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Coptic Monastic Literature: The Forgotten Names

Like every human being, a monk is made up of soul and body. That is why, when we investigate the memories of past monks, we refer to what remains of their spiritual activity but also of their material presence in the world: written documents, from one side, and archeological monuments, from the other. In the case of many of the Egyptian monks, this works smoothly. We can see the ruins of Pachomian monasteries (in the region of Hou = Diospolis Parva),¹ and we have the text of some literary works of Pachomius² together with the lives of him and of his successors. We can see the monastery of St. Antony (near the Gulf of Suez),³ and we have the text of his letters and of his life (written, according to trusted opinion, by the great Athanasius).⁴ We can see the ruins of the monastery of Atripe (near Shmin = Apollinopolis Magna),⁵ and we have the literary works of Shenoute⁶ and of his successor, Besa.⁷ We can see the monasteries of the Wadi al Natrun,⁸ and we have literary documents concerning Macarius and his entourage. And so on and so forth.

History, geography, and literature, all concur well in providing good information on early Egyptian monasticism. But when we consider the region so-called of the Thebais, which for authors like Palladius or the Timotheus of the *Historia monachorum* meant the entire region South of the Fayum today named Middle Egypt, the situation is not so clear.

¹ On the archaeology of the Pachomian monasteries, cf. Louis Théophile Lefort, *Les premiers monastères pachômiens. Exploration topographique*, Le Muséon 52 (1939) 379-407; *Ägypten*, Archiv für Orientforschung 27 (1980) 281-316; Gary Lease, *The IV Season of the Nag Hammadi Excavation, 21 December 1979-15 January 1980*, GM 41 (1980) 75-85; Bastiaan van Elderen, *The Fourth Season of the Nag Hammadi Excavations*, ARCE Newsletter 111 (1980) 25-26.

² Cf. L.Th. Lefort, *Oeuvres de S. Pachome et de ses disciples*, Louvain, Secretariat CSCO, 1956, CSCO 159 160; Amand Boon, *Pachomiana Latina*, Louvain, Bureaux de la Revue, 1932, Bibliothèque de la Revue d'Histoire Ecclesiastique, 7.

³ Ample photographic evidence in Massimo Capuani, *Egitto copto*, Milano, Jaca Book, 1999 p. 119 sgg.; cf. P. van Moorsel, *Deir Anba Antonius veertien Jaar na mijn eerste Campagne*, in: C. Fluck et al., *Divitiae Aegypti. Koptologische und verwandte Studien zu Ehren von Martin Krause*, p. 214-222, Wiesbaden, Reichert, 1995.

⁴ S. Rubenson, *The Letters of St. Antony: Origenist Theology, Monastic Tradition and the Making of a Saint*, Lund, Lund University Press, 1990.; L. Cremaschi, *S. Atanasio, Vita di Antonio. Apoftegmi. Lettere*, Roma, Edizioni Paoline, 1984, *Lecture Cristiane delle Origini*, 19/testi; G. Garitte (ed.), *S. Antonii vitae versio sahidica*, CSCO 117, 118, Paris, 1949, rist. Louvain, R. C. Gregg, *Athanasius, the Life of Antony and the Letter to Marcellinus*, New York etc., Paulist Press, 1980.

⁵ Photographic evidence in Capuani cit., p. 177-182; Ugo Monneret de Villard, *Les couvents près de Sohâg*, Milano, 1925-6, 2 vols.; G. Lefebvre, *Dair al Abiad*, in DACL 4(1) col. 459-502; Mahmoud Ali Mohamed & Peter Grossmann, *On the Recently Excavated Monastic Buildings in Dayr Anba Shinuda: Archaeological Report*, BSAC 30 (1991) 53-63 (pl. I-II); Benedicte Verbeeck, *De kloosterkerken bij Sohag. De architecturale Beslechting van een ideoloog*, Phoenix 27 (1981) 91-102; Peter Grossmann, *New Observations in the Church and Sanctuary of Dayr Anba Sinuda - the So-called White Monastery - at Suhag: Results of Two Surveys in October, 1981 and January, 1982*, ASAE 70 (1984-5) 69-74

⁶ S. Emmel, *Shenute's Literary Corpus*, in the press, CSCO, Subsidia.

⁷ K. Heinz Kuhn, *Letters and Sermons of Besa*, CSCO 157 158 Louvain, Orientaliste, 1956.

⁸ Hugh Gerard Evelyn-White, *The Monasteries of the Wadi 'n Natrun*. 3 vols., New York, Metropolitan Museum Publ., 1926-33

Having the monastic movement been born in Egypt, names of leading Egyptian monks of the IV-V centuries are well known to anybody interested in the ancient history of monasticism. Antony, Macarius, Pachomius, Evagrius, John of Lykopolis, etc. etc., are a common heritage for all Christianity, because they are mentioned at length in Greek and Latin sources.⁹ Not so for some interesting personages, who are found only in Coptic documents, though they were certainly famous in their times, and later on, also among Greek speaking people, but perhaps only in Egypt. This paper will investigate who they are, why their memory is absent from the international sources, and how they contribute to a better knowledge of Egyptian monasticism and also of Coptic literature..

