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## **MONKS AT WORK IN EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN: IDEALS AND REALITY\***

**W**HEN DECIDING TO PRACTISE ASCETICISM and ‘abandon the world’, should the monks renounce all the wealth they have? If they had decided to do so, should they provide for themselves only by means of manual labour?<sup>1</sup> If they had not renounced all their worldly goods before taking their vows, would they be able to use these resources later? Was it acceptable to receive gifts from the rich in exchange for prayers for their benefactors and their families? If the monks could not make a living, could they beg without feeling ashamed?

### THE BIBLICAL JUSTIFICATION FOR THE REQUIREMENT OF RENOUNCING MATERIAL GOODS

The Gospel of St. Matthew 19:16–22 provided a clear answer to the first question posed above:

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Manual labour’ must be taken literally, not as a mere stylistic figure. It has to be remembered that the ancients (also Christians) regarded physical work as a different phenomenon than political activity, writing literary masterpieces or teaching. A bishop did not work while performing his worship-related duties, preparing candidates for baptism, participating in doctrinal discussions, and other tasks like this.

Just then a man came up to Jesus and asked, 'Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?'. 'Why do you ask me about what is good?', Jesus replied, 'There is only One who is good. If you want to enter life, keep the commandments'. 'Which ones?', he inquired. Jesus replied, 'You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, honour your father and mother', and 'love your neighbour as yourself'. 'All these I have kept', the young man said, 'What do I still lack?'. Jesus answered, 'If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me'. When the young man heard this, he went away sad, because he had great wealth. (tr. NIV Bible)

A similar precept is in the Gospel of St. Luke 12:22–31:

Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will never fail, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Another important text showing the necessity of abandoning material goods was the story of the Jerusalem community in the Acts of the Apostles 2:44–45:

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

The same narrative continues later in the Acts 4:32–37:

All the believers were one heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the

Lord Jesus. And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need. Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means 'son of encouragement'), sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet.

The two passages of the Acts were quoted for the first time by Basil in the *Lesser Asketikon* (29),<sup>2</sup> where he used them to demand from the monks the unconditional renouncement of any material goods. Later on, Evagrius of Pontus referred to them in *Antirrhethikos*<sup>3</sup> (written during his stay in Egypt in the years 383–399). Around the same time, another reference to the practices of the Jerusalem community was made by Horsiese in the so-called *Testament*, a Coptic text written at the end of his life (he died c. 390).<sup>4</sup> However, it was not till the third decade of the fifth century that the Jerusalem community was explicitly described as a model of monastic life: this was done by John Cassian.

Undoubtedly, a great many monks, zealously striving for perfection, tried to conform to Jesus' exhortation as reported by the Evangelists and to the model of communal life that they found in the Acts of the Apostles.

<sup>2</sup> In the present paper I shall often quote passages of the ascetic works by Basil of Caesarea, usually called *Rules* or *Asketika*. Each of them has the form of a series of questions put by anonymous monks to Basil and answers by which Basil enunciates the principles of ascetic life and comments on passages of the Bible. The oldest of these 'rules', the so-called *Lesser Asketikon*, was written about 366. It has come to us only in the Latin translation by Rufinus of Aquileia. Recent edition: *The Rule of Saint Basil in Latin and English*, ed. A. M. SILVAS, Collegeville, MN 2013. In the middle of the seventies of the fourth century Basil rewrote and enlarged this work, transforming it into two treatises, which differ from each other by the length of the answers given to the questions: *The Longer Rules* (or *The Longer Responses*) and *The Shorter Rules* (or *The Shorter Responses*). The Latin titles currently in use: *Regulae fusius tractatae*, *Regulae brevius tractatae*. The only edition of the Greek text of both was reprinted in *Patrologia Graeca* 31, cols. 889–1305 (text edited by Julien Garnier in 1722!). A new translation with some commentaries, used by me in this article, is to be found in the book of A. M. SILVAS, *The Asketikon of St Basil the Great*, Oxford 2005, pp. 153–451.

<sup>3</sup> Evagrius of Pontus, *Talking Back. Antirrhethikos. A Monastic Handbook for Combating Demons*, tr. D. BRAKKE [Cistercian Publications], Collegeville, MN 2009, 1.50, p. 64.

<sup>4</sup> *Pachomiana Latina*, ed. A. BOON, Brussels 1932, chap. 50, p. 142.

An example of this would be Anthony, a prominent Egyptian Father who followed that path. Priors of coenobitic congregations – Pachomius and Shenoute – also required that their monks renounce all possession. We do not know how many monks from Nitria, Cellia, Scetis, protagonists of the *apophthegmata*, applied these rigorous biblical orders; it seems probable that many of them did. However, not all of them followed Christ's call in this way. Proof of this may be found in various sources, including papyrus documents for Egypt – essential texts when trying to determine the 'real reality'.<sup>5</sup>

The texts showing that the monks retained and used their own resources were mainly written between the sixth and eighth century. The earliest extant proof of such practices is the *Asketikoi Logoi* by Isaiah (d. 491), who began his ascetic life in Scetis and later moved to Palestine, near Gaza, at an unknown date. Among his remarks on how a monk should behave towards his brothers within the community (whether in a semi-anachoretic laura or in a coenobium), it is possible to find advice on how to avoid conflict between ascetics who had their own resources and those who did not. In his insightful study entitled *Power and Politics of Poverty in Early Monasticism*, Samuel Rubenson proved that the perfect state of being a monk was not found in poverty, but in being free from the worries about having enough resources and the related feeling of greed.<sup>6</sup> Monks should aspire to what we can call 'voluntary poverty', which involves resigning from ostentation of wealth, assuming a modest lifestyle. In the light of the sources gathered by Rubenson, such an approach was a necessary condition to separate oneself from 'the world' and achieve *hesychia*. Zosimus, a Palestinian monk who was active around mid-6th century and the author of *Ascetica*, states concisely and accurately: 'I always say that there is no harm in the fact of possession, but in the attachment to what we

<sup>5</sup> For Egypt, see E. WIPSYCKA, *Moines et communautés monastiques en Égypte (IV<sup>e</sup>–VIII<sup>e</sup> siècles)* [= *The Journal of Juristic Papyrology Supplement 11*], Warsaw 2009, pp. 545–565. For Palestine, see Abba Isaiah of Scetis, *Ascetic Discourses*, tr. J. CHRYSAVGIS & R. PENKETT, Kalamazoo 2002, pp. 55, 59. For Syria, see E. WIPSYCKA, 'The economy of the monasteries of Syria', *U schyłku starożytności. Studia źródłoznawcze* 19 (2020), in press.

<sup>6</sup> Paper published in G. D. DUNN, D. LUCKENSMEYER & L. CROSS (eds.), *Prayer and Spirituality in the Early Church*, vol. V: *Poverty and Riches*, St. Pauls 2009, pp. 91–110.

possess'.<sup>7</sup> Typically, monastic texts also condemn begging monks, for rigorous poverty would actually lead to a more active search for benefactors.<sup>8</sup> It is worth mentioning here that many monks came from affluent families.<sup>9</sup>

Upon deciding to abandon 'the world', they probably gave only a part of their wealth to the poor, even though such behaviour was criticised by the monastic opinion expressed in the *apophthegmata* (see, e.g., *Alphabetikon*: Anthony 20 [20]). John Cassian, in Chapter 7 of his *Instituta*, warns that there are fatal consequences of retaining even a portion of wealth. He analyses in detail the stories of reckless monks and the tragic results of their actions.<sup>10</sup> Cassian believed that there was only one proper path for monks: they should always choose a coenobitic monastery as a place for living as ascetics, since only a community of people who live together, work together, and care for the sick and aging brothers would allow the monks to be free of their economic worries. But coenobite monks also retained some wealth, as we know from Egyptian and Syrian sources. For Cassian, however, conveying an ascetic ideal was more important than depicting the actual practices in monastic communities; he wrote for Gallic ascetics using elements of Egyptian customs, but simultaneously drifted away from Egyptian reality.

From a legal point of view, the resignation of material goods by monks willing to meticulously follow the Gospel was not an easy process. Avshalom Laniado highlights this in his 2009 study by drawing attention to

<sup>7</sup> Κεφάλαια ὠφέλιμα [in:] Φιλοκαλία τῶν νηπτικῶν καὶ ἀσκητικῶν XII, ed. P. K. CHRISTΟΥ, Πατερικαὶ ἐκδόσεις Γρηγόριος ὁ Παλαμᾶς, Thessaloniki 1981, Zosimus 15.

<sup>8</sup> The hierarchical Church and most ascetic communities took a strong stance when it came to the spread of Messalianism in Syria and Asia Minor, as the followers refused to work at all. Similarly, begging and wandering monks were condemned (as will be discussed later, pp. 328–329). Nilus of Ancyra (d. 430) condemned monks searching for resources among the rich; see his *Logos asketikos* (*Liber de monastica exercitacione*), chap. 8, *Patrologia Graeca* 79, col. 728.

<sup>9</sup> This is an opinion shared today by virtually all researchers interested in monasticism. I have gathered proofs to support such an opinion in all my publications. See my book *The Second Gift of the Nile. Monks and Monasteries in Late Antique Egypt* [= *The Journal of Juristic Papyrology Supplement* 33], Warsaw 2018, chap. 10 'The monks as a social group', pp. 337–369.

<sup>10</sup> Jean Cassien, *Institutions cénobitiques*, ed. J.-C. GUY [= *Sources chrétiennes* 109], Paris 2001 (2nd ed.). See also Evagrius of Pontus, *Talking Back. Antirrhētikos* (cit. n. 3), book III, pp. 85–98, on the combat with the demon of greed. More about this text, see p. 316.

imperial regulations in this matter.<sup>11</sup> The emperors wanted to oppose such behaviour among the elite (*honestiores*), who bore fiscal responsibilities stemming from their legal and financial status. The laws issued by them ought to have excluded the *honestiores* from monastic communities and the clergy. Yet, whatever we know about the actual social life points to the fact that the regulations quoted by Laniado were not followed. Most of the leaders of the Church came from this social stratum; many of the monks we know by name and biography were actually *honestiores*. It is possible that some of them gave a part of their fortune to family members who took over the fiscal responsibilities, giving to the poor whatever was left after that. I know only of one text that presents a situation approximating to that, namely the *Quaestio* 196 from the *Lesser Asketikon* by Basil of Caesarea.<sup>12</sup> In that paragraph, Basil considers the case of a monk who entered the community and left behind tax debts. Bearing in mind Jesus's admonition about paying taxes (Matt. 22:17–21), the monks in the community he joined became responsible for those debts, 'but if, when he departed, he left all things in the hands of his relatives, then neither himself nor the brothers ought have any scruple about it'. Basil mentions only the taxes and not the ban on *honestiores* wanting to abandon 'the world', yet the text remains important for my reasoning: giving one's wealth to relatives lifted any fiscal responsibility. For Laniado's thesis, it would be convenient if we had access to a tale where a rich protagonist gave his family everything he had. However, we do not have non-legal sources that evidence such behaviour. This is, of course, a case of *argumentum ex silentio*, which is always a weak argument, but, considering the vast and diverse Church and monastic documentation, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that, in reality, the law was not so strictly followed.

Basil also discusses the issue of goods left to the family upon accepting the habit in his *Lesser Asketikon* (*quaestio* 5), which provides the answer to the following question: 'Should one those who wishes to join himself

<sup>11</sup> A. LANIADO, 'The early Byzantine state and the Christian ideal of voluntary poverty', [in:] M. FRENKEL & Y. LEV (eds.), *Charity and Giving in Monotheistic Religions*, Berlin 2009, pp. 15–43.

