is important to know that an international conference about the daily life of the Coptic monks took place under the title of: “*La vie quotidienne des moines en Orient et en Occident (IV<sup>e</sup>-X<sup>e</sup> siècles)*” questions transversales” from 21 to 23 November in 2011 in Paris.

Concerning the cultural activities, the Coptic monks are skillful artists. Some of them are charged by art as well as ivory work, glasswork, metalwork, woodwork, icons and textiles, wall paintings as well as copying manuscripts and other communal service. In fact, Coptic art was developed through the years within the monasteries because of the monks’ efforts and care.

Inside the Coptic monasteries, there are also social and economical activities<sup>40</sup> such as guarding the gates, excursions and visitors’ Tour Guiding, cells building, working in local mineral sources like salt, working in the oil press and the millhouse (Pl. IV), preparing the museum (Pl. V), gardening, animals’ and birds education in the farm, baking and cooking, carpentry, weaving and shoemaking, producing baskets and ropes, camels driving in addition to burring the bodies of the monks who died within the monastery in the *tafos*.

Being the only country blessed by the Savior outside his birth land according to the Coptic Orthodox Tradition, the Escape of the Holy Family into Egypt was the result of an angelic vision warning of the Massacre of the Innocents that took place during the time of Herod in Palestine. In every place blessed by the visit of the Holy Family, monasteries and churches were built from the beginning of the sixth century AD. G. GABRA, wrote also that at many monastic sites, the early community was most probably *lavra* or *laura*<sup>41</sup> which means cells or small houses in which monks were separately living under the supervision of a superior or a leader who lived with them as his disciples.

---

<sup>40</sup> J. GASCOU, art. “Monasteries, economic activities of”, *CoptEnc.*, V, 1639-1645.

<sup>41</sup> G. GABRA, *Monasteries*, p. 29.



Concerning the budget of the monasteries, monks are living depending on their own productions, acquisitions and donations. The majority of the monasteries are dedicated to the monk that's why these buildings are built in the deserts. The minority of the monasteries are constructed within the cities for the religious women like the monastery of Saint George for the Copts, the monastery of Saint Mercurius Philopator in Old Cairo, the monastery of the Virgin in Harit Zuwaila, the monastery of Saint Theodore in Harit al-Rumm and the monastery of Dair al-Banat in al-Shaariya.

In fact, monks and monasteries were and are one of the most important factors that caused the continuity of the Christian Egypt. They were and are also considered to be the major source of Coptic art. The considerable part of the Coptic wall paintings is monastic especially in the Red Sea, Wadi Natrun, Sohag and Asiyut monasteries. Some of the anecdotes and the sayings of many ascetics are conserved in the *Apophthegmata Patrum*<sup>42</sup> and this help to well understand the social and the cultural environment in which the monks and the nuns lived in both the Occidental and the Oriental Egyptian deserts.

Within the monasteries, it is absolutely forbidden to smoke. It is totally forbidden also to enter the cells of the monks. It is kindly required to keep quiet inside the monasteries because these are the houses of the monks. Visitors must keep the monasteries clean and they must respectably wear.

In conclusion, Egypt is the birthplace and the motherland of the monastic life, its piety, ethics and institutions in the entire world. From it, the monastic rules have spread abroad. Last time, the geographical isolation of the monasteries and its rocky surroundings made its visit difficult. In the Coptic monasteries, monks played role in the history of the Coptic Orthodox Church and in the Egyptian society. They were gathering together for

<sup>42</sup> R. S. BAGNALL, "Monks and Property: Rhetoric, law and Patronage in the Apophthegmata Patrum and the Papyri", *GRBS*, XLII, Durham, Caroline du Nord (2001), 7-24.