1. The documents

There exist several Coptic documents, concerning Egyptian monks, which are outside of what may be called the canon of the international monastic literature in Greek or in Latin, which was formed e.g. by the various redactions of the so-called *Apophthegmata Patrum*, by the *Historia Lausiaca*, by the *Historia monachorum*, by the *Vita Antonii* of Athanasius, by the three *Vitae* written by Hieronymus (*Pauli, Hilarionis, Malchi*), by the *Vitae Pachomii*, by the works of John Cassianus and Evagrius. All these texts, together with the *Ecclesiastical Histories*, have been used by the historians, from Tillemont onwards, to describe the early Egyptian monasticism in Egypt. They do not mention the monks who are the subject of this paper, and as a consequence none of the modern historians, so far as I know, has taken them into consideration.

a. *Vita Apollinis*

One of those Coptic texts mainly concerns the life of one Apollo and some companions, notably pHib and Papohe.¹⁰ Its title in the only complete manuscript is: *Life of pHib*, but this title was conceived, together with two paragraphs inserted at the beginning of the text, in order to utilize the text of the life of Apollo for the popular feast of the *metanoia* (penitence and indulgence) celebrated inside the shrine of pHib.

Apollo is described as an eminent figure in IVth cent. monasticism. At the beginning he retired in the mount of Titkooh, near Shmun, with pHib and Papohe; then the three went around preaching to the other monks. One day Apollo prophesizes the institution of the feast of the *metanoia*, in honor of pHib. Then they found a small community near the village of Tahruj, go back to Titkooh, where pHib dies, then they visit the monastery of apa Pamin, but the Saviour orders to Apollo to go again to Titkooh and remain there, taking care of the annual festivity of the *metanoia*. On the road there Apollo and Papohe visit the monastery of Taparoue. At Titkooh they build a church on the tomb of pHib, where a great miracle (the resurrection of the monk Zacharias) seals the feast of the *metanoia*.

To this text, as to most texts of the Coptic literature, not much discussion has been devoted. Only the problem of the identification of Apollo has been proposed, especially in view of the

⁹ Karl Heussi, *Der Ursprung des Mönchtums*, Tübingen, Mohr (Siebeck) 1936 (Repr. Aalen, Scientia, 1981) the classic reference on the subject; H. Leclercq, *Les débuts du monachisme*, in Fliche-Martin, *Histoire de l'Église*, vol. 3, p. 299-370; Otto F. A. Meinardus, *Christian Egypt. Ancient and Modern*, Cairo, Cahiers d'Hist. Egypt., 1965; II ed. Cairo, American Univ. Press, 1977.

¹⁰ T. Orlandi - A. Campagnano, *Vite dei monaci Phif e Longino*, Milano, Cisalpino Goliardica, 1975, Testi e documenti, Serie copta, 51; René-Georges Coquin, *Apollon de Titkoo ou/et Apollon de Bawit?*, *Orientalia* 46 (1977) 435-446

identification of the ruins of his monastery, about which I shall deal later. The main question is, whether our Apollo is the same of that described in the VIII chapter of the Greco-Latin *Historia monachorum*, that I am inclined to deny, while it is generally admitted. In any case the two personages present in the two texts have nothing in common, but their name and the fact to be monks.

When the Coptic text was composed, and if originally it was composed in Greek, are open questions, which at present must be left aside. In my opinion, for this as for the other texts that we are going to touch, we had better speaking of a tradition, born in the IV century, which concretely appears in different collections and redactions, as far as the Arabic period.

b. *Vita Aphou*

A rather extraordinary text concerns the life of Aphou,¹¹ the content of which perfectly fits in the ecclesiastical history of the IV-V cent., but in a very peculiar way. The text concerns three periods in the life of this personage, mentioned only in Coptic documents. First he spent an extremely ascetic life, living with calves, absolutely like one of them, and he was accepted by them as a companion. Then, in 399 (as it can be assumed from the facts narrated) he went to Alexandria, in order to reproach the great Theophilus, none else, for his opinion against the anthropomorphism of God.¹² The discussion between the two is a very interesting piece of theology, and after that Theophilus is convinced and changes of mind, as in fact we know he did. After some time, Theophilus, remembering this episode and the personality of Aphou, consecrates him as bishop of peMje (Oxyrhynchus). Aphou continued to live in anachoresis, visiting the city once a week, to perform his duties.

Here too we have no objective information on when the text was written, and no other document mentions the extraordinary dispute between Theophilus and Aphou, although he is mentioned in other texts, as we shall see.

c. *Vita Aronis*

The *Historia monachorum*¹³ which reports on the life and deeds of the monks living in the desert between Souan (Syenae) and Pilak (Philae) is historically consistent, and even it is supported by an official document, but only one of the monks mentioned is known from other documents. The person who narrates his visit to the monks in that region is Papnute, who also is supposed to be the author of the text. The narrative is concentrated in two places: one near Souan, where Papnute meets or hears about pSeleusios, Zabulon; John; Anianus, Paul; Zaccheus, Sarapammon, Matthew; and one near Pilak, where Papnute meets Isaac, who in turn speaks about Macedonius, Mark, Isaias, and pSulusia (bishops of Philae; Marc is also mentioned in an Athanasian document), and especially Aron, of whom many miracles are narrated.

d. *Vita Onophrii*

¹¹ Francesco Rossi, *Trascrizione di tre manoscritti copti del Museo Egizio di Torino*, Mem. Acc. Scienze Torino, II.37 (1885). Electronic edition by myself in the CMCL web page, <http://rmcisadu.let.uniroma1.it/~cmcl/aphou/indice.html>, G. Florowski, *Theophilus of Alexandria and apa Aphou of Pemdje*, S. Lieberman (ed.), Misc. Wolfson, p. 275-310

¹² Cf. Elizabeth A. Clark, *The Origenist Controversy. The Cultural Construction of an Early Christian Debate*, Princeton University Press, 1992.