<sup>12</sup> *The Rule of St Basil in Latin and English*, ed. and tr. A. M. SILVAS, Collegeville, MN 2013.

to those dedicated to the Lord relinquish his property to his relatives indifferently, even to the underserving?’ The reply highlights the fact that a monk should not give his wealth to whomever he wished, but should as far as possible assess all things with utmost diligence, as it has already been consecrated to God. If his kin were unhappy with his decisions, he was not to yield to their protests, as they would be blaspheming.<sup>13</sup>

The interventions of Justinian with regard to monks maintaining their fortunes took a different direction (I am still referring here to the information gathered by Laniado in his article). The emperor saw poverty as each monk’s duty, stemming from their status after putting on the habit. According to him, those who wished to become monks had to decide beforehand on the financial security of children and spouses. After that, they became paupers from the legal point of view; everything inherited later would become the property of the community.<sup>14</sup>

Bearing in mind the information gathered from sources other than imperial legislation, I can only repeat what I wrote elsewhere about the ban on renouncing possessions by the *honestiores*. It is well-known that monks usually had some possessions of their own, although in order to conform with the requirement of modest living, they did not make a display

<sup>13</sup> Basil repeats such an opinion in the *Longer Rules*, 9: ‘Since the Lord says: “Sell your possessions and give to the poor and you shall have treasure in heaven, and come follow me” (Matt. 19:21) and again: “Sell all that you have and give alms” (Lk. 18:22), we consider that one who is forsaking his own for such a goal, ought not take a casual attitude towards (and relinquished) his property (as he pleases). Rather he should (as far as possible), try to keep a most careful account of everything. Since from now on it is consecrated to the Lord, and he should administer with all piety (rationally) as far as it can be done, aware that one does not “carry out the work of God carelessly” (Jer. 48:10) without peril. Let him do this either personally, if he has the capacity and experience, or through those who have been chosen for the work after extensive testing and have given proof of their capacity for trustworthy and wise administration. He must realise that it is not without peril either to relinquish it to his relatives or to administer it simply through anyone at all. For if he who was entrusted with the care of the King’s possessions was not absolved of blame, though he did not repeatedly filch from the store, but merely lost by neglect the interest he may have added (cf. Matt. 25:24–28), what condemnation do we suppose that they can expect who have been frivolous and careless in the administration of what is already dedicated to the Lord?’

<sup>14</sup> For more information on the topic, see A. HASSE-UNGEHEUER, *Das Mönchtum in der Religionspolitik Kaiser Justinians I*, Berlin 2016.

of their wealth. The information found in Justinian's laws stems from his views on the ideal of a perfect monastic community, which he hoped to realize by means of legal decrees.<sup>15</sup> However, the various communities with their diverse traditions and customs did not conform with the imperial orders. It is possible that the decisions made by Justinian were important for monasteries in Constantinople and surrounding areas; maybe the monasteries founded by imperial dignitaries and their wives followed those regulations. Nevertheless, the empire was vast and monasteries far from the capital may not have felt obliged to follow Justinian's commands, and the emperor did not have the means to enforce his will everywhere.

#### THE BIBLICAL JUSTIFICATION FOR THE NECESSITY OF WORKING OR ABSTAINING FROM IT

Gospel of St. Matthew 6:25–34:

Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life? And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labour or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendour was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you – you of little faith? So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?'. For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.

<sup>15</sup> On Justinian's vision of ideal monastic communities (especially in the *Novels*) and on the social reality of his times, see E. WIPSZYCKA, *Monks and Hierarchic Church in Egypt and Levant in Late Antiquity* [= *The Journal of Juristic Papyrology Supplement* 40], Leuven – Paris – Bristol, CT 2021, pp. 42–50.



## Gospel of St. Matthew 10:8–10:

These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: ‘Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel. As you go, proclaim this message: “The kingdom of heaven has come near”. Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received; freely give. Do not get any gold or silver or copper to take with you in your belts – no bag for the journey or extra shirt or sandals or a staff, for the worker is worth his keep’.

## Second Letter of St. Paul to the Thessalonians 3:6–10:

And we charge you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you withdraw yourselves from every brother walking disorderly, and not according to the tradition which they have received of us. For yourselves know how you ought to imitate us: for we were not disorderly among you; Neither did we eat any man’s bread for nothing, but in labour and in toil we worked night and day, lest we should be chargeable to any of you. Not as if we had not power: but that we might give ourselves a pattern unto you, to imitate us. For also when we were with you, this we declared to you: that, if any man will not work, neither let him eat.

## First Letter of St. Paul to the Thessalonians 5:12–17:

And we urge you, brothers and sisters, warn those who are idle and disruptive, encourage the disheartened, help the weak, be patient with everyone. Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always strive to do what is good for each other and for everyone else. Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.

When reading these passages, it is crucial to understand that the early Christians took the Bible literally. They did not conform to our contemporary idea that the specificity of the literary genre and the language of the New Testament should be taken into consideration, and paid little attention to the context of the passages they were interested in or to the contradictions among them.

The passages quoted above are obviously contradictory. If Matt. 6:25–36 is to be understood literally, those monks who worry about material goods (so the ones who work) commit a sin of mistrust towards God, who knows what they need and takes care of them Himself. On the other hand, 2 Thes. 3:6–10 highlights the importance of work for every member of the community. In 1 Thes. 5:12–17, the same Paul states that Christians should pray continuously: this could be taken as implying that there should be no time for work. However, Paul thought it was his duty to earn his living by working. On the other side, Matt. 10:10 says that ‘the worker is worth his keep’ (cf. Lk. 10:7), meaning that the apostles could share in the earnings of others, a statement which was used in the subsequent centuries as a justification for paying the clergymen for their worship-related activities.<sup>16</sup>

Faced by two contradictory precepts, the monks chose one option and ignored the other, although attempts were also made to find an explanation that would resolve the contradictions. Let me quote an example from Basil’s *Shorter Rules*:

Question 272:

Since there is a precept of the Lord that we are *not to be anxious about the morrow* (Matt. 6: 34), how are we to understand this precept soundly? For we see ourselves expending much care for the sake of need, even going so far as to lay up stores able to last a long time.

<sup>16</sup> See also First Letter to the Corinthians 9:3–13: ‘This is my defence to those who sit in judgment on me. Don’t we have the right to food and drink? Don’t we have the right to take a believing wife along with us, as do the other apostles and the Lord’s brothers and Cephas? Or is it only I and Barnabas who lack the right to not work for a living? Who serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard and does not eat its grapes? Who tends a flock and does not drink the milk? Do I say this merely on human authority? Doesn’t the Law say the same thing? For it is written in the Law of Moses: “Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain”. Is it about oxen that God is concerned? Surely he says this for us, doesn’t he? Yes, this was written for us, because whoever plows and threshes should be able to do so in the hope of sharing in the harvest. If we have sown spiritual seed among you, is it too much if we reap a material harvest from you? If others have this right of support from you, shouldn’t we have it all the more? But we did not use this right. On the contrary, we put up with anything rather than hinder the gospel of Christ. Don’t you know that those who serve in the temple get their food from the temple, and that those who serve at the altar share in what is offered on the altar?’.

Answer:

One who has accepted the teaching of the Lord who said: *seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness* and is fully persuaded of the truth of the promise he added: *and all these things shall be given to you besides* (Matt. 6:33), does not retard the soul with *the cares of this life* which *choke the word and render it unfruitful* (cf. Matt. 13:22). Instead, striving in the good contest of being well pleasing to God, he believes the Lord who said: *The worker is worthy of his food* (Matt. 10:10) and in no way preoccupies himself about it. All the same he does work, yet with no anxiety on his own account, but for the commandment of Christ, as shown and taught by the Apostle when he said: *In all things I gave you an example, that by labouring in this way, you ought to support the weak* (Acts 20:35). For to be anxious on one's own account exposes one as a lover of self; but to be anxious and work for the sake of the commandment is praiseworthy and shows the disposition of a lover of Christ and a lover of one's brothers.

Basil's explanation<sup>17</sup> is not very straightforward, which is not surprising. Christian writers of Late Antiquity were not prepared to accept the existence of contradictions in the Holy Writ and tried to explain them away by twisted reasoning.

That being said, both attitudes may be found in the monks' approaches to work, as will be illustrated below.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Similar explanations can be found in *Short Rules* 252.

<sup>18</sup> The problem of monastic work appeared in the twentieth-century research in an interesting article by H. DÖRRIES, 'Mönchtum und Arbeit', [in:] *Forschungen zur Kirchengeschichte und zur christlichen Kunst (Festgabe f. Ficker)*, Leipzig 1931, pp. 17–39, which mostly analysed *apophthegmata*. Among the later studies, see especially A. GUILLAMONT, 'Le travail manuel dans le monachisme ancien. Contestation et valorisation', [in:] IDEM, *Aux origines du monachisme chrétien. Pour une phénoménologie du monachisme [= Spiritualité orientale 30]*, Bégrolles 1979, pp. 117–126; T. ORLANDI, 'Il lavoro nella primitiva letteratura copta', [in:] S. FELICI (ed.), *Spiritualità del lavoro nella catechesi dei Padri del III–IV secolo*, Rome 1986, pp. 151–164; in the same collection: S. PERICOLI RIDOLFINI, 'Il lavoro nelle più antiche fonti monastiche (Vita Antonii e fonti pacomiane)', pp. 141–150; L. CREMASCHI, 'Il lavoro nelle fonti monastiche', *Vita Monastica* 58/229 (2004), pp. 47–64. I also published an article on this subject: 'Quand'è che lavoro e carità cominciarono a far parte della vita dei monaci egiziani', *Studia Anselmiana* (2019), pp. 709–725. This was based on a paper delivered in 2016; however, since that year, I have changed my opinion on certain important points (especially with regard to Syrian monasticism). Older works have to be used with caution, as the research conducted

## EGYPTIAN MONKS

The earliest Egyptian piece of evidence on the role of work in monastic life is *The Life of Anthony* by Athanasius.<sup>19</sup> When presenting the first phase of the protagonist's ascetic experiences, before Anthony leaves for the desert, Athanasius writes: 'He worked with his hands, though, having heard that it is necessary that he who is idle, *let him not eat*. And he spent what he made partly for bread, and partly on those in need' (3.6).<sup>20</sup> Researchers exploring the attitude of monks towards manual labour quote this passage to prove that it was seen as a duty since the very beginning of monasticism, and the reliability of Athanasius as a witness of the protagonist's life was highly valued in the academic community. It is possible that young Anthony followed the words of Paul from 2 Thes.; however, it should be pointed out that he did not conform to them later on. When he decided to 'abandon the world' and move to the desert, he chose a tomb as his place of ascetic life. He locked himself in and asked one of his friends to bring him bread from time to time (8.1). Later on, when he stayed for many years in an abandoned military fort to break contact with 'the world', he still received bread twice a year (12.3-4). We can assume the bread was provided by his acquaintances. Obviously, under such circumstances, work was out of the question. Some years later, after abandoning the fort and assuming the role of leader in the growing community of his disciples, Anthony sought refuge once again in the deep desert. To escape human companionship, he settled in a small oasis near the Red Sea, where he found water and palm trees to provide his food. The Saracens who led him there left him some bread, but also periodically supplied him with more (50.2-3). Only later, when the 'runaway from the world' was being visited by guests undertaking the effort of bringing him food, did Anthony

in recent years has significantly changed our understanding of the *apophthegmata* and lives of the monks. The literary character of such writings has been highlighted, which contributed to abandoning the conviction that they are faithful representations of reality.

<sup>19</sup> On the source value of *Vita Antonii*, see WIPSZYCKA, *The Second Gift* (cit. n. 9), pp. 27-107.

