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Egyptian Nuns in Late Antiquity as Exemplars

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(TRANSLATED BY ALESSIA BERARDI)

One day two elderly men from the region of Pelusio went to Mother Sarra. Along the way, they were saying to each other: "Let's humiliate this old woman!" They said to her, "Be careful that you do not exalt yourself in your mind and say: 'Behold, the anchorites come to me, who am a woman!'" Mother Sarra said to them, "In nature I am a woman, but not in thought."

(AP/G Sarra 4)¹

She said again to the brothers: "I am a man and you are women."

(AP/G Sarra 9)

The role of the Christian woman in late antiquity has been widely studied, and many aspects of female asceticism have recently been brought to light.² The result has been a denunciation of the sexism of the tradition and a rehabilitation of great exceptional figures, but with one serious consequence: nuns are often made into folkloristic figures.³ Writing the history of the women who undertook the path of religious life, and particularly monastic women, both in their everyday life and through radical choices that often mirrored the masculine ones, is risky owing to the discontinuity of the sources, the complexity of their chain of transmission, and the gaps and grey areas that still remain.⁴

¹ *Apophthegmata Patrum. Collectio Graeca alphabetica* (AP/G); Greek text edited by J.-B. Cotelier (PG 65,71–440); English translation by Benedicta Ward, *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers* (Kalamazoo, MI, 1975).

² Gillian Clark, *Women in Late Antiquity: Pagan and Christian Lifestyles* (Oxford, 1993); Kate Cooper, *The Virgin and the Bride: Idealized Womanhood in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, MA, 1996); Kate Cooper, *Band of Angels: The Forgotten World of Early Christian Women* (London, 2013). See Susanna Elm, "Virgins of God": *The Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity* (Oxford and New York, 1994), 6, n. 21, for further bibliographical references.

³ Jo Ann Kay McNamara, *Sisters in Arms: Catholic Nuns through Two Millennia* (Cambridge, MA, 1998).

⁴ On the difficulty of identifying late antique female monasteries, see the article by Brooks Hedstrom and Dey in this volume.

This article aims to investigate the social and cultural implications of the choice for virginity or chastity (for widows) in late antiquity, in order to explore the possibility that the religious life allowed women to free themselves from submission to paternal figures and avoid relegation to the margins of society. I will highlight the contemporaneous emergence of the female and male ascetic choice, starting from the experiences of domestic ascetic life. I will also address the continuous tension between a reality in which female monastic life had its own roots and traditions, and a rhetoric that makes it a mere variant of a male monastic model. Although this volume is dedicated to the West, much can be made by drawing attention to the situation in Egypt and reflecting on the tension between the centrality and marginality of the female monastic experience, a common thread in both Latin and Greek Christianity. I will thus offer examples intended to emphasize similarities, dependencies, and fractures among diverse ascetic and monastic female experiences. In the second section, I will focus on the continuity between family life and monastic life. The preservation of biological ties even after the religious choice allowed some women to continue in their role as mothers, sisters, and even wives within their monasteries, thus reflecting the ambiguous positions open to women choosing the religious life. Finally, I will offer some examples of women who played the role of spiritual mothers, daughters, and sisters within their monastic family. This complexity of roles prevents us from determining who had the greater or lesser freedom and emancipation: the women who decided (or were forced) to marry, or those who chose (or were forced into) the monastic life. The reality was ambiguous and complex, characterized by intersecting spiritual, cultural, social, and economic factors.

From Household to Monastery: First Steps of Women's Asceticism

Reconstructing the history of female asceticism is not an easy task. The sources from the first centuries are difficult to interpret, and the evidence for women choosing not to have a family, and of both spiritual and corporal practices analogous to those that were particular to female monasticism from the fourth century onward, are fragmented. It is true that, already at the end of the second century and at the beginning of the third, women no less than men were attracted by (perpetual) chastity, which purified them and made them more suitable for the reception of the Spirit. Thus, within

all of the churches, groups of abstinent and virgin women arose, as well as real orders of widows. In the middle of the third century, there were around 1,500 poor and needy widows in Rome; at the end of the fourth century, the city of Antioch supported some 3,000 widows and virgins. Moreover, wealthy widows also supported Christian communities, as in the case of Olympia, the spiritual friend of Chrysostom (d. 407), or of the widows in Jerome's (d. 420) circle.⁵ The invitation to chastity and virginity is, after all, a theme often present in New Testament apocryphal literature such as the *Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles* or the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, in which the women are models of both physical and spiritual integrity and solidity.