¹³ E. A. Wallis Budge *Miscellaneous Coptic Texts in the Dialect of Upper Egypt*, (London), British Museum, 1915.

Another *Historia monachorum*,¹⁴ mainly concerned with the very famous anchorite Uanofer, is also known in Greek under the title of *Life of Onuphrios*,¹⁵ and it has found its way into the Byzantine Synaxaries. But the text has no real connection with the main Greek monastic documentation that we have mentioned above. The person who travels, visiting the monks, this time in Middle Egypt, is again Papnute, clearly the same as the one of the *Vita Aronis*, but again very possibly a person created to give the specification of an author to an otherwise anonymous narrative.

Travelling in the desert, he finds a certain Timotheus, who tells him his life. He had been in a monastery at the beginning, but then he had preferred a solitary life. After living in the sin with a woman for a while, he repents, goes further in the desert, and settles in a new cave in an oasis, where a palmtree produces one bunch of dates every month, which are his only food.

Papnute moves away, to the Oasis “where the barbarians live” (probably the nomads normally called Blemmies), walking for 17 days, until he sees far away a naked figure, covered by tree leaves. He is Ouenofer, and has been living there for 60 years, walking in the mountain and eating roots and leaves. At the beginning he stayed in the monastery of Erete near Shmun; but understanding that even in the opinion of his teachers the solitary life was more elevated, he left his cell and went into the desert. Papnute makes inquiries on his asceticism, puts a number of questions, and finally assists to his death.

Papnute travels again. After three days he finds another anchorite, a beautiful man whose dress consisted of palm tree leaves. He has three companions, and the four stayed in the desert for sixty years, receiving four loaves of bread each day. They do not want to reveal their names, but they ask Papnute to tell the brethren in Egypt what he has seen, so that they would remember them. Papnute finds a new oasis, full of beautiful trees with many fruits, an orchard. After a while there come four young men, who are living there. They are the sons of officials from Oxyrhynchus, and they were at school together. After having acquired the mundane education, they went in the desert in search of the divine wisdom. Guided by an angel, they met an old anchorite, who instructed them for one year, before dying, after which they remained in the same place forever. They spend the week in separate residences, and meet at Sunday to assist to a synaxis celebrated by an angel. Their names: John, Andreas, Heraclammon, Theophilus. Papnute reports his travel to some monks of Scete, who write his words, and send the book to Scete, where it is placed in the Church for public lecture.

e. *Vita Pauli de Tamma*

The *Historia monachorum*¹⁶ which has Paul of Tamma as its hero is also very peculiar, and unfortunately very incomplete. The purported author is Ezechiel, disciple of Paul, who accompanies his teacher to visit a number of anchorites in the region between Shmun (Hermoupolis) and Siout (Lykopolis): Isidorus, with Agathonicus; pAmoun; Apollo; Aphou; pHib; pShoi of Ieremias. This text seems to have been written rather late, and to assemble a number of traditions, which the author is not able to really understand. But those traditions do not come from the canonical Greek ones, rather they belong to the milieu which we are trying to recover.

¹⁴ Ed. E. A. Wallis Budge, *Coptic Martyrdoms etc. in the Dialect of Upper Egypt*, Edited with English Translations, London, British Museum, 1914.

¹⁵ BHG 1378-1381.

¹⁶ Ed. Émile Clément Amélineau, *Monuments pour servir à l'histoire de l'Égypte chrétienne aux IVe, Ve, VIe et VIIe siècles*. Texte copte publié et traduit, Paris, Leroux, 1888, 1895, 2 vols., MMAFC 4. Cf. electronic edition by myself in CMCL web page, <http://rmcisadu.let.uniroma1.it/~cmcl/vipa/indice.html>.

f. *Vita Panine et Paneu*

The *vita Panine et Paneu*¹⁷ is also very fragmentary. It tells the vicissitudes of a young student of Antinoe, Symphronius-Panine, who suffers the envy of his nasty companions, and decides to become a monk, together with his friend Paneu, at tErot Shmun (near Sioout = Lykopolis). The dwellers of the village want to have them consecrated presbyters, so they move to Kalamon (the one in the Fayum, as it seems) where three famous anchorites live: Timotheus, Theophilus, and Christodorus. Here they are made monks, and are told that they will become martyrs. For this they are sent back to the nomos of Shmin (Apollinopolis Magna) and Psoi (Ptolemais) and here, at tErot, they meet the monk Iohannes, who sends them to the great pSote, the bishop of pSoi. After that they go back to tErot, are captured by Maximianus, and finally killed.

2. General remarks on the texts

Most of these texts belong to one of the popular literary genres of the international monastic literature (in Greek), the *historia monachorum* (= HM), but on the whole they are outside the range of the texts which constituted that kind of literature, and which were normally read in the centers of the international Christianity. Mainly for this reason they completely lack those external references (except for the *HM-Vita Onophrii*, cf. above), which allow us to date texts with sufficient precision in order to establish their historical credibility.