<sup>20</sup> Athanase d'Alexandrie, *Vie d'Antoine*, ed. and tr. G. J. M. BARTELINK [= *Sources chrétiennes* 400], Paris 1994; English translation: Athanasius, *The Life of Antony and the Letter to Marcellinus*, tr. R. C. GREGG, New York 1989.

decide to cultivate a piece of land to provide bread and vegetables for the travellers (50.6). According to the logic of the narration in *The Life*, work at that stage did not stem from the biblical guidelines, or from an ideology requiring manual labour. Rather, it was a practical solution in the interest of Anthony's visitors.

Therefore, the information from *The Life* 3.6 is of little value when assessing the actual attitude of Anthony towards work. It is probable that Athanasius introduced this message into the text based on the monastic customs at the time of his own activity (a little after 356) and that it is actually his opinion, not Anthony's. Twisting the truth in *The Vita* should not come as a surprise, as we are well aware that the majority of this work is of a literary nature. Athanasius could freely shape the image of a perfect monk with little regard to the actual fate of the protagonist, about whom he in fact knew very little.

Chronologically, the next piece of information on the attitude of Egyptian monks towards work may be found in the writing of Epiphanius of Salamis entitled *Panarion*, in chapter 80.4 which contains a polemic on the Messalians (to be discussed further below, see pp. 329–330). To the Messalians who, being convinced that they had to pray relentlessly, refused to work, Epiphanius opposes the behaviour of the Egyptian monks:

As the bee, with the wax she has produced (in) her hands but a drop of honey in her mouth, hymns the Lord of all with her own voice of song, in proportion to her understanding – as Solomon testifies, 'By honouring wisdom she was advanced' (Prov. 6:8c) – so the servants of God who are truly founded on the solid rock of the truth and build their house securely, perform their light tasks, each in his own trade, with their own hands. And they recite nearly all of the sacred scripture and keep their frequent vigils without tiring or grudging, one in prayer, another in psalmody. They continually hold the assemblies that have been set by lawful custom and spend all their days in the offering of blameless prayers to God, with deep humility and woeful lamentation, (at) the hours which come without intermission at their fixed intervals. [And], as I said, besides their spiritual work they spend their days in manual labour, so that they will not become needy and fall into human hypocrisies, no longer able to speak the truth to the impious or be untouched by the defilement of those who are rich from unrighteousness and take advantage of the poor – and no longer able to do without

maintenance by such people because they cannot support themselves by honest toil, but are forced by need to share the idle table of the rich.<sup>21</sup>

Prior to writing his *Panarion* in the years 376–377, Epiphanius had familiarised himself with the customs of Egyptian monks, probably during a long stay in the country during the years c. 315–320 to about 340 (or perhaps even longer). He seems to have remained in close contact with them after returning to his native Palestine and becoming the bishop of Salamis, Cyprus, in 367. Therefore, he was familiar with the Egyptian ideas and practices. It is difficult to establish to which period of Epiphanius' stay in Egypt his description of the working monks corresponds. This was a time of rapid growth and transformations of monasticism, therefore the attitude to work might have been changing.

There is an important issue which should be mentioned here: Epiphanius attests the existence of the custom of *melete*, that is, reciting memorised passages from the Bible (especially psalms) and prayers during work.<sup>22</sup> When doing this, the monks followed both precepts of Paul. In the ascetic literature of later times *melete* that accompanies work will be mentioned very frequently, will become a topos. I shall quote only one example here, an apophthegm from the series of *Anonymous Sayings* that encompasses the essence of this topos in two sentences: 'The elders used to say of another brother that he never desisted from manual labour (*ergocheiron*) and that his prayer continually (*adialeiptos*) ascended to God. He was also exceedingly humble and of very stable character (*tapeinos kai eukatastatos*).'<sup>23</sup>

The practice of combining work with prayer is also attested by Evagrius in a treatise in the form of a letter, *To Eulogius*, written in the 490s:

<sup>21</sup> Epiphanius, *Ancoratus und Panarion*, vol. III, ed. K. HOLL [= *Die Griechischen Christlichen Schriftsteller* 37], Leipzig 1933, p. 489; English translation: *The Panarion. Books II and III, De Fide*, tr. F. W. WILLIAMS [= *Nag Hammadi and Manichean Studies* 79], Leiden 2012 (2nd ed.).

<sup>22</sup> J. WORTLEY, 'How the desert fathers "meditated"', *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies* 46 (2006), pp. 315–328; E. WIPSZYCKA, 'Biblical recitation and their function in the piety of monastic Egypt', [in:] M. CHOAT & M. Ch. GIORDA (eds.), *Writing and Communication in Early Egyptian Monasticism*, Leiden 2017, pp. 213–219.

<sup>23</sup> *The Anonymous Sayings of the Desert Fathers. A Select Edition and Complete English Translation*, tr. J. WORTLEY, Cambridge 2013, N 415.

Cherish also in a special way alongside your manual labour the remembrance of prayer; for the former does not always have available means of achieving the activity, but the latter offers a means continuously available. [...] Therefore, do the work of manual tasks for the love of humanity and the work of the rational mind for the sake of the love of wisdom, in order that on the one hand there may be hospitality for guests and a consuming fire for laziness, and on the other hand a guide to contemplation and a winnowing of thoughts. (10)<sup>24</sup>

Neither Epiphanius nor Evagrius specify the type of work which a monk might undertake. We learn from later texts that monks usually took up the making of baskets, ropes, nets, mats, etc., from palm tree fibres, reeds, and various types of wild grass. This type of handicraft would not require a lot of concentrated attention (apart from making mats, which usually involves the cooperation of two or three persons).<sup>25</sup> Contemporary researchers investigating the monastic way of life completely trust the evidence of literary texts that mention *melete* as a part of the work ritual and suggest that monastic work normally consisted in plaiting activities. However, a careful reading of the sources provides enough proof to argue that the monks actually worked in a variety of craftsmanship areas, including those which did not allow for even a highly mechanical recitation. They often worked as manuscript copyists or weavers, or produced items from leather or wood, or made ceramic pots. Those who were strong and healthy enough worked during the harvest as seasonal labourers, as the poor of the Mediterranean and Near East did. In this way, the monks obtained grain for bread (or porridge), as well as olives and olive oil. The effort of harvesting in the heat would have been overwhelming, and the monks would not have had the strength to recite anything while working. The same may be said for monks working on the fields and on the orchards, cleaning the channels, helping at vineyards and in wine-making. The list of activities leaving little (if any) room for any form of

<sup>24</sup> Evagrius of Pontus, *The Greek Ascetic Corpus*, tr., introd. and comm. R. E. SINKIEWICZ, Oxford 2003, p. 16.

<sup>25</sup> On the techniques applied for weaving baskets, etc., see WIPSZYCKA, *Moines et communautés monastiques* (cit. n. 5), pp. 533-545.

prayer may be expanded even further, as there is a considerable amount of information provided in the sources. It was the ancient authors of literary texts who, when shaping the image of perfect monks, 'chose' for them basket weaving and similar tasks as a typical activity that highlighted the modesty of their living. Profit from selling such items was small, expenses on raw materials and simple tools (knives, needles) were minimal, the work did not require concentrated attention and could not give satisfaction.

The anonymous author of *Historia monachorum in Aegypto* (written between 395 and 404; cited further on as *HM*), a monk from the convent on the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem, knows that some Egyptian monks do work (1.32), and he specifically mentions their participation in harvests (18.1). He says that they give some of the grain they earned to the poor in Alexandria. This practice is mentioned not as a mere fact belonging to the daily life of the monks, but as one of the reasons for praising them. The author of *Historia* does not focus on the work of the monks, but rather on ascetics miraculously fed by God:

One can see them [monks] scattered in the desert, waiting for Christ like loyal sons watching for their fathers, or like an army expecting his emperor, or like a sober household looking forward to the arrival of its master and liberator. For with them there is no solicitude, no anxiety for food and clothing. There is only the expectation of the coming of Christ in the singing of hymns. Consequently, when one of them lacks something necessary, he does not go to a town or a village, or to a brother, or friend, or relation, or to parents, or children, or family to procure what he needs, for his will alone is sufficient. When he raises his hands to God in supplication and utters words of thanksgiving with his lips, all these things are provided for him in a miraculous way. (*HM* prologue 7)<sup>26</sup>

The author of *HM* certainly travelled around Egypt and spoke with the monks. The ones he met probably did not see work as important enough to be able to convince him that it is, in fact, a central element of ascetic

<sup>26</sup> Edition: *Historia monachorum in Aegypto*, ed. A.-J. FESTUGIÈRE, Brussels 1961; English translation: *The Lives of the Desert Fathers. The Historia monachorum in Aegypto*, tr. N. RUSSELL, Kalamazoo 1981.



life, nor could they discourage him from writing about a miracle similar to what happened to Elijah according to the Bible (1 Kings 19:6–8). When translating *HM* into Latin, Rufinus of Aquileia introduced some changes, sometimes significant, but none regarding the attitude towards work.

Palladius' first work on the great monks from monastic communities in the Western Delta was written slightly earlier than the *HM*. Large passages are available thanks to a Coptic translation (the Greek text was lost).<sup>27</sup> In the years 419–420, the same author wrote *Historia Lausiaca*, using the material of the earlier book, expanding it and adding information on monks from other areas of the eastern Mediterranean.<sup>28</sup> In both writings, Palladius repeatedly mentions famous monks who earned their living through their own work. When presenting the figure of the famous Macarius of Alexandria, he mentions the saint's response to a monk who prayed constantly and lived off donations: 'For sixty years I have been offering one hundred stipulated prayers while working for my food and having the necessary contact with the brothers – and my conscience is not accusing me of neglect'. Macarius' interlocutor was accustomed to say 300 prayers daily; he became worried when he heard of a virgin who said 700 prayers (*HL* 20.3). Another famous monk, Pambo, stated at the end of his days: 'From the time when I came to this place to the desert, built my cell, and took up residence in it, I have no recollection of eating bread that was given to me: only what my hands produced'. (*HL* 10.6)

Palladius' master, Evagrius, copied manuscripts (*HL* 38.10), although – as the older version of *HL* notes – he did not need to do so. The monk who handled the finances of Evagrius and his disciples (and also of the guests) had 200 solidi at his disposal (a sum obviously exaggerated, but it is not important here for me).<sup>29</sup>

However, the views Evagrius actually held with regard to monks' labour were not as unequivocal as Palladius' testimony would suggest. They can

<sup>27</sup> *Four Desert Fathers. Coptic Texts Relating to the Lausiatic History of Palladius*, tr. and introd. T. VIVIAN, New York 2004.

<sup>28</sup> Palladio, *La Storia Lausiaca*, ed. and comm. G. J. M. BARTELINK, tr. M. BARCHIESI, Milan 1974 [*Fondazione Lorenzo Valla*].

<sup>29</sup> *Four Desert Fathers* (cit. n. 27), Evagrius 18, p. 84.

be extracted from his *Antirrhetikos*,<sup>30</sup> written during his stay in Nitria or later in Cellia (383–399). This little treatise was meant to help monks in difficult times, especially during the attacks of *logismoi* – demons of gluttony, doubt, boredom, greed – aimed at dissuading them from ascetic practices. Evagrius points to passages in the Bible that they could recite to defend themselves against particular *logismoi*. The book describes various situations in which the monks could succumb to the demonic whispers, and they were many. *Antirrhetikos* discloses the burden of asceticism with unique precision: cruelly bad health resulting from fasting, listlessness, fear of hunger and old age, fear of demonic visions constantly tormenting the brothers. These factors determine the attitude towards labour in many cases. The answer to the question of whether a monk should work as much as possible is ambiguous. According to Evagrius, if a monk works too much, this is often due to hidden greed.<sup>31</sup>

There is a particularly interesting paragraph in I.6I (p. 67): ‘Against the thoughts that make our soul neither want gather provisions through manual labour nor be persuaded to receive something from its family because they are poor and reside at a great distance, but rather advise it to fill its

<sup>30</sup> The title has been translated in a number of ways. D. Brakke suggested ‘Talking back’. His translation is the source of my quotations (Evagrius of Pontus, *Talking Back. Antirrhetikos* [cit. n. 3]). The original Greek text is lost; the work survived only in a Syrian translation. Good introduction to *Antirrhetikos*: D. BRAKKE, ‘Care for the poor, fear of poverty, and love of money: Evagrius Ponticus on the monk’s economic vulnerability’, [in:] S. R. HOLMAN (ed.), *Wealth and Poverty in Early Church and Society*, Grand Rapids 2008, pp. 76–87.