meals, mass, prayers and work. The most remarkable aspect of the Coptic monasticism over the last years has been the renovation of the ascetic practices. The important change that took place recently in the monastic life is the extension of the desert roads leading easily the visitors to the monasteries which became popular and archeological sites that can be reached simply by any vehicle in few hours. At last and not least, it is evident that the daily life of the monks in the Coptic monasteries is very distinguished. It confirms how productive these foundations in the Egyptian society are. These are not only religious buildings but also scientific institutions and cultural centers as well. Through their long history, the Coptic monasteries were prosperous with monks and abbots who undertook its renovation and its development. These persons were usually busy by the religion, the science and the social life. They are praying, fasting and reading the holy books. What's more, they work and help people who usually visit the monasteries to get the blessing of the saints and their intercession. These are the most important main activities which are common in all monasteries. They may be other secondary activities and they may be also few differences concerning the management. The Coptic monastic life didn't disappear but it had been modified to fit modernization and recent development.

## List of abbreviations and periodicals

- BSAA:** *Bulletin de la société archéologique d'Alexandrie.* (Alexandria).  
**BullACPSI:** *Bulletin of the Ain Shams Center of Papyrological Studies and Inscriptions.* (Cairo).  
**CoptEnc.:** *the Coptic Encyclopedia,* 8 vols. (New York, 1991).  
**ÉtudTrav.:** *Études et Travaux. Travaux du Centre d'archéologie méditerranéen de l'Académie des sc. Polon.* (Varsovie).  
**GRBS:** *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies.* Duke Univ. (Durham, Caroline du Nord).  
**JJP:** *Journal of Jewish Studies.* Oxford Center for Postgrad. Hebrew Stud. (Oxford).  
**HThR:** *Harvard Theological Review.* Harvard Univ. (Chico, California).  
**ROC:** *Revue de l'Orient Chrétien.* (Paris).

## Bibliography

- ANBA MARTYROS, *al-Arman fi Misr*, Cairo, 2007, (*al-Arman*).
- ANBA MARTYROS, *Ruhban min ginsiyat mukhtalifa*, Cairo, 2007, (*Ruhban*).
- ARCHBISHOP, art. "Monk", *CoptEnc.*, V, New York, 1991, 1667b-1668b, (*Monk*).
- R. S. BAGNALL, *Egypt in Late Antiquity*, Princeton, 1996, (*Egypt*).
- R. S. BAGNALL, "Monks and Property: Rhetoric, law and Patronage in the Apophthegmata Patrum and the Papyri", *GRBS*, XLII, Durham, Caroline du Nord (2001), 7-24, (*Monks*).
- BANUB HABASHI, *al-Rahbana al-qibtiya*, Alexandria, 1948, (*al-Rahbana*).
- R. G. COQUIN, art. "Dayr", *CoptEnc.*, III, New York, 1991, 695 a, (*Dayr*).
- G. GABRA, *Cairo the Coptic Museum & Old Churches*, Cairo, 1999, (*Cairo*).
- G. GABRA, *Coptic Monasteries. Egypt's Monastic Art and Architecture*, with a Historical Overview by T. VIVIAN, Cairo-New York, 2002, (*Monasteries*).
- G. GABRA, *Historical Dictionary of the Coptic Church*, with Contributions by B. A. PEARSON, M. N. SWANSON and YOUHANNA NESSIM YOUSSEF, Cairo, 2008, (*Dictionary*).
- J. GASCOU, art. "Monasteries, economic activities of", *CoptEnc.*, V, New York, 1991, 1639a-1645b, (*Economic*).
- J. E. GOEHRING, "Withdrawing from the Desert: Pachomius and the Development of Village Monasticism in Upper Egypt", *HThR*, LXXXVIII, Chico, California (1999), 89-108, (*Withdrawing*).
- J. E. GOEHRING, "Monasticism in Byzantine Egypt: Continuity and Memory", in: (Ed.) R. S. BAGNALL, *Egypt in the Byzantine World 300-700*, Cambridge, 2010, (*Egypt*).
- A. GUILLAUMONT, art. "Monasticism, egyptian", *CoptEnc.*, V, New York, 1991, 1661a-1664b, (*Monasticism*).
- IRIS HABIB ELMASRY, *Introduction to the Coptic Church*, 1977, (*Introduction*).
- KIRULLUS AL-ANTUNI, Hegumenos. *Kawkab al-Barriyah, al-Qiddis al-Anba Antuniyus*, Cairo, 1948, (*Kawkab*).
- W. LYSTER, *Monastery of Saint Paul*, Cairo, 1999, (*Monastery*).
- AL-MAQRIZI, TAQIYY AL-DIN AḤMAD IBN 'ALI IBN 'ABD AL-QADIR († 845/1441), *Kitab al-Mawa'iz wa'l-i'tibar bidīkr al-Khitat wa'l-aṭar*, II, ed. of Bulaq, Cairo, 1835, (*Khitat*).
- AL-MAQRIZI, TAQIYY AL-DIN AḤMAD IBN 'ALI IBN 'ABD AL-QADIR († 845/1441), *Tarikh al-aqbat al-ma'ruf bi'l-qawl al-ibriḡi li'l'allama al-Maqrizi*, étudié par 'ABD AL-MA'UD DIYAB, Le Caire, 1998, (*Tarikh*).
- OTTO F. A. MEINARDUS, *Christian Egypt. Ancient and Modern*, Cairo, 1965, (*Egypt*).