This also makes it difficult to insert them in the general development of monastic literature, which in turn would help to understand the evolution of the particular part of monasticism which has produced them. Information on them can be desumed only from their content. So the *Vita Aphou* is surely assigned to after 401, and it deals with events happened ca. 380-420; but was it written in Greek or directly in Coptic? and when?

The same questions apply to the other texts. They have something in common, especially the persons whose life and deeds they describe, but it is difficult to assign to them a date and a cultural milieu. So it is important to recall the persons that we find and the cross references that we can make from the texts. In the *vita Apollinis* are mentioned: Apollo, pHib, Papohe, Anup, and Zacharias. In the *HM-vita Aronis* are mentioned: Papnoute, pSeleusios, Zabulon, Banufiel, John, Zacchaeus, Sarapammon, Anianus, Paul, Matthew, Aron, Isaac, Macedonius, Mark, Isaia, Aristos, and Aphou. In the *HM-vita Onophrii* are mentioned: Papnute, Uanofer, 4 unnamed, John, Andreas, Heraklammon, Theophilus. In the *HM-vita Pauli de Tamma* are mentioned: Paul, Ezechiel, Hyperichos, Isidorus presbyter, Agathonicus, Apollo, Papohe, Paese, Ishkrou, Pitta, Aphou, Antony of Scete, pHib, pShoi of Ieremias. In the *passio Panine* are mentioned: Symphronius-Panine, Paneu, Timotheus, Theophilus, Christodorus, John, pSote, Philemon.

Of course it happens that in the texts different persons have the same name; but from the context it is possible to identify the persons who appear in more than one text, therefore building a chain which keeps together the texts themselves. The *vita Pauli de Tamma* and the *vita Apollinis* have in common Apollo, pHib, and Papohe. Aphou joins the *vita Aphou*, the *vita Pauli*, and the *HM-vita Aronis*. Papnoute, the author, joins the *HM-vita Aronis* and the *HM-vita Onophrii*.

¹⁷ Tito Orlandi, *Il dossier copto del martire Psote*. Milano, Cisalpino, 1978, 126 p. 4 pl. Testi e documenti per lo studio dell'antichità, serie copta, 6

It is also important to recall the places mentioned in connection with the persons: in the *vita Apollinis* we find: Titkooch, Tahruc, the monastery of apa Pamin, Taparoue. In the *vita Aphou*: peMje (besides Alexandria-Rakote, of course). In the *HM-vita Aronis*: Suan, pKooch, the Cataracts, Pilak-Philae. In the *HM-vita Onophrii*: Shmun, Erete, peMje-Oxyrhyncus. In the *HM-vita Pauli*: Tamma, Kouï-n-Erot, Antinoe, Siout, tEreb, tErot Ashans, Kos, pShkepohe, Perkoush, tOuho, the mount Meroeit, the mount of Koou. In the *passio Panine*: Terot Shmun, Antinoe, Kalamon, Shmin, pSoi-Ptolemais, Stallu(-Shmun), the mount Ebot.

The region in which our monks move goes from peMje in the North to Shmun in the South, with the extensions to the Fayum (in the *passio Panine*), to Siout (in the *passio Panine* and in the *HM-vita Pauli*), and to Pilak (in the *HM-vita Aronis*).

I think that all these references, as also some negative ones (Antonius *may* be mentioned only in the *HM-vita Pauli*, Pachomius never), and the prevalence of one determined literary genre (the *Historia monachorum*) allow us to consider the texts as a homogeneous group, rather than individual witnesses of an otherwise not characterized production.

On the other hand one notes that most of these documents, in the form that has reached us, are not unitarian texts according to conventional literary rules, but reveal many traces of reworking, and also of being composed from parts of different, preexisting texts. The historical evaluation of their content has to be done, taking this fact into account; and consequently the small or sometimes not small discrepancies found between the archaeological evidence (that we are going to present) and the literary documents, may be easily explained, from one side, but also suggests carefulness in the reconstruction of the traditions concerning the monks, their monasteries, and their ascetic life.

In this regard, the main themes that we find discussed in these texts are: the advantages of the solitarian vs. the communitarian monastic life, and in connection with this, the reasons why one chooses the monastic life; the diet, and the ways (often miraculous) in which the monk obtains his food; the kind of dress; how and how often the monk does the synaxis; the death of the monk. One would like to see the numerous passages treating these themes discussed as they are worth.

3. Archaeological Evidence

When we come to archaeology, we note first of all the scarce attention that specialists pay to the relations of the archaeological documents with Coptic literature (mainly) and often with the textual documents of all kind. There are reasons for that, because the chronology, therefore the historical value of the Coptic texts is often a matter of guess; and the documents are difficult to evaluate. Nevertheless, the comparative study of the two different historical sources should prove useful.

In fact, some of the problems are similar for the literary texts and for the archaeological remains, in the sense that some archaeological remains are well situated in the frame of known historical facts.¹⁸ Others are not. For what concerns the archaeological sites of Bauit, Saqqara, (and Esna and Wadi Sarga, perhaps), one notes how uncertain is the information that we have on them, and consequently that we can desume from the data which they offer. It is a question not only of excavations left unfinished, and of uncertain interpretation of the functions of the different rooms. We can only mention these shortcomings, which must always be considered when using such

¹⁸ Cf. the considerations at the beginning of this paper.

documentation, but we do not comment on them. It is also a question of trying to recognize the kind of ascetic life which they were built for, as e.g. Ewa Wipsycka¹⁹ has begun to do for the monastery of Kalamon.

a. Bait, apa Apollo

At the margin of the desert, west of the small town of Dairut (tErot Shmun, as it seems), are situated the ruins of a Monastery²⁰ which aroused the interest of the scholars from the end of the XIX cent. Even before the excavations, which were conducted by J. Clédat and then others (notably Jean Maspero) from 1902 to 1914, inscriptions and documents found in place indicated that the eponymous of the monastery was an apa Apollo. Crum wrote in 1902 an article which resumed all the documents that could illustrate the person of apa Apollo;²¹ and his remains the last word, except for the subsequent discovery of the Coptic *vita Apollinis* (cf. above).