<sup>31</sup> The most interesting pieces of advice are as follows: I.6I, p. 67: ‘Against the thinking that hinders us from working with our hands and compels us to eat bread and to fill ourselves’ (2 Thes. 3:10); p. 86: ‘Against the thought [the Greek text had probably the word *logismos*, EW] that demanded more manual labour from a brother, than he is capable of’ (Lev. 25:46); 3.29, pp. 91–92: ‘Against the thought of love of money that, on account of the desire for wealth, drove us to perform manual labour night and day; and so deprived us of reading the Holy Scriptures and prevented us from visiting and ministering to the sick’ (Prov. 11:4); 6.1, p. 133: ‘Against the thought of the demon of listlessness [gr. *akedia*, EW] that hates the manual labour of the skill that it knows, and wants to learn another skill by which it will be better supported and which will not be so arduous’ (Gen. 3:19); 6.28, p. 139: ‘Against the thought of listlessness that rejects manual labour and leans the body in sleep against the wall’ (Prov. 6:9–11).

need from others'.<sup>32</sup> Evagrius assigns the same value to the fruit of labour and the support sent by the family, but discourages monks from accepting donations from third parties. This is rather easy to explain: Evagrius is convinced that the monk has a right to the family fortune (as he might not have renounced it or taken all of it along while starting his monastic life). The differentiation between support received from family and from other people may seem to us unjustified. In both cases, the monk is not following St. Paul's guidelines in 2 Thes. Nevertheless, this inconsistency did not bother Evagrius. In a lesser-known piece entitled *Rerum monachalium rationes* (4), he says that a monk should not feel shame while accepting donations if he is in need of food or clothing, as it would indicate the sin of pride. He adds that monks should not worry about the future because tomorrow will provide all the necessities (in other words, God will take care of his children).<sup>33</sup> It appears that Evagrius was not absolute in his judgements, but rather analysed particular cases and possible psychological complications. Contradictions such as the ones above did not disturb him.

The quoted passages of *Antirrhetikos* clearly point to the fact that some monks came from affluent families. The disciples surrounding Evagrius in Cellia, as mentioned by Palladius in both variants of *HL*, were educated, and must have come from at least the middle-income class. For them, physical work was a choice and not a necessity. It is worth noting here that Anthony also came from a rich family.

In the large dossier of apophthegms, there are still some traces of a discussion on the problem whether a monk should work, but doubts in this matter are quickly dismissed.<sup>34</sup> Those that shaped the *apophthegmata* collections in the second half of the fifth and sixth centuries were convinced that Paul's precept in 2 Thes. was obligatory and repeated it with insistence. We do not know the opinions of the monks at the oral stage of the creation of the *apophthegmata*, we only know what was included in later

<sup>32</sup> Two other passages of *Antirrhetikos* (cit. n. 3) mention sending 'gold' by the family: 3.3, p. 86; 3.17, p. 89.

<sup>33</sup> *Patrologia Graeca* 40, col. 1256.

<sup>34</sup> See John Colobus 2 (317); Silvain 5 (860) in *Alphabetikon* and Lucius 12.10 in the Systematic Collection.

writings.<sup>35</sup> In any case, in a letter to Calosirius, the bishop of Arsinoe, Cyril of Alexandria expresses his contempt towards the monks from the Qalamoun monastery who dispensed with work to devote themselves only to prayer.<sup>36</sup> It is clear that the duty of ‘constant prayer’ was always present in the mind of specially devoted brothers.

We cannot establish when the Egyptian monastic communities understood that work, apart from economic and charity-related value, also affects the psyche by stabilising a monk’s mood, facilitating internal and external discipline, preventing *akedia* – boredom, discouragement, doubt in the significance of ascetic practices – everything that was the effect of demonic activity in the eyes of theoreticians. The earliest writings containing extensive considerations on this aspect of work are John Cassian’s writings (second decade of the fifth century), especially book 10 (*De spiritu acediae*) of his *Instituta*.<sup>37</sup> He directed his discourse at Gallic monks and prepared for them an ambitious programme of ascetic life on the basis of his personal experiences in Egypt in the 480s and 490s.

According to Cassian, a monk should work. If he is a healthy man, he should not use his family’s support and especially not settle near them for this very purpose.<sup>38</sup> Cassian quoted and dwelled upon Paul’s letters, he also repeated opinions condemning idleness, found in moralistic pagan literature (which, although it did not praise work, loudly criticised idleness as morally reprehensible).

<sup>35</sup> On this topic, see S. RUBENSON, ‘The formation and re-formation of the Sayings of the Desert Fathers’, [in:] *Studia Patristica* 55 (2013), pp. 5–22, an insightful study of the process of shaping the apophthegms collection as well as the relationship between them and the reality of monastic life in Late Antiquity.

<sup>36</sup> Letter 83 [in:] Cyril of Alexandria, *Select Letters*, ed. and tr. L. R. WICKHAM, Oxford 1963, pp. 214–221.

<sup>37</sup> Jean Cassien, *Conférences*, ed. and tr. E. PICHÉRY, vols. I–III [= *Sources chrétiennes* 42, 54 & 64], Paris 1955, 1958, 1959. The search for analogous argumentation in the works of Evagrius Ponticus was not successful. There is only one case where Evagrius ties eagerness at work with a victorious fight with *akedia*, but he does not elaborate on it: *Rerum monachalium rationes* 8, *Patrologia Graeca* 40, cols. 1252d–1264c. In chapter VI of *Antirrhētikos* (cit. n. 3), treating of the combat with *akedia*, only two paragraphs (2 and 28) out of 57 mention work, and they do not point out that work can be for the monk a help in his fight.

<sup>38</sup> Jean Cassien, *Conférences* (cit. n. 37), vol. III, 24.11–12, pp. 181–184.

At the end of book 10 of his *Instituta*, Cassian tells a story intended to be engraved in the monks' memory as an image of perfection. It is a sort of summary of his considerations on the benefits of work. The protagonist is an anchorite living at the Mons Porphyrites in the Eastern Desert, rocky and barren, a place separated from civilisation by a seven-day walk. He ate dates and vegetables from his own garden (it is possible to find small water sources in the valleys of this massif). Every day, he made a few items from palm fibres (although Cassian does not specify what items). When his cave was full of them, he simply burnt them all: 'thus proving that without manual labour a monk cannot stop in a place nor rise to the heights of perfection: so that, though the need for food did not require this to be done, yet he performed it simply for the sake of purifying his heart, and strengthening his thoughts, and persisting in his cell, and gaining a victory over accidie and driving it away'.<sup>39</sup>

Of course, work should occupy a secondary position in a monk's life, after prayer and pious readings. A strong statement on this issue was made by Gregory of Nyssa in *The Life of Macrina*. Praising the ascetic way of life of Macrina's female companions, he writes:

Self-control was their pleasure, not to be known was their fame, their wealth was in possessing nothing and in shaking off all material surplus, like dust from the body; their work (*ergon*) was none of the concerns of this life, except in so far as it was a subordinate task (*parergon*). Their only care was for divine realities, and there was constant prayer and the unceasing singing of hymns, extended equally throughout the entire day and night so that this was both work (*ergon*) and respite from work (*ergon*) for them. (10.24–34)<sup>40</sup>

Let me quote one more important testimony of monks regarding work as *parergon*. It is an apophthegm of the *Alphabetikon*, one of the series of the apophthegms assigned to Theodore of Pherme 10 (277). Theodore

<sup>39</sup> Jean Cassien, *Institutions cénobitiques* (cit. n. 10); English translation: John Cassianus, *Institutes*, tr. E. C. S. GIBSON [= *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* series 2, 11], New York 1894.

<sup>40</sup> Grégoire de Nysse, *Vie de Sainte Macrine*, ed. P. MARAVAL [= *Sources chrétiennes* 178], Paris 1971; English translation: *The Life of Macrina by Gregory Bishop of Nyssa*, tr. K. CORRIGAN, Toronto 2001.

visited a monk who said: ‘When I was at Scete, the works of the soul (*ta erga tes psyches*) were our work (*ergon bemon*); we regarded handiwork (*ergocheiron*) as secondary work (*parergon*). But now the works of the soul (*ta erga tes psyches*) have become secondary work (*parergon*) and the former secondary work the main work (*ergon*)’.<sup>41</sup>

According to the theoreticians of ascetic life, excessive accent on manual labour was potentially harmful, as it was the effect of the action of a demon/*logismos* who pushed the monk towards the sin of greed (*philargyria*). Even if the brothers renounced everything upon entering the ascetic life, intense labour could bring about more resources than were essential for survival. Thus, the accumulated wealth could become poison. A monk might begin to want to multiply the possessions, but not share them with others. The apophtegms and edifying stories aimed at the monks used various means to instil in them the fear of such a situation. John Cassian used the entire book VII of his *Institutata* to describe the fight with the demon of greed.<sup>42</sup> Texts elaborating on this issue do not specify what kind of work could conduce to such an increase in wealth. They are abstract considerations far from reality, in which work – possible only for a part of the day (usually a small one) by people weakened by fasting and

<sup>41</sup> English translation: *Give Me a Word. The Alphabetical Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, tr. J. WORTLEY, New York 2014.

<sup>42</sup> ‘When then this vice (*philargyria*) has got hold of the slack and lukewarm soul of some monk, it begins by tempting him in regard of a small sum of money, giving him excellent and almost reasonable excuses why he ought to retain some money for himself. For he complains that what is provided in the monastery is not sufficient, and can scarcely be endured by a sound and sturdy body. What is he to do if ill health comes on, and he has no special store of his own to support him in his weakness? He says that the allowance of the monastery is but meagre, and that there is the greatest carelessness about the sick: and if he has not something of his own so that he can look after the wants of his body, he will perish miserably. [...] And so, when he has bamboozled himself with such thoughts as these, he racks his brains to think how he can acquire at least one penny. Then he anxiously searches for some special work which he can do without the Abbot knowing anything about it. And selling it secretly, and so securing the coveted coin, he torments himself worse and worse in thinking how he can double it: puzzled as to where to deposit it, or to whom to entrust it. Then he is oppressed with a still weightier care as to what to buy with it, or by what transaction he can double it. And when this has turned out as he wished, a still more greedy craving for gold springs up, and is more and more keenly excited, as his store of money grows larger and larger’ (7.7) (tr. E. C. S. GIBSON).

night vigils – brought a profit so small that it was often too little to cover basic needs. Cassian's conclusion is as follows:

It will be the greatest victory and a lasting triumph, if, as is said, the conscience of the monk is not defiled by the possession of the smallest coin. For it is an impossibility for him who, overcome in the matter of a small possession, has once admitted into his heart a root of evil desire, not to be inflamed presently with the heat of a still greater desire'. (7.21)

In reality, eremites and members of *laurae* could not conform to these guidelines: a monk had to deal with money. Obviously, there was a possibility of escaping this difficulty: those who wanted to live an ascetic life should choose a cenobium, as Cassian recommended to do. Nevertheless, a large part (perhaps even the majority) of Egyptian monks did not choose this path.