It is not enough, however, to trace the first forms of female asceticism through the choice for virginity or chastity. It is also necessary to trace the performance of bodily practices such as fasts, vigils, and the renunciation of food. The first forms of female ascetic practice were carried out at home in a domestic manner, albeit with a definitive physical detachment from the everyday life of the family. Entry into a formal female monastery was not expected of these ascetics. The first hints of these practices can be found in Acts 21:8–9, where we encounter Philip's daughters, virgins and prophetesses living at home. Female domestic asceticism was a long-standing phenomenon that did not disappear with the spread of a more structured monastic model.⁶ The diffusion of this way of life is confirmed by different types of sources, including canonical literature and papyri, in which female virgin ascetics are compared to widows because of their consecration to God. The conjugal bond is clearly overcome by a lifestyle considered to be both different and superior, freeing woman from worldly ties. It is no coincidence that these women were called the "brides of Christ." Their matrimonial bond was consummated only on a religious-spiritual level, creating both a new and an "other" marriage, which replaced marriage to a husband.

Through greater physical detachment from daily dwelling places, and in particular through a more explicit adoption of life rules that formalized ascetic practices, monasticism called family ties further into question. Women who chose either an anchoritic or cenobitic monastic life by joining

⁵ Peter Brown, *The Body and the Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, 2nd ed. (New York, 2008).

⁶ See the article by Magnani in this volume, and the article by More and Mulder-Bakker in volume II.

one of the communities spreading throughout the area often set aside previously held family bonds. Such bonds, however, were sometimes preserved, and monastic choices within the same biological family could, in fact, reinforce them.⁷

The fourth-century canons attributed to Bishop Athanasius of Alexandria (*Ath. Can.*) report that some virgins left their homes and families to live in a monastery of virgins under the guidance of a mother.⁸ Women who lived apart from their families, homes, and villages could attend celebrations in the church as a group, but not during feasts or at night. They were to fast until sunset, as well as on Saturdays and Sundays; they were not allowed to talk with married women; and they could visit their families only if accompanied by other virgins.⁹ The contents and the terminology used in the text seem to attest to a formal monastic model. It is interesting to note that some of these regulations were transmitted through the centuries and accepted within the sixth-century rule for nuns of Caesarius of Arles (*RCaeV*), the pivotal Western source for the female monastic experience.

While several papyri provide information about forms of female monastic asceticism that seem no longer to have been domestic, the classification of these communities of women, their identification as monasteries, and the kind of asceticism practiced there remain unclear. Perhaps they reflected a transition from domestic asceticism to monastic asceticism, or were confraternities of some kind that continued to exist within the villages, possibly also within houses. In any case, what can be seen here is the communitarian development of asceticism, which clearly represents a further stage in the spread of female monasteries, now separated from the world, within Egyptian territory, a development also seen later elsewhere in both East and West.

The first occurrences of the term *monaché* (nun) used in a technical way appear in the fourth-century papyri that are one of the main documentary source bases for the history of Egyptian monasticism. Although papyri are closely tied to their local historical and geographical contexts, they remain excellent instruments for collecting accurate and concrete information about monastic life. The text

⁷ Philip Rousseau, "Blood-Relationship among Early Eastern Ascetics," *Journal of Theological Studies* 23 (1972): 135–44; Andrew S. Jacobs and Rebecca Krawiec, "Fathers Know Best? Christian Families in the Age of Asceticism," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 11 (2003): 257–63; Rebecca Krawiec, "From the Womb of the Church: Monastic Families," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 11 (2003): 283–307. See also the article by Alciati in this volume.

⁸ Athanasius, *The Canons of Athanasius of Alexandria: The Arabic and Coptic versions*, ed. and trans. Wilhelm Riedel and Walter Ewig Crum (London, 1904), *Ath. Can.* 48, 92, 99.

⁹ *Ibid.*, *Ath. Can.* 92.

PSI VI 698,¹⁰ from Oxyrhynchus in 392, mentions the house of a nun. Was this a nun (*monaché*) who continued to own her house or, perhaps less likely, a woman who practiced domestic asceticism? The fifth-century papyrus P.Princ. II, 84, which concerns the selling of a house that belongs to Euphemia *monazousa*, raises similar questions. Judging by the terminology and the content of these documents, I am inclined to see in them evidence of female monastic praxis in places detached from the house and the family of origin.