On the identification of the monastery of Bait with the monasteries mentioned in written documents, and of the person of its epomymous, there has been a good deal of discussion. Some results are by now to be considered as sure, but unfortunately much confusion has been done in the matter of identification of places, names, and monasteries and consequently of dates and the historical setting. We are not interested here in clarifying all the questions: for what concerns this paper, the following may suffice.

The name Bait, *pace* some also recent publications, cannot serve as the identification of the (old) monastery. Bait – as it was correctly established by Crum,²² never mind different opinions (p-abot *et similia*) expressed by some scholars afterwards – comes from Coptic ΠΛΟΥΗΤ, which in fact means “the monastery”, therefore it is simply tautological and cannot be used *per se* to distinguish one monastery from another. “The monastery of Bait” is not a name, but the indication of how the indigenous called the ruins of the monastery in later times. By the way, it became the name of a village nearby.

A monastery is correctly indicated, according to the ancient customs, from the locality where it stood (e.g. the monastery of Kalamon) or from the person most venerated, sometimes an angel (e.g. the monastery of apa Samuel, of the archangel Michael), and this person is not necessarily the founder. In our case, Apollo is certainly the most prestigious person venerated in the monastery, and it makes sense to believe that the locality of Titkooh is precisely where the actual Bait is.

Putting things objectively, we have: (1) a monastery which the *vita Apollinis* situates near a village named Titkooh, in the nomos Shmun (Hermoupolis), mentioned in literary and not literary documents (also the village itself is attested).²³ (2) A monastery in the Hermopolite nomos (Shmun), which was officialy (but not exclusively!) called the monastery of apa Apollo. This is known from excavations in the locality called by the Arabic name of Bait, which derives from

¹⁹ E. Wipsycka, *Apports de l'archéologie à l'histoire du monachisme égyptien*, in: M. Starowieyski, *The Spirituality of Ancient Monasticism*, Cracow, Tyniec, 1995, p. 63-78. This article is to be considered together with other essays in *Études sur le Christianisme dans l'Égypte de l'antiquité tardive*, Roma, Inst. Patr. Augustinianum, 1996. 452 p. (= *Studia Ephem. Augustinianum*, 52)

²⁰ J. Clédat, *Le monastère et la nécropole de Baouît*, MIFAO 39, Cairo 1916, new ed. ed. Bénazeth-Rutschowskaya, MIFAO 111, Cairo 1999; É. Chassinat, *Fouilles à Baouît*, MIFAO 13.1, Cairo 1911; M. Krause, K. Wessel, *Bawit*, in: *Reallex. z. byzant. Kunst*, 1, 569-583, Stuttgart, 1966; Meinardus, cit., p. 271-2.

²¹ W. E. Crum, *Der hl. Apollo und das Kloster von Bawit*, ZAS 40 (1902) 60-62.

²² *Dictionary*, p. 21B: ΛΟΥΗΤ (Π-ΛΟΥΗΤ) = Bawit, owing to Apollo's great monastery there.

²³ Jean Gascou, *Documents grecs relatifs au monastere d'abba Apollon de Titkois*, *Anagennesis* 1.2 (1981) 219-230

Coptic ΠΑΥΗΤ, i.e. “the monastery”.²⁴ (3) A very revered monk, called Apollo, whose life is reported in a literary text in connection with monasteries called Tahrouc, apa Pamin, but especially Titkooh, where he spent his last years. – The evidence assembled by Clackson²⁵ is conclusive, in my opinion, in demonstrating what was already suggested,²⁶ that the monastery excavated at Bait is the monastery of apa Apollo in the desert/mountain of Titkooh, as in fact Clackson proposes, although with some hesitation. Different is the case for the identification of this Apollo with the monk mentioned in the so-called *Historia Monachorum* (Greek and Latin), which I am inclined to exclude.

The destination of the various rooms of the monastery, which were excavated, is quite uncertain, except for the obvious case of churches and cells of the monks, also owing to the fact that a final publication could never be produced. Extensive studies have been published only for the wonderful paintings, but always without much concern for the literary tradition of the persons represented. Beyond misunderstandings and errors, what is surely established is the importance and also the peculiarity of the monastery. Clackson writes: “The impressive architectural remains found at the site bear witness to the fact that the monastery was once one of the most important sites in Middle Egypt”;²⁷ and what Wipsycka writes of the Kellia: “L’étude de l’architecture, de la décoration et du mobilier des ermitages nous oblige d’admettre non seulement que les ascètes des VIe-VIIIe siècles se servaient des biens qu’ils possédaient dans le monde, mais aussi – fait encore plus significatif – qu’ils n’éprouvaient pas de gêne à faire étalage de leur richesse”²⁸, is true also of Bait and Saqqara.