### PACHOMIAN MONKS

I have yet to mention the views and practices of Pachomius and the monks from the cenobitic convents he established in Upper Egypt in the third decade of the fourth century and in the subsequent years. They require individual treatment by virtue of the immense dossier consisting of the *Lives* of the first priors of these congregations, their letters and sets of rules. Excluding the letters of Pachomius and Theodore, which do not mention work, other texts in this dossier were written at the end of the fourth century and the beginning of the fifth century at the earliest. Without a thorough analysis, it is not possible to assume that they can inform us about the views and practices of Pachomian monks of the previous decades. It is known that the image of Pachomius and his disciples was subject to considerable manipulation. The authors of their *Lives* adjusted the facts to their programme of improving the congregation, which at the end of the fourth century was suffering from a leadership crisis and, more generally, from an identity crisis.

Despite this reservation, it seems to me certain that manual labour belonged to the way of life of Pachomian monks from the very start. This conviction stems from an assessment of their economic situation.

Ensuring the essential amount of food and clothing in the first two large convents (Tabennese and Pbau) was a significant challenge. Joining the convent, monks probably brought some resources with them, but these resources could not sustain them for long. There is no indication that in the first half of the fourth century the congregation owned lands granting regular income; property of lands only appeared in the second half of the fourth century or even later. It is unlikely that convents, which were a completely new phenomenon and whose population quickly grew in numbers, regularly received donations large enough to cover their daily expenses. Thus, monks had to work, and even so hunger was still a threat to their communities.<sup>43</sup> Following the words of Paul in 2 Thes. 3:6–10 was the only sensible solution.

At the end of the fourth century, Pachomian monks worked a great deal – too much to devote enough time to prayer and reading. We know this from a very credible source, namely a kind of spiritual testament written by Horsiese before his death (c. 390). He addresses the leaders of the congregation the following way:

Do not refresh them [*the monks* – EW] in their bodily needs without giving them spiritual nourishment. Or again not teach them spiritual things while oppressing them and their bodily needs, namely, food and clothing. But give them food for soul and body alike; and give them no opportunity for negligence. Or what is this justice of ours, that we oppress the brothers with work while we enjoy leisure? Or that we impose on them a yoke which we are unable to bear? (Acts 13:10) [...] let us share with them both work and refreshment and let us not consider our disciples slaves and allow their distress to be our joy. (7)<sup>44</sup>

<sup>43</sup> It is not an exaggeration, as proven from a text written by Theodore, who led the congregation after Pachomius' death: 'He [God subjecting monks to trials] caused serious hardships to arise among the brothers in Apa's [meaning Pachomius] time. To such a degree that so great a man as he had recourse to seculars for bread. That good man with his eyes saw his sons working little mills and licking the meal with their tongues in consequence of their great hunger [...] For want of bread, not once in all those days was the signal given for a meal'. Edition: *Oeuvres de s. Pachôme et de ses disciples*, ed. L. T. LEFORT [= *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium* 159], Leuven 1956, p. 41; translation: *Pachomian Koinonia*, tr. A. VEILLEUX, vol. III, Kalamazoo 1982, p. 93.

<sup>44</sup> Edition: *Pachomiana Latina*, ed. A. A. BOON, Brussels 1932, pp. 112–113; translation: *Pachomian Koinonia*, tr. A. VEILLEUX, vol. III, Kalamazoo 1982, pp. 174–175.



The crisis confirmed by Horsiese's text was triggered not only by the bad conduct of the congregation's elite,<sup>45</sup> but by economics as well. The increasing wealth of the convents posed new challenges to the Pachomians:

As we had said before they had acquired many fields, and again after some time many boats, each monastery built its own. Because of this they had no leisure and were burdened with heavy cares. In the time of Abba Pachomius, as they were few, they were vigilant not to be burdened by worldly possessions. (*Vita Prima* = *GI* 146, similarly *SBo* 197)<sup>46</sup>

Such a diagnosis of the roots of the crisis was fair, although it may sound surprising at first. The increasing number of monks led to further expansion of economic activity and the search for sources of income that would prevent famine. As the convents became more renowned, they started to receive donations from people 'of the world', such as money, grain, lands, and boats. Yet, the growing wealth burdened the congregation. All those possessions entailed an increased effort in order to multiply goods. Monks had to work more in the fields and in workshops. Managing wealth became more complex and progressively larger groups of monks had to be engaged in those processes in locations far from the convents. Their participation in the worship practices at the convent was, therefore, difficult. Work was usurping the first place, despite the fact that prayer was supposed to be more important.

The belief that a monk should work that was widespread amongst the Egyptian monks proved important for Palestinian monks, who were strongly affected by the trends in Egypt. Nevertheless, sources written in Palestine never discussed this issue.

<sup>45</sup> These people could quote Matt. 10 and 1Cor. as their defence. Horsiese was probably outraged by the extent to which the leaders were excluded from the work-related obligations. The tradition of the congregation still remembered that Pachomius used to work alongside his brothers.

<sup>46</sup> *Sancti Pachomii Vitae Graecae*, ed. F. HALKIN, Brussels 1932; *Pachomii vita Bobairice scripta*, ed. and tr. L. T. LEFORT, Leuven 1925 [= *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium* 89]; translation: *Pachomian Koinonia*, tr. A. VEILLEUX, vol. I, Kalamazoo 1980, p. 403.

BASIL OF CAESAREA  
ON MONKS AND WORK

The obligation to work was seen as essential by Basil of Caesarea, who devoted two important chapters – 37 and 38 – of his *Longer Rules* to this issue. He comments there on the already quoted words of Paul. According to Basil, prayer and work are two different activities, performed in two different ‘times’; they are separate and yet harmoniously tied together (he quotes Ecc. 3:1: ‘All things have their season’). However, in the very next sentence, Basil presents a monk who prays while working. Thus, we encounter contradictory judgements to calm the meticulous ascetic by assuring him that he is still performing his most important duty – prayer. Since the first evidence in Epiphanius *Panarion*, the topos is essential (at least superficially) the discord between Paul’s recommendations.<sup>47</sup>

In *Longer Rule* 38, Basil considers the types of work that befit a monk. The labour should not disturb the order and peace of life or require raw materials which are difficult to obtain. The products should be sold quickly, without inappropriate interaction of men and women. It is crucial to make simple and modest items; ones that are commonly used (in this, Basil is very original). They should be sold without having to travel long distances that are both unnecessary and dangerous to the monks’ souls. Monks could be farmers, masons, carpenters, smiths, weavers, cobblers. ‘Of these agriculture is the best, since of its nature it provides the necessities of life and it preserves farmers from much wandering about or running hither and thither – but only if, according to the condition we laid down, it brings on us no troubles and disturbances from neighbours we live with’. Such praise of agricultural activity has a very distant (pagan!) origin in literature. Basil’s opinion is worth remembering, as Egyptian (and also Palestinian) sources do not mention whether the monks worked the fields before or after the harvest season. Only one apophthegm assigned to

<sup>47</sup> Other canons of Basil’s sets of rules that deal with mitigating the alarming contradiction in NT: *Short Rules* 206, 207, 252, 272; *Lesser Asketikon* (see n. 2) 173. See the explanations of G. GOULD, ‘Basil of Caesarea and the problem of the wealth of monasteries’, *Studies in Church History* 24 (1987), pp. 15–24.

Poemen openly expressed the dislike of this possibility,<sup>48</sup> although Egyptian documents show that monks personally tended to the fields (not only leased the owned parcels).

As a whole, Basil's discourse seems to have little in common with the actual experience of working monks. His image of monastic work is constructed by a member of the elite, an educated person recalling his readings and using rhetorical schemata. It is commonly known that masons, smiths or farmers could not systematically combine work with prayer, but this did not bother Basil.

#### SYRIAN MONKS<sup>49</sup>

The attitude of Egyptian monks towards work drew the attention of many scholars, but the same issue was rarely taken up with regard to Syrian monks. The great study of Syrian ascetism by Arthur Vööbus does not mention working monks at all.<sup>50</sup> As to other researchers, if they mentioned this issue at all, they maintained that Syrian monks did not follow the example of their Egyptian brethren, did not want to work and lived off

<sup>48</sup> *Alphabetikon*: Poemen 22 (596). Poemen does not explain why monks should not work the fields, apparently it was obvious for the editors of *Alphabetikon*. My comment to the apophthegm in: 'Les activités de production et la structure sociale des communautés monastiques égyptiennes', [in:] M. MOSSAKOWSKA-GAUBERT, O. DELOUIS (eds.), *La vie quotidienne des moines en Orient et en Occident (IV<sup>e</sup>-X<sup>e</sup> siècle)*, vol. I: *L'état des sources*, Cairo 2015, pp. 62-75.

<sup>49</sup> The term 'Syria' needs to be specified. It was and is used to denote a vast area from the Mediterranean coast to northern Mesopotamia. On one hand, it includes the Roman province of Syria (later on two provinces, Syria I and II) with the Greek-speaking townspeople and their elites, but on the other – areas of Syriac language dominance and Syriac-speaking elites. Various ethnicities contributed to the same civilisation, but in the issue of monks and their attitude to work there are no differences significant enough to call for separate considerations.

<sup>50</sup> A. VÖÖBUS, *The History of Ascetism in the Syrian Orient. A Contribution to the History of Culture in the Near East*, vol. II: *Early Monasticism in Mesopotamia and Syria* [= *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium. Subsidia* 17], Leuven 1960 (in this chapter, Syria denotes the Syrian language area).

alms, donations, Church and even imperial subsidies.<sup>51</sup> This opinion needs to be checked: there are many sources available.

The opinion about the reluctance of Syrian monks to take up work is based on attitudes typical of Syrian pre-monastic ascetic movement, characterized by the existence of wandering teachers and spiritual masters, travelling among the Christian communities. They constituted radically ascetic groups having an élite character. The best literary evidence of their activity is the work entitled *Liber Graduum*.<sup>52</sup> Concerning the date of its origin opinions diverge: the text may have been written between the second half of the third century and the middle of the fourth century. Even if we are to assume the second option, there is no doubt that the writing expresses much older views. Its author groups Christians (good Christians, since the sinners are not included here) into two categories: 'the perfect', that is, the ascetics-teachers, and 'the upright' faithful who had families, led normal social lives and provided resources and care for 'the perfect'.

To him who is greater in his mind and repentant in his heart, and knows to accomplish an invisible deed, our Lord and his preachers said: 'Do not be anxious for your body; about what you shall wear, not even for yourself of what you shall be nourished' (Matt. 6:26), but 'seek that which is higher and meditate upon it' (Col. 3:1). Because a person in this way is able to correct, reconcile, admonish, and teach people to please the one who gives the life to all, and to extricate people from stories that are not virtuous and discussions that are not profitable, and amusement, and inappropriate laughter, and hateful words, and evil deeds. Because of this conduct and profit, our Lord did not allow this person, who is helper for all people, to work on the land, because he said to him as [he said] to Simon, 'if you love me, feed for me my flock and my sheep, my ewes and my lambs' (Jn. 21:15–17). This one

<sup>51</sup> A. GUILLAUMONT, 'Le travail manuel dans le monachisme ancien. Contestation et valorisation', [in:] A. GUILLAUMONT, *Aux origines du monachisme chrétien* [= *Spiritualité orientale* 30], Abbaye de Bellefontaine 1979, pp. 117–126; Ph. ESCOLAN, *Monachisme et Église. Le monachisme syrien du IV<sup>e</sup> au VI<sup>e</sup> siècle: un monachisme charismatique*, Paris 1999 [= *Théologie historique* 109], chap. 5: 'Le financement du monachisme: travail ou aumône?', pp. 183–225; V. BERTI, 'Il monachesimo siriano', [in:] G. FILORAMO (ed.), *Monachesimo orientale. Un'introduzione*, Morcelliana 2010, pp. 139–191, at p. 155.