- OTTO F. A. MEINARDUS, *Christian Egypt Faith and Life*, Cairo, 1970, (*Faith*).
- OTTO F. A. MEINARDUS, *Monks and Monasteries of the Egyptian Deserts*, Reviewed ed., Cairo-New York, 2002, (*Monks*).
- OTTO F. A. MEINARDUS, *Coptic Saints and Pilgrimages*, II<sup>nd</sup> ed., Cairo-New York, 2003, (*Coptic*).
- F. NAU, “Histoire des solitaires égyptiens”, *ROC*, XIII, Paris (1908), pp. 57-60, (*Histoire*).
- OMAR TOUSSOUN, *Sur le Wadi Natroun, ses moines et ses couvents*, Alexandrie, 1931, (*Étude*).
- SHERIN SADEK EL GENDI, “La femme copte ses rôles et ses fonctions de l’antiquité au vingtième siècle”, *BSAA*, XLVIII, Alexandrie (2009), 147-191, pls. LI-LIII, (*Femme*).
- SHERIN SADEK EL GENDI, *L’architecture des monastères coptes autrefois et aujourd’hui (Étude comparative)*, “The Third International Congress. The Mutual Influence between the Ancient Civilizations”, *BullACPSI*, I, Cairo, 2012, pp. 59-73, (*L’architecture*).
- A. VEUILLEUX, art. “Monasticism, Pachomian”, *CoptEnc.*, V, New York, 1991, 1664b-1666a, (*Pachomian*).
- H. G. E. WHITE, *The Monasteries of Nitria and Scetis*, 3 vols., New York, 1933, (*Monasteries*).
- E. WIPSYCKA, “Saint Antoine et les carriers d’Alexandrie: Remarques sur le chapitre 46 de la Vita Antoni d’Athanasé”, *ÉtudTrav.*, XIV, Varsovie (1983), pp. 460-463, (*Saint*).
- E. WIPSYCKA, “Les clercs dans les communautés monastiques d’Égypte”, *JJP*, XXVI, Oxford (1994), pp. 135-166, (*Clercs*).

Plates

Pl. I



The recent refectory in the Syrians Monastery in Wadi Natrun. SHERIN SADEK EL GENDI (2010)

Pl. II



Inside the library of the monastery of Saint Pishoi in Wadi Natrun. SHERIN SADEK EL GENDI (2010)



Monks and Bishops in the Saint Mark Foundation fifth Symposium. Abba Hydra Monastery in Aswan 2010



One of the millhouses of the Monastery of Saint Anthony the Great in the Red Sea. SHERIN SADEK EL GENDI (2010)



**The Museum of the monastery of Saint Macarius the Great in Wadi Natrun. SHERIN SADEK EL GENDI (2010)**