It is important to keep in mind that the inscriptions, especially those with the famous “litanies”,²⁹ and the paintings of the monastery contain many of the monks whom we have met in the literary texts examined above, and they constitute a link with those texts.

b. Saqqara, apa Jeremias

The site of the monastery which was covered by the sand in a place at the boarder between the desert and the nekropolis of Menfi, (modern Saqqara) was of course first exploited by the “sebakhin”, whose findings drew the attention of the scholars on the important Christian ruins, neglected by the Egyptologists. It was excavated by Quibell at the beginning of the XXth cent. (1906-1910),³⁰ in a more or less scientific way, and only recently taken again into consideration by P. Grossman, who conducted four seasons of excavation in the period 1972-1982, though only for the churches.³¹

²⁴ To say “the monastery of Bait” is tantamount to say “the monastery of the monastery”.

²⁵ S. J. Clackson, *Coptic and Greek Texts relating to the Hermopolite Monastery of Apa Apollo*, Oxford, Griffith Institute, 2000, p. 14-15 and Appendix 2 and 3.

²⁶ By me in *Vita Phif* cit. and others.

²⁷ Op. cit., p. 6.

²⁸ *Apports...*, cit., p. 75

²⁹ Most of them can be found in A. Mallon, *Copte (Epigraphie)*, DACL 3, pt. 2, p. 2819-2886. Cf. the complete list in Cäcilia Wietheger, *Das Jeremias-Kloster zu Saqqara unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Inschriften*, Altenberge, Oros Verlag, 1992. XVI 532 p. = Arbeiten zum spätantiken und koptischen Ägypten 1

³⁰ James E. Quibell, *Excavations at Saqqara (1905-6), (1907-8), (1908-9, 1909-10)*, Le Caire, IFAO, 1907-13, 4 vols.

³¹ P. Grossmann, H.-G. Severin, *Reinigungsarbeiten im Jeremias Kloster bei Saqqara*, MDAIK 38 (1982) 155-194; P. Grossmann, *Reinigungsarbeiten im Jeremias Kloster bei Saqqara. Dritter vorläufiger Bericht*, MDAIK 36 (1980) 193-202

Apart from the fact that the monastery was founded at the end of the VI century, and was abandoned around the Xth century, no certain date for special events in its life can be set. The same is true for the identification of the use of the spaces, except for the churches and the individual dwellings of the monks. In any case it is interesting to note, drawing from the very sound observations made already by its excavator, but neglected on the whole by recent scholars, like Coquin and Martin in the Coptic Encyclopedia,³² that the history of the monastery mirrors the history of the Coptic church. It was founded in the time when the Coptic church, and also the Coptic literature, enjoyed a period of splendour: the second half of the VIth century, which saw the patriarchate of the great Damianus, and the organizational and cultural activity of a group of bishops who are the greatest Coptic literary authors after Shenoute.³³ It continued to flourish during the first period after the Arab conquest of Egypt; and only towards the end of the VIIth century the persecution began: sculptures representing living creatures had to be excised or hidden; then the monastery was sacked and the churches thoroughly destroyed. They were rebuilt, and life resumed normally, until a new important destruction of buildings and other damages was made around 750, when the relations between Copts and Arabs seriously deteriorated as a consequence of revolts against heavy taxation, and there was a change of politics with the passage from the Omayyad to the Abbasid caliphate. Once again the monastery was restored, but after 850 it was abandoned.

Like in the case of the monastery of apa Apollo, the paintings³⁴ and inscriptions³⁵ constitute a precious clue to the life and the beliefs of the monks. The monasteries of Bait and Saqqara, together with their minor appendices of Esna and perhaps Wadi Sarga, were the most wide and adorned monasteries of their time, and their decoration attests the direct connection of the two monasteries, in the name of Apollo and pHib, but also of Paul of Tamma, Onophrius, Anup, Papnute, etc. It is also important that among the manuscripts found in the monastery, one dating at the beginning of the VIth cent. contained an *epistle* of Paul of Tamma.³⁶

4. General Appraisal

It is especially through the mention of the names of monks that we can at last find an historical counterpart to the group of texts which has introduced our discourse. Apollo, Paul of Tamma, pHib, Aphou, Panine, and with them the monks mentioned in the HM-*vita Onophrii* (Aron and his companions are a case apart, but surely they share many characteristics with this group), obliterated in the canonical Greek texts on early monasticism, have found their proper environment and may become historical persons.

We must however pay attention to the questions of chronology. The archaeological and literary records that we can study are surely later than the period in which Apollo and the others lived. They in fact are witness to the continuation of their work, and of their teaching, in the

³² Also Paul van Cauwenbergh, *Étude sur les moines d'Égypte depuis le Concile de Chalcédoine (451) jusqu'à l'invasion arabe (640)*, Paris, Imprimerie nationale, 1914, p. 130-131, and Wietheger, cit., p. 27-28, on the basis of Grossmann, whom we do not follow in this point of dating, otherwise not relevant for our general thesis.

³³ Cf. T. Orlandi in A. Di Berardino (ed.), *Dizionario Patristico e di Antichità Cristiane*, Casale Monferrato, Marietti: I vol. 1983, col. 886.

³⁴ P. van Moorsel, M. Huijbers, *Repertory of the Preserved Wallpaintings from the Monastery of Apa Jeremiah at Saqqara*, *Miscellanea Coptica*, p. 125-186. Marguerite Rassart-Debergh, *La décoration picturale du Monastère de Saqqara. Essai de reconstitution*, *Miscellanea Coptica*, p. 9-124.