<sup>52</sup> *The Book of Steps. The Syriac Liber Graduum*, tr., introd. and notes R. A. KITCHEN & M. F. G. PARMENTIER, Kalamazoo 2004.

who feeds the sheep of Christ is not able to go guide the plow and work the visible land, but gathers, feeds, and reconciles the sheep who were delivered to him. (12.6., pp. 124–125)

Therefore, ‘the perfect’ should not work, but not because there is something wrong with the work (as believed the *electi*, a similar group in the Manichaean communities assuming a dualistic worldview). ‘The perfect’ were to be entirely focused on their mission of teaching others.

It might seem that there is clear support for the opinion that Syrian monks usually did not work in *Historia religiosa*, written in 444 by Theodoret. The text mainly relates about famous monks whom the author knew in person, but also includes stories reaching back as far as the end of the fourth century.<sup>53</sup> Only one passage, that about the monastery established by Theodosius in Scopelus (Rhosus Massif), shows monks busying themselves with work. We learn that the monks living there produced sails, hair coats, mats and baskets, and worked the fields, and that a port had been built for trading (*HR* 10. 3). Theodoret puts into Theodosius’ mouth the following declaration:

While those engaged in life toil and labor to support children and wives, and in addition pay taxes and are dunned for tribute, also offer the first-fruits to God and supply the needs of beggars as far as they are able, it would be absurd for us not to supply our essential needs from labour – since we use scanty and simple food and simple dress – but to sit indoors with our arms crossed, reaping the handiwork of others.

Theodoret undoubtedly shared this opinion. However, he does not mention monks’ work anywhere else, and his descriptions of the lives of certain monks clearly suggest that they relied on what lay people offered them – a behaviour that does not conform to Paul’s precept from 2 Thes., to which Theodoret appeals when describing Theodosius’ behaviour. As

<sup>53</sup> Edition: Théodoret de Cyr, *Histoire des moines de Syrie*, eds. P. CANIVET & A. LEROY-MOLINGHEN [= *Sources chrétiennes* 234 & 257], Paris 1977–1979; English translation: Theodoret of Cyrrhus, *A History of the Monks of Syria*, tr. R. M. PRICE [*Cistercian Publications*], Collegeville, MN 1985.

we see, work is good, but refraining from work for the sake of ascetic life also is good. This is contradictory. Such inconsistency is a characteristic trait of ascetic thought of Late Antiquity.

I have been wondering how I should treat those of the sermons delivered by John Chrysostom in Antioch which encourage the faithful to provide material support to the monks living at the nearby mountain, Silpius, which towered over the city.<sup>54</sup> These sermons may suggest that the monks needed constant help, because they did not work. John Chrysostom mentions the work of the monks only once and just in passing.<sup>55</sup> Nevertheless, it would be unwise to conclude on the basis of his homilies that the Antiochian monastic communities were reluctant to take up manual labour. John directed his sermons at the general public in order to teach them how they should behave. In Chrysostom's mind, good behaviour included the willingness to give alms to the poor, and monks renouncing their possessions belonged to this category. Delivering a sermon was not a good opportunity to discuss the attitude of monks towards work as means of obtaining a living.

We do know that the Messalian monks, who started to appear at the end of the fourth century, opposed the duty of work. Messalians, or Masalians, was a Syriac term, comparable to *euchitai* in Greek ('those who pray').<sup>56</sup> The earliest proof of their presence in Edessa (prior to 373) can

<sup>54</sup> Chrysostom often mentions the necessity of providing material support for the monks. The donors gained favour in the Heavens thanks to their generosity: 'I long to urge you on and encourage you to the alliance and succour of the saints of God [meaning 'monks', EW]; but I fear lest someone should suspect another thing, that I say this not for your sakes, but for theirs. But know that it is not for their sakes I say these things, but for your own. And if ye are willing to attend, I convince you by my very words; the gain is not equal to you and to them. For ye, if ye give, will give those things from which, willing or unwilling, ye must soon after part, and give place to others; but what thou receives is great and far more abundant' (*In Philip. hom. 1, Patrologia Graeca* 62, col. 188), English translation: *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. XIII. Chrysostom also encouraged the Antiochene to personally give the donations to the inhabitants of Silpius to bear witness to their way of life, sacrifice, and virtue.

<sup>55</sup> *In Matth. hom. 68.3, Patrologia Graeca* 58, col. 644: 'when they have risen up and finished those holy and continual prayers, the sun being risen, they depart each one to their work (*ergon*), gathering thence a large supply for the needy', English translation: *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. X.

<sup>56</sup> Foundational publication about the Messalians: C. STEWART, 'Working the Earth of the Heart'. *The Messalian Controversy in History, Texts and Language to 431 A.D.*, Oxford 1991; also

be found in a hymn by Ephrem the Syrian, where the Messalians are mentioned among six other heresies: ‘and the *msallyānē* who are debauched [or contemptible or stirred up]’ (tr. Stewart).<sup>57</sup> More information about the Messalians may be found in the work of Epiphanius of Salamis entitled *Panarion* (chapter 80), which was quoted above.<sup>58</sup> According to Epiphanius, the Messalians were present in Antioch, but came from Mesopotamia. We also know that they quickly moved to eastern parts of Asia Minor. To Epiphanius, the most distinguishable trait of the Messalians was their refusal to work – contrary to the guidelines of St. Paul – which led them to maintain themselves by begging. They renounced all possessions and wandered, allowed for the despicable cohabitation of men and women (this is important: here we learn that women were among these travelling ascetics), fasted and prayed without any order, slept without limits (which they did because God was supposed to talk to them in their dreams). Their sin was *philonikia* – ambition in ascetic practices. They grew out their hair in a womanly fashion and shaved their beards, which made them look even more like women and were prone to strange and ‘enthusiastic’ behaviour (in the Greek meaning of the word: ‘being possessed by a deity’).<sup>59</sup> The hierarchical Church fought them zealously (the bishop of Antioch played a particularly important role in this struggle), culminating with the Council of Ephesus in 431, where a statement was issued condemning the Messalians:

[...] those adhering to the heresy of the Messalians or Enthusiasts in the entire province or under suspicion of this disease, whether clerics or laymen, may be dealt with. If they sign an anathema according to the provi-

widely discussed by D. CANER, *Wandering, Begging Monks: Spiritual Authority and the Promotion of Monasticism in Late Antiquity*, Berkeley – Los Angeles 2002, pp. 212–224, chapter ‘In support of the “People who pray”’. Apostolic monasticism and the Messalian controversy’. See also A. Guillaumont’s study in the collection quoted in note 18.

<sup>57</sup> *Contra haereses* 22.4. Stewart’s translation in the previously quoted book (n. 57), p. 15.

<sup>58</sup> *Panarion*, ed. K. HOLL, rev. by J. DUMMER [= *Die Griechischen Christlichen Schriftsteller* 37], Berlin 1980.

<sup>59</sup> In the documentation of the Council of Ephesus, which condemns them, they are referred to as Messalians, *euchitai* and *enthousiastai*: *Acta conciliorum oecumenicorum*, ed. E. SCHWARTZ, vol. I.1.7, p. 117.

sions of the aforesaid synodical decree, clerics are to remain in the clergy and laymen in the communion of the church; but if they refuse and do not sign an anathema, then presbyters, deacons and those holding any other rank in the church are to be deprived of both clerical rank and communion, and laymen are to be anathematized, while monasteries are forbidden to house those convicted, lest the tares spread and flourish.<sup>60</sup>

The Messalians had no organisational structure, they were an ascetic movement whose spirituality was very attractive for many monks (the caricatured image given by Epiphanius should not be seen as a factual representation). We can confidently say that not all of them begged and wandered: the decree of the Council of Ephesus just quoted implies that there were monasteries participating in this movement; and there also were clerics who yielded to the temptation of Messalianism. Condemnation by the Church limited the reach of the Messalians but could not destroy the trend altogether. Later literature still makes mention of the Messalians, the anti-Messalian polemic goes on. However, it is difficult to assess whether such accusations correspond to reality or are mere slander.

A similarly contemptuous attitude towards work was assumed by groups of wandering and begging monks, especially those belonging to the movement started by Alexander Acoemete, founder of the Constantinopolitan convent of the Acoemetes.<sup>61</sup> He was born around 360 on one of the islands on the Aegean Sea. He studied law in Constantinople and began his career as *praefectianus*, a clerk in the office of the *praefectus praetorio*. After conversion, he gave away his family fortune and travelled to Syria around 379 to join a monastery unknown to us. The lifestyle of the community did not satisfy his desire to meticulously follow the Gospel (this attitude was called *akribeia*: ‘exactness’) and so, he left the convent, Bible in hand, and spent seven years in solitude, studying the Scriptures and praying, somewhere on the steppe near Chalcis. He crossed the Euphrates and lived

<sup>60</sup> *Acta conciliorum oecumenicorum* (cit. n. 59), vol. I.1.7, pp. 117–118; English translation: *The Council of Ephesus of 431. Documents and Proceedings*, tr. R. PRICE, introd. and notes Th. GRAUMANN [TTH], Liverpool 2020, pp. 523–524.

<sup>61</sup> *La vie d’Alexandre l’Acémète*, ed. E. DE STROOP, *Patrologia Orientalis* 6, Paris 1911, pp. 645–703 (with a Latin translation); English translation: CANER, *Wandering, Begging Monks* (cit. n. 56), pp. 249–280; text presentation: *ibidem*, pp. 229–249.



in a storage jar, sleeping there at night and wandering around the mountains during the day. For twenty years, he was 'praying for bread to eat and clothing to wear'. He eventually gathered 400 ascetics, who daily shared with the poor whatever was left of their own food and had only one tunic.

Alexander used the period spent at monastery he had created at the banks of the Euphrates, in Osroene, to prepare his own liturgical programme.

These [the monks] he separated into eight choruses that sang and chanted psalms to God with zeal and understanding. And so, he established his monastery. As for its liturgical observance and sequence, he arranged this into twelve parts in accordance with the prayers he recited in his jar. [...] For although he assumed oversight of so many brothers, he did not worry about any provisions for their needs. (chapter 27)

Later on, he expanded the prayers, so they took place both day and night. At the end of each prayer cycle, the hymn of the angels was sung seventy-seven times:

Glory to God in the highest, and on the earth peace, goodwill toward men.  
(chapter 30)

Nevertheless, this was not enough for Alexander. He selected 150 'noble soldiers of Christ' who were to accompany him on the path through 'that fearsome desert of unbelievers'. He crossed the Euphrates and went into the desert, carrying only parchment codices of the Holy Scriptures. Then, Alexander and his disciples wandered along the *Strata Diocletiana*, feeding the poor and supporting all believers. Without provisions or water, the members of this 150-person march travelled from fortress to fortress and settlement to settlement. Soldiers and civilians alike fed them, and the monks, following the adopted rule, gave to the poor any surplus food (chap. 32–33). Ceaselessly singing psalms, the monks travelled across the desert up to Palmyra. However, the city authorities closed the gates upon their arrival. The monks stayed outside the walls for 3 days, until barbarians (Arabs) brought them food on their camels. There was enough to feed the poor of Palmyra as well (chap. 35).

The Antiochian bishop, Theodotus (c. 420–429) also refused to let them in, even using force to repel them. Alexander led his companions into the

city at night and took over an abandoned bathhouse, where they immediately started singing psalms. The bishop did not dare to banish them for fear of the habitants, who saw Alexander as a prophet and wanted to hear his teachings. Alexander undertook to convince the rich to build a hospice, and he openly criticised the bishop and the dux residing in Antioch for their neglect towards those in need (chap. 38–39). Following this, the bishop obtained an order from the dux to relegate Alexander and his monks to Chalcis, where they were watched over by the municipal guard. Alexander managed to escape disguised as a beggar and undertook a long journey, eventually arriving in Constantinople. Along the way, he visited a convent that would have received his full approval if not for the garden, which he saw as ‘a possible impediment to perfect virtue’ (chap. 41–42). He arrived at the capital with twenty-four monks from that convent, but he was not greeted enthusiastically.

On the question of whether Alexander was a Messalian, Caner rightly notes that we actually do not know his theological views and therefore cannot be sure. Refusal to work and lack of concern about feeding his monks day by day is not enough to deem the community a group of Messalians. However, it could have been the opinion of hostile representatives of the clergy and town authorities. In any case, accusing Alexander of being a Messalian was a convenient excuse for repressing him and his followers.

Alexander’s strength lay in his original psalm liturgy, unceasingly celebrated irrespective of time and place. Groups of monks praying on squares, streets and during marches strongly affected witnesses from various social strata. Alexander was supported not only by the poor receiving leftover food, but also the rich whom he met during the long journey from the Euphrates to Constantinople.

The list of texts that modern historians of monasticism often quote in order to show the negative attitude of Syrian monks towards work includes a striking passage from the Syriac *Life of Barsauma*,<sup>62</sup> a famous monk active during the Second Council of Ephesus and the Council of Chalcedon.<sup>63</sup>

<sup>62</sup> ESCOLAN, *Monachisme et Église* (cit. n. 51), p. 186.

<sup>63</sup> *The Life of Barsauma*, tr. A. PALMER, [in:] J. HAHN & V. MENZE (eds.), *The Wandering Holy Man. The Life of Barsauma. Christian Asceticism and Religious Conflict in Late Antique Palestine*,

In the chapter titled ‘Twenty-ninth sign’ (‘sign’ meaning miracle), Barsauma learns that his monks are planting a vineyard; having been asked to bless it, he answers:

Bless God’s Word which is going to see to it that not one of the grapevines you have planted sprouts! Our ‘vineyard’ is Christ, who said: ‘I am the vineyard and you are the branches’. (Jn. 15:1–6) We are the ‘plants’ and we will bear tasty ‘fruit’ through the Crucified, as He promised.

Of course, these words having been uttered, the saplings of the vineyard dried up.

If we carefully reflect on the moral meaning of this story, we must admit that it cannot be used as evidence of what Syrian monks thought of work. Barsauma does not say that his monks ought not to work in a vineyard. He rather suggests that the monastery ought not to possess a vineyard, since it turns the monks away from the aim of ascetic life. Another chapter (‘Twenty-eighth sign’) tells of an eremite who asked Barsauma a blessing for his vineyard: Barsauma was dissatisfied with him because ‘the mourner’s mind was preoccupied with plants’. These saplings too failed to bring fruit. On the other hand, when villagers asked the saint to bless their vineyards, their wish was granted (chap. 51: ‘Many signs’).

Bearing in mind all the information presented here on the Syrian monks who openly manifested the conviction that work should not be an indispensable element of their lives, we still should not conclude that this viewpoint was shared by all Syrian monks (or even by the majority). All of the collections of monastic canons, luckily preserved in Syriac and Arabic, suggest that work was a normal activity for a monk, and suited the essence of monastic life. Let us take a closer look at those canons.

Oakland, CA 2020, pp. 187–271. In the ‘Introduction’ of that book (pp. 7–10) the editors express the opinion that *The Life of Barsauma* was written at a time relatively near to the Council of Chalcedon, perhaps as early as the middle of the 5th century, but that the text that we have contains some later interpolations. E. HONIGMANN, *Le couvent de Barsauma et le patriarcat jacobite d’Antioche et de Syrie* [= *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium* 146, *Subsidia* 7], Leuven 1954, pp. 6–23, believes that this *Life* originated in mid-6th century. For the problem I am discussing here the divergences concerning the date are not very important.

Rabbula, bishop of Edessa (411–435) in *Admonitions for the Monks*, canon 16:

The monks shall not, under the pretext of occupation and work, fail the times that are appointed for the worship-service day and night.<sup>64</sup>

A monophysite rule written for convents inside the Sasanian state, canon 11:

When a monk ceases from the manual work [lit. ‘of hands’], he shall meditate in the divine books.<sup>65</sup>

Rule of Abraham of Kashkar (c. 500–588), an important reformer of East Syrian monasticism,<sup>66</sup> canon 1:

Quietness, however, is preserved by two means: through constant reading and prayer, or by the service of hands and through meditation. As abba Isaiah says, and as also the Wise One says: ‘Idleness generates a multitude of evils’. And again, a man who does not do work is cast into desires all the time.<sup>67</sup>

Dadisho (prior of the convent established by Abraham and first successor of him), canon 10:

With regard to the ways and affairs of the body and the works to be done, all the brothers of the community shall work equally and no one shall be idle.<sup>68</sup>

Babai (successor of Dadisho in the same this convent), canon 7:

<sup>64</sup> *The Rabbula Corpus Comprising the Life of Rabbula, His Correspondence, a Homily Delivered in Constantinople, Canons, and Hymns*, ed. R. R. PHENIX & C. B. HORN, Atlanta 2017, pp. 96–97.

<sup>65</sup> A. VÖÖBUS, *Syriac and Arabic Documents Regarding Legislation Relative to Syrian Asceticism*, Stockholm 1960, p. 90.

<sup>66</sup> S. CHIALÀ, *Abramo di Kashkar e la sua comunità*, Qiqajon 2005; F. JULLIEN, *Le monachisme en Perse. La réforme d’Abraham le Grand Père des moines d’Orient [= Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium 622, Subsidia 121]*, Leuven 2008.

<sup>67</sup> VÖÖBUS, *Syriac and Arabic Documents* (cit. n. 65), pp. 152–155.

<sup>68</sup> VÖÖBUS, *Syriac and Arabic Documents* (cit. n. 65), p. 170.

A monk shall be bound to serve in the cenobium for three years [Abraham's convent had a cenobitic part for beginners and an eremitic part for experienced monks – EW]; when he shall receive five staters in silver from the fund (of the monastery) in order to build the cell, and all the brothers shall help him the third (part) of his work; if there is an empty cell in the monastery, then shall he serve for four years and shall get it; and if he is a novice and he has strength he shall serve more; and if somebody builds the cell by his own property, he shall serve for two years.<sup>69</sup>

Clearly the community wanted to keep strong and healthy novices in the cenobitic part of the convent, as they constituted an important labour force. It is worth noting the numbers here: building a cell required 5 staters and 'a third of the cost of a monk's work'. How did they evaluate this third?

Canons of Mārūtā of Maipherqat, belonging to the set of norms that were in force both in West-Syrian and East-Syrian monasteries (date and place of origin are unknown):<sup>70</sup>

'However great the work and labour in the monastery, those who are weak shall be excused from fulfilling the canon of the service; those who are sound shall work. [...] In the summer when the days are hot, they shall work in the early (morning) for as long as it is cool; when the day becomes hot, they shall sit for reading until the time of mid-day service'.<sup>71</sup>

While reading the great hagiographic work by John of Ephesus and the monumental history of convents by Thomas of Marga, entitled *The Book of*

<sup>69</sup> VÖÖBUS, *Syriac and Arabic Documents* (cit. n. 65), p. 179. One stater mentioned in the text is worth four silver coins (Syrian texts call them *zuze*, in Arabic – *dirham*; their weight varied from 3.9 to 4.16 grams and the worth reached 1/25 of a golden coin – *dinar*, rarely in circulation; taxes were paid in *zuze*). I was not able to find the prices for the second half of 6th century, they would help establish the worth of 5 staters more precisely than saying that it was about 1 dinar (4 *zuze* × 5 = 20, 1 dinar = 25 *zuze*). All calculations are approximate.

<sup>70</sup> The text of the compilation may be found in: VÖÖBUS, *Syriac and Arabic Documents* (cit. n. 65), as well as in a separate edition: *The Canons Ascribed to Mārūtā of Maipherqat and Related Sources*, ed. A. VÖÖBUS [= *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium* 439–440, *Scriptores Syri* 191–192], Leuven 1982.

<sup>71</sup> Vööbus in the *CSCO* edition quoted in the previous note, pp. 99/82–83.

*Governors*,<sup>72</sup> I noticed that in those works there are no reflections on how work should be treated. Both authors apparently saw no reason to discuss such issue. A positive attitude towards work in monastic life was for them something obvious. There cannot be any doubt that the monks they were thinking of did work.

Finally, let us finish with an amusing story. It is a tale of a monophysite patriarch of Antioch in the years 594/5?–631, Athanasius, also known as Gamolo ('Camel Driver'). The future hierarch took care of camels and allegedly stayed in his convent for a year after the election to complete the task assigned to him by his brothers. When the bishops arrived for him after the agreed time, they found him sticking mud to the walls of the stable.<sup>73</sup> Even though this story presenting the humility of the patriarch is probably fictional, it was supposed to sound real to monastic communities. For them, zealous physical work was a virtue.

Moving on from texts which show the attitude of Syrian monks towards work to texts documenting their behaviour, it is possible to find a considerable amount of evidence supporting my opinion. I shall not quote all pieces of information, since most of them concern individual cases (the limited value of individual cases for understanding the whole has to be remembered; such data do not conclusively indicate anything).

Let me mention only the most striking cases. Monks worked taking part in the material foundation of their monastery, when it was necessary to construct communal buildings and cells or to adjust the caves to match the needs of their future inhabitants. This probably happened in the early stages of all monastic communities. In the introduction to his rule, Abraham of Kashkar provides a clear description of this tiresome period that requires participation from all of the monks.

<sup>72</sup> John of Ephesus, *The Lives of the Eastern Saints*, ed. and tr. E. W. BROOKS, *Patrologia Orientalis* 17–19, Paris 1923–1924; *The Book of Governors. The Historia Monastica of Thomas Bishop of Marga A.D. 840*, ed. and tr. E. W. BROOKS, London 1893.

<sup>73</sup> We learn about this in a passage from a chronicle written by Michael the Syrian, vol. II, book 10.24, who based his book on the lost chronicle of Dionysius of Tel Mahre from mid-9th century. About this personage, see *Gorgias Encyclopedic Dictionary of Syriac Heritage*, s.v. 'Athanasius Gamolo' [J. TANNOUS].

But because, since the time when we settled down in this place, we brothers who dwell here have laboured and wearied ourselves to excavate the caves and to build the cells for ourselves in order to dwell in them and wherefore we have approached this manner (of life) (only) recently, we have neglected to lay on ourselves anything that is commensurate with this manner (of life). But now since we have rested a little from the bodily toil and labour and since we have come to ourselves, we have consulted together to choose (something) for us from the divine books and from the sayings of the holy fathers, something which is fitting for the healing of our abscesses and for the remedy of our sores.<sup>74</sup>

Building an impressive church – an aim which every large monastery had the ambition to achieve – required of course the work of specialists who were laymen (architects, stonemasons, carpenters, mosaicists, painters), but monks also cooperated, and among them there could be some specialists of these kinds of work.

John of Ephesus provides another report, important for the present discussion, on monks working to build a convent. It concerns the vicissitudes of the Amida monasteries and is found in a history of the persecutions monophysite communities under Justin's and Justinian's rule.<sup>75</sup> The monks were expelled in winter, their marching column camped along the way and sought shelter in smaller monophysite convents. One such place was a small convent called 'The Poplars', located on the outskirts of the Amida territory. The monks constructed new monastic buildings there. After two and a half years, they returned to Amida only to see their convents ruined. It took considerable effort to restore the site. However, the persecutions were revived, and the monks were banished once again. After many years, they finally returned to Amida and rebuilt once more their monasteries.

Simeon (known as Simeon of the Olives) was prior of one of the branches of the Qartamin monastery. He created a large olive grove hiring workers to plant the trees. However, when the trees bore fruit, it was the

<sup>74</sup> Ὡῶῶῶῶ, *Syriac and Arabic Documents* (cit. n. 65), p. 153.