³⁵ Cf. Mallon, cit. List and commentary in Wietheger, cit., p. 210-242.

³⁶ Ed. Orlandi, *Dossier*, cit. The list of the preserved manuscripts, which come from the monastery in Wietheger, cit., p. 83-84.

following generations. The cult they consistently received at Titkooh and Menfi is the proof of the continuity of a tradition which they had originated, and can give us elements through which we can interpret their historical personalities.

Ewa Wipsycka rightly observes³⁷ that the Egyptian monasticism cannot be reduced to the types anachoretic vs. coenobitic, Antonian vs. Pachomian, solitary vs. communitarian, or whatever we want to call the two supposedly opposed systems. She rightly stresses the great range of diversity between the life style of the group of monks who more or less lived together. But what is especially important for us is that the difference in style does not necessarily corresponds to a difference in spiritual and even doctrinal inclination. Wipsycka is surely right for what concerns the historical (and also archaeological) reality. But if we pass from this historical point of view to the point of view of the monks themselves, and especially of the Egyptian monks (or Egyptianized: e.g. Evagrius or Arsenius), the situation appears to be different.

To begin with, the opposition between solitary and communitarian asceticism is not an invention of modern scholars, but it was a statement, an interpretation if one likes better, of the ancient writers directly involved in the reports on Egyptian monasticism. Not only Jerome and Cassianus are explicit on this, but also in our Coptic texts, which may be considered much more near to the daily life of monks, the opposition is not only mentioned, but discussed at length. It is clear from them that there existed a lively discussion on the comparative value of the choice between the two possible sorts of monastic life.

Also we note that this was not the only choice presented in our texts, and here we can say that another choice is only implicit in the “international” personalities, whom modern scholars have taken into consideration, and explicit in the Coptic texts. In these texts we find often an opposition between a “human friendly”, and on the other side an “exclusive” attitude of the single monks. We find in *HM-vita Apollinis*: “He was kind towards all good men... He was a peaceful man, who loved every image of God as a whole man”.³⁸ And in the *HM-vita Onophrii*: “And I said unto them: My fathers, are not then those who are in the desert more excellent than we are? And they answered: Yes, because we are always together, and we meet in the synaxeis with pleasure. When we are hungry we find the food prepared for us. When we are thirsty we find the water to drink. When we are tired our brethren help us, and when we wish for something to eat, we prepare it together. But where shall those who are living in the desert find such things? ”.³⁹ And in the *HM-vita Pauli de Tamma*: “... my father did not want to eat, because that was the third day of the forty days he spent fasting. Our father apa Apollo said: My father, have lunch with me, that a grace may come in my residence and in my monastery today, because of you. You know, my dear father, that it is not what comes into the man that defiles the man.”⁴⁰

We are inclined to suppose that this opposition between two styles of monastic life corresponded to that between the exoterism, common to the Origenistic monks, especially those influenced by the teaching of Evagrius, and a kind of egalitarianism which was defined as a friendliness for all men. This would have originated a particular, optimistic, joyous way of considering the monastic life, just the kind of life that was practised in the Apollonian monasteries. From this point of view, I think that in the second half of the IVth century we can draw a distinction between Pachomians and Evagrians, on the one side, and Apollonians on the other. The *Drang nach den Wust*, probably the common element of all the monks, and probably coming from

³⁷ *Apports...*, cit., p. 69.

³⁸ Ed. Orlandi, para. 4.

³⁹ Ms New York Morgan Library M580 (= CMCL MichBV), p. 14-5.

⁴⁰ Ed. Orlandi, http://rmcisadu.let.uniroma1.it/~cmcl/vipa/vipa_txt.pdf, p. 7.

a typical Egyptian attitude, received different flavours, depending on the existing differences in the interpretation of the Christian doctrine in Egypt.

All this concurs to represent the early Egyptian monasticism as a much more varied phenomenon than it appears from the traditional historians, ancient and modern, and this meets the opinions expressed by E. Wipsycka, but on the other hand an opposition between two conceptions of the monastic life, which is different from the traditional view of the anachoretic vs. coenobitic monasticism(s). As it seems, doctrinal attitudes and ascetic habits had influence on each other in a way that produced a very complicated reality, of which Ewa Wipsycka has considered only one of the components. The other component has been partially illuminated in an important contribution for a recent Congress, not by chance written by our host today, Mark Sheridan.⁴¹ He presents two opposite views, by A. Guillaumont and Th. Baumeister, on the role of the Alexandrian (Catechetical) school in the shaping of the monastic life. My opinion is that in a certain sense both are right: in the early Egyptian monasticism there was a place for all doctrines considered orthodox at that time, but with different consequences for the organization of the monastic communities. In any case, the canonical sources (i.e. the Greek and Latin texts mentioned above) were all Origenistic-oriented, and although this did not prevent them from giving a rather faithful description of the Egyptian monasticism, certainly it produced an understatement about certain groups, which were barely nominated, or totally ignored (the case of Shenoute is particularly striking), while Coptic documents and archaeology testify to their importance, also from the point of view of their doctrinal theorization.

So far for what concerns the history of Egyptian monasticism, and the archaeological evidence. The problems deserve to be more deeply and widely assessed, as Ewa Wipsycka suggests; and surely I am not able to carry on this subject, in my capacity (if at all) of student of literary texts. But it is precisely an important problem arisen in the study of the Coptic literature that has led me to inquire this aspect of the early Egyptian monasticism, and this is not without importance.