<sup>75</sup> John of Ephesus, *The Lives of the Eastern Saints* (cit. n. 72), *Patrologia Orientalis* 17, pp. 416/618–421/623. A similar story of a convent (a smaller one, in this case), which was built, then destroyed by persecutors and rebuilt again, is told by the same author, *Patrologia Orientalis* 17, pp. 105–108.

monks who collected the harvest by picking the olives from the branches, and not hitting the branches with sticks as it was usually done.<sup>76</sup> The effort was greater, but the oil obtained from olives harvested in such a way was more valuable.

Everyday tasks inside a monastery (renovation, transport, water supply, bakery, kitchen and refectory, taking care of the sick and the old) were surely performed by the monks themselves to a great extent; completing such tasks took many hours of intense labour.

As in Egypt and Palestine, the monks in Syria worked for other people during harvest, gathering olives, dates, probably also grapes. This is not mentioned often, but their engagement in this type of work – typical for the poor of the entire Mediterranean area – is certain.<sup>77</sup>

In the light of the quoted sources (and many more which are available), the conviction of historians about the reluctance of Syrian monks to undertake work is misguided, and even surprising. Their error lies in the assumption that the instances of monastic groups refusing to work were typical of the entire monastic population.

## WORK AND GIVING ALMS

Many texts encouraging the monks to work justify such a call with the duty of giving alms to those in need (such as the poor and the sick). This idea appears as early as Athanasius' *The Life of Anthony*, in a passage praising

<sup>76</sup> We know the content of *The Life of Simeon* from a summary published by S. BROCK, 'The Fenqitho of the Monastery of Mar Gabriel in Tur Abdin', *Ostkirchliche Studien* 28 (1973), appendix: 'Shem'un "of the Olives"', pp. 174–179. See the important article discussing the history of this text: J. TANNOUS, 'The Life of Simeon of the Olives: A Christian puzzle from Islamic Syria', [in:] J. KREINER & H. REIMITZ (eds.), *Motions of Late Antiquity. Essays on Religion, Politics, and Society in Honour of Peter Brown*, Turnhout 2016, pp. 309–330.

<sup>77</sup> On the monks from the community established by Abraham of Kashkar, see *The Histories of Rabban Hörmîzd the Persian and Raban Bar-Idtâ*, ed. and tr. E. A. W. BUDGE, London 1902; Abraham Zabaya, *The Life of Bar 'Edta*, chap. 1, verses 207–211. The author wrote his book late (9th–13th century), but he was summarising an earlier (7th-century) life, see CHIALÀ, *Abramo di Kashkar* (cit. n. 66), p. 22 n. 6. Another source: *The Book of Governors* (cit. n. 72), book V, chap. 17, p. 562.



the desert ascetics: So were like tents their cells in the hills filled with divine choirs – people chanting, studying, fasting, praying, rejoicing in the hope of future boons, working for the distribution of alms, and maintaining both love and harmony among themselves. (44.2)

Later, this idea is often found in *apophthegmata*:

A brother asked Abba Poemen: ‘Tell me a saying’. The elder replied: ‘Apply yourself to handiwork as much as you are able, in order to perform deeds of mercy with it, for it is written: “Almsgiving and faith purge sins”’ (Prov. 15.27a). ‘What is faith?’, the brother said and the elder said: ‘Faith is to live in humble-mindedness and to perform the deeds of mercy’.<sup>78</sup>

Basil of Caesarea also addressed this in *Longer Rules* (42):

Question: With what goal and in what disposition should workers carry out their tasks?

Response: It must always be borne in mind that the worker’s purpose is not to minister to his own needs by his own labours, but to fulfil the commandment of the Lord who said: ‘I was hungry and you gave me food’, etc. (Matt. 25:35). For to be anxious for oneself is in every way forbidden by the Lord when he says: ‘Do not be anxious for your life, what you shall eat, or for your body, what you shall put on’, and he added: ‘For the Gentiles seek after all these things’ (Matt. 6:25 & 32). Now let him not set his own need as the goal of his work, but the service of those in want.

The monks had to work to be able to give alms, but this did not imply that they had to distribute them personally. Basil and other authors of ascetic writings did not approve of accepting donations from the rich with the intention of giving them to the poor.<sup>79</sup> When considering almsgiving as the main purpose of monastic work, they were leaving economic reality out of account. In order to increase the rhetorical effect of their discourse, they did not mention the fact that monks – if they had given up any property – were obliged to buy their food and clothes by the income

<sup>78</sup> *Alphabetikon*: Poemen 69; English translation: *Give Me a Word* (cit. n. 41).

<sup>79</sup> On this issue, see R. FINN, *Almsgiving in the Later Roman Empire. Christian Promotion and Practice 313–450*, Oxford 2006, pp. 93–95.

of their work. What is more, they let their readers or hearers imagine that the earnings of the monks enabled them not only to satisfy their elementary needs, but also to help other people on a large scale. Perhaps monks working as copyists of books were in such a situation (they certainly earned more than monks-weavers or monks-shoemakers); and of course those monks who before taking the habit had been well-off and who had not renounced their property could practice charity systematically. As regards monastic communities, they became charitable institutions if they acquired land, workshops and money by gifts, legacies or bequests of pious people. However, Basil did not had such situations in mind. The monks he was thinking of had to be perfectly poor.

Basil is the first author to state that the monks' charity should respect certain principles. He was convinced that monastic communities should delegate one monk to take care of distributing alms, and other brothers should be prohibited to give away anything of their own initiative (*Shorter Rules* 91, 100). Most importantly, charity should not go too far:

Question: Ought we give from the common store to the needy from outside?

Response: Since the Lord says: 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel' (Matt. 15:24) and 'It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the house-dogs' (Matt. 15:26), we are under no necessity to take what is assigned to those dedicated to God and disperse it indiscriminately.

But whether it is possible to do what was said by the woman praised for her faith – 'Yes Lord, but even the dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from their masters' table' (Matt. 15:27) – let it be left to the decision of the steward with the consent of those who share seniority with him, in order that from our abundance 'the sun', as is written, 'may rise over the evil and the good'. (Matt. 5:45) (*Shorter Rules* 302)

An answer to the question for how to treat those who begged for alms may be also found in the dossier of letters written by two famous monks, Barsanuphius and John of Gaza:

Practise hospitality and the commandment [for charity] as much as you can; however, balance these also with your patience. Even if you have more

than enough in your possession, you should still exercise balance, lest anyone develop a habit of asking continually on the pretext of poverty. Therefore, carefully examine the reasons for which each visitor approaches. If someone happens to be a thief, as the fathers have said, simply give that person a blessing (*eulogia*) and then ask him to leave. Moreover, since some of them come here to exploit you, do not allow them any such boldness; for they are trying to exploit you with their greed, since they do not really need anything. And do not give a garment to anyone upon first encounter; unless it is a person who greatly fears God and is embarrassed to ask. So, search out the truth, in order to see whether a person is genuinely poor and needy for God's sake rather than as a result of a prodigal life; and, afterward, show compassion to that person. (Letter 587 from John to the new prior Aelianus)<sup>80</sup>

Both texts are independent and separated by nearly 200 years, but they formulate the guidelines in a similar manner: charity cannot violate the basic economic interests of the community, and the treatment of those asking for help should depend on who they are. Both texts reflect the experience of monks managing monasteries, who frequently encountered people undeserving the support, who were insolent, intrusive, greedy. There is a departure here from the idyllic image of a monk working only to be able to give alms – the image that we saw in other Basil's writings and in hagiographic texts. This inconsistency stems from the difference of the levels of discourse: in *Longer Rules* 9, Basil presents general ideas; in *Shorter Rules* 302, he is closer to practical reality. For both does he find quotations from the Bible.

The declarations of Basil and John which I have just quoted constitute a *unicum* in monastic literature. This should not come as a surprise, as monastic literature was clearly didactic, had to provide monks with examples worth following. This is true of the apophthegms, where moral instructions could not be ambivalent. The same is true of the lives of saintly monks. Those monastic texts that talk about giving alms rarely

<sup>80</sup> Edition: Barsanuphe et Jean de Gaza, *Correspondance*, ed. F. NEYT & P. DE ANGELIS NOAH, tr. L. REGNAULT [= *Sources chrétiennes* 451], Paris 2001; English translation: Barsanuphius and John, *Letters*, vol. II, tr. J. CHRYSAVGIS [*The Fathers of the Church*], Washington 2007, pp. 168–169.

talk about the poor. They usually do not specify who the recipients of alms are. For their authors, obviously, it is not important to show to whom the monks give their resources. What is important is the monk himself, who gives alms for the sake of following the Gospel.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> It is highlighted by RUBENSON, 'The formation and re-formation' (cit. n. 35).

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**Abstract:** This study investigates linguistic and scriptal variation in notary signatures found in late antique contracts from Egypt, seeking to identify and interpret the potential relationship between choices in language and script. To answer this, theoretical concepts and methods from sociolinguistics, social semiotics, and multilingual studies are used, with the objective of adding a new, more linguistically-oriented perspective to existing research on notarial signatures. On the one hand, this research demonstrates how the Latin script seems to restrict notaries, resulting in transliterated Greek signatures with very homogeneous content. The familiarity of notaries with the Greek language and writing is, on the other hand, reflected in signatures written in the Greek alphabet, which are much more diverse and at times adjusted to the circumstances under which specific documents were composed. Even if notaries seem to lack confidence in freely producing text in the Latin script, they choose to do so due to its functional values, which are conveyed and perceived visually. Latin letters create an association between signatories and Roman law, adding to the trustworthiness and prestige of the signatures. Differentiating between script and language allows us to understand how the Latin script maintained the connotations that formerly accompanied the Latin language, gradually replacing it in the form of transliterated passages, at a time when the language was disappearing from papyrological



documentation. In this sense, sociolinguistics, and especially social semiotics, prove useful when dealing with visual aspects of language in papyri, as they prevent their functions and meanings from being overlooked.

**Keywords:** notary, social semiotics, digraphia, diglossia, *di emou* signatures

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**Keywords:** *coloni adscripticii*, *enapographoi georgoi*, Apion estate (Oxyrhynchus), tenancy, viticulture in late-antique Egypt

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**Keywords:** Ptolemaic papyri, petitions, letters, oil contraband, tax farming, Arsinoite nome, prisoners of war

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**Keywords:** Monastery of the Metanoia, *anmona civilis*, shipping receipts, Dioscorus archive

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**Keywords:** expertise, Areopagus, Exegetai, Phanodemus, Apollodorus, son of Pasion, *anagrapheis* (inscribers), Lysias *Against Nicomachus*

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**Keywords:** Latin papyri, Roman citizens, Egypt, business, trade, land

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**Keywords:** murder, pre-trial detention, priests, Soknopaiou Nesos

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**Keywords:** Deir el-Bahari, Amenhotep son of Hapu, Greek inscriptions

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**Keywords:** Alexandria, Mark Antony, Cleopatra VII, Antyllus, 'Inimitables'

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**Keywords:** medieval Nubia, Qasr Ibrim, Old Nubian documents, onomastics, ghost-names, account, Nubian economy

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**Keywords:** animal cult, priests, temple personnel, Egyptian temples, Ptolemaic period, Fayum area

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a dispute that seemed to have been closed. Two ways of reasoning in favour of monastic work were generally used: monks might and should pray and work at the same time, satisfying both precepts; monks ought to work in order to be able to give alms, and this conferred to work a meaning that went beyond immediate usefulness. Praying and working at the same time was not always feasible in actual practice, but this did not bother authors of ascetic treatises.

**Keywords:** voluntary poverty, St. Anthony, Pachomius, Hirsiesee, Basil of Caesarea, Evagrius of Pontus, John Cassian, *melete*, Messalians, 'wandering and begging' monks, Rabbula, Syriac monastic rules, almsgiving