5. The development of early Coptic literature

The Coptic literature is rather a peculiar phenomenon.⁴² As a matter of fact, Patristic literature in general is peculiar, because its religious doctrinal character outplaces its literary proper aspect. In this sense, the Coptic literature, which is nothing but the Patristic literature in Coptic language, is rightly treated in the same way as those in other languages, Oriental as well as Western. But it has also other peculiarities. First of all, the fact that it was not borne to replace its parent, the Greek Egyptian patristic literature, for those who did not speak Greek, but to assert some kind of Egyptian culture that was to live together with the prevailing Greek christian culture, as in fact it did.

Therefore the first essays consisted exclusively of translations, first of the sacred christian books, then of the early Greek fathers or assimilated texts. But here we find a situation which has some resemblance with that noted for the monastic environment, that is, we find in Egypt some texts, both in Greek and in Coptic, which were more or less canceled from the canon of Greek

⁴¹ *The Development of the Interior Life in Certain Early Monastic Writings in Egypt*, in: *The Spirituality of Ancient Monasticism*, Cracow, Tyniec, 1955, p. 91-104.

⁴² My opinion on the origins and development of the Coptic literature in: *Letteratura copta e cristianesimo nazionale egiziano*, in A. Camplani (ed.), *L'Egitto cristiano*, Roma, Augustinianum, 1997; cf. also the *History of Coptic Literature (in fieri)* at <<http://rmcisadu.let.uniroma1.it>>.

patrology.⁴³ We allude above all to the works of Meliton of Sardis, and to a homily on the creation, which conveyed Asiatic tendencies, to which the Alexandrian school was strongly opposed, and in consequence also the Origenistic Cappadocian fathers, and most of the Latin, like Rufinus and also the first Jerome: all in all, the official theology of the international Christian fathers of the IV century. It would be reasonable to suppose that the Coptic literature, after the translation of the Bible, would select the texts to be translated from Greek in the normal Egyptian environment, and that the Egyptian environment was in line with the Origenistic tendencies of Alexandria. On the contrary, we find texts that the Origenistic culture considered at least as outdated, after the theological speculation on the theory of the *logos*, which was the main outcome of the Alexandrian school.

It is true that in fact some Origenistic texts are present in early Coptic literature: the dossier of Agathonicus⁴⁴ is the principal testimony, and the letters of Antony⁴⁵ another one. Also the gnosticizing texts so-called of Nag Hammadi should belong with them. They can be easily inserted in the IVth century Egyptian culture. But where can we place the cases of Asianizing texts? We must consider how it happened that the crisis which led to the Origenistic controversy of the end of the IV century changed the situation.⁴⁶ It originated between Cyprus (with Epiphanius) and Jerusalem, and soon spread to Egypt, much to the astonishment of the great Theophilus, especially because it assumed in this country the aspect of a controversy on the anthropomorphism (of God), a theory that he rightly had condemned in the Festal Letter of 399. It is evident that he underestimated the power and extension of the monastic groups devoted to Asiatic tendencies, which the Origenism in its different flavours had superseded in the better theologically oriented (I do not say educated!) milieus. The monks in Kellia, Sketis, Nitria, and also Tabennesi in the South, were content with the official Alexandrian theology, which was largely Origenist; who cared about groups in Middle Egypt (as we believe) who did not conform?

But it is also evident, from the sheer sequence of the facts, if not from explicit documents, that Theophilus had to make a quick choice between the two factions, and because his decision went in favor of the anthropomorphites (not as such, of course), they must have proved the more combative part of the christian population, especially if he had to take drastic measures against the others, as he did. Who were they, or at least, who were the main representants of the Asiatic-anthropomorphite current? I think that, after what we have noted on the monastic centers and texts examined above, the obvious conclusion is that just they are to be considered the most important part of the anti-Origenistic groups, those who gave birth to the Coptic literature outside the Bible.

They were far from being uncultivated people. The works of Paul of Tamma, which by the way might be one of the first products of original Coptic literature, are a good witness of this. And if they contain also some features of the Origenistic exegesis, this is only natural in Egypt, but what matters is that they maintained also, and probably in prevalence, the pre-Origenistic theological and exegetical thought.

This would explain why the canonical Greek works on the monks, inspired by an elitarian Origenism, avoided to mention them, and described Egyptian monasticism as formed by some

⁴³ Cf. T. Orlandi, *La tradizione di Melitone in Egitto e l'omelia De anima et corpore*, Augustinianum 37 (1997)37-50.

⁴⁴ Cf. T. Orlandi, *Il dossier copto di Agatonico di Tarso. Studio letterario e storico* in: D.W. Young (ed.), *Studies Presented to H.J. Polotsky*, p. 269-299, Beacon Hill MS, Pirtle Polson, 1981.

⁴⁵ Cf. S. Rubenson, *The Letters of St. Antony*, cit.

⁴⁶ Cf. E. Clark *The Origenist Controversy. The Cultural Construction of an Early Christian Debate*, Princeton University Press, 1992.

spiritually superior, Origenistic, persons, like Macarius or Evagrius, and then by a lot of ignorant peasants, exactly the picture that has been reproduced by the modern historians; and men like Apollo, Paul of Tamma, and Aphou were forgotten in the official history of IVth century monasticism.