Two texts from the beginning of the fourth century, P.Oxy XIV, 1774 and SB III 9746, mention a certain Didyma, who seems to be a mother superior of a group of spiritual sisters.¹¹ It is important to remember that within the available Greek and Coptic sources, it is often very difficult to distinguish between references to biological relationships and references to spiritual bonds. Given the context and function of the correspondence, I am convinced that this text refers to the latter.

Alongside these documentary sources, there is abundant evidence in the most ancient literary sources for the existence of a female cenobitic way of life, for example in the *Life of Antony*, in the *Lives of Pachomius*, and in the *Historia Monachorum in Aegypto*. The Latin translations of these texts also provide insight into their transmission and influence on occidental Christianity.

Some of the *Apophthegmata*, the maxims of monks from Egypt, Syria, and Palestine in the fifth century, are attributed to women, namely to Sara, Theodora, and Syncletica. It is undeniable that the presence of only three women within the whole corpus of maxims is a sign of marginality, if not of the feminine experience itself, at least in terms of the way in which this same experience was welcomed, accepted, and transmitted. It is indeed telling that more space was not given to women. But, although the category of "Desert Mothers" has been heavily disputed in the past, the existence of women in this setting can no longer be questioned.¹² It is striking that the content of the female maxims almost completely mirrors the male ones.

I would like to focus here, in particular, on the conditions of community life within female monasteries, because this context offers a more productive space for complex reflection about family and the relationships between

¹⁰ All the abbreviations for papyri, ostraca, and tablets can be found at <http://papyri.info/docs/checklist> (date of last access: 18 August 2018).

¹¹ Mario Naldini, *Il Cristianesimo in Egitto. Lettere private nei papiri dei secoli II–IV* (Fiesole, 1998), letters 36 and 37, 173–80.

¹² Caroline Schroeder, "Women in Anchoritic and Semi-Anchoritic Monasticism in Egypt: Rethinking the Landscape," *Church History* 83 (2014): 3; William Harmless, *Desert Christians: An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism* (Oxford and New York, 2004), 440–2.

nuns and family than ascetic life or semi-anchoritic life. A text reported in the *Historia Lausiaca* (HL) from the fifth century explicitly speaks about a female community within the Pachomian complex.¹³ This included 400 women, and had the same constitution and largely the same manner of life as the male monastery. The women lived across the river from the men. When a virgin died, the other virgins prepared her body for burial and, acting as bearers, laid it on the riverbank. The brethren, crossing in a ferry with palm leaves and olive branches, retrieved the body, singing psalms as they went, and buried it in their own cemetery. Apart from the priest and the deacon, no man was to cross over to the women's monastery, and then only on Sundays.

There are cases recorded of women who ran away to become nuns, and accounts of others who were forced to become nuns. There are also nuns who escaped from monasteries, nuns who had a family and children, and nuns who never had a family. Because all of these are situations that were also reported for monks, I do not think that it is possible to discern a precise and detailed distinction between the female and male motivations for entering the monastic life from the available sources. Similarly, it is not entirely clear if and how male monastic rules were applied by the nuns, or at least proposed to them.¹⁴ As Schroeder noted, Shenoute (d. 465), archimandrite of the monastery of Atripe (afterwards called the White Monastery), alludes to male and female hermits connected to his monastery, but the degree to which the women within the boundaries of his community submitted to the rules is unclear.¹⁵ How much direct supervision and control these nuns received and whether they were full members of the monastic community remains unknown.

One variant features a woman dressed as a man in order to be accepted into a monastery. One anonymous monk, for example, lived alone in a cave and grew famous for his discipline in plaiting rope and refusing to speak to visitors. This monk's female sex was revealed only after death.¹⁶ These marginal cases are interesting, whether they reflect reality or were merely

¹³ Palladius, *Historia Lausiaca*, in *Die Lateinische Übersetzung der Historia Lausiaca des Palladius*, ed. Adelheid Wellhausen (Berlin and New York, 2003), 29. See also HL 29–30, 33, 49, 56, 59, and 67.

¹⁴ See the article by Diem and Rousseau in this volume; on the RB and RCaeV, see Albrecht Diem, "The Gender of the Religious: Wo/Men and the Invention of Monasticism," in *The Oxford Handbook of Women and Gender in Medieval Europe*, ed. Judith M. Bennett and Ruth Mazo Karras (Oxford, 2013), 439–44.

¹⁵ Schroeder, "Women in Anchoritic and Semi-Anchoritic Monasticism," 5–6.

¹⁶ AP/G Bessarione 4.

rhetorical constructions. The reasons for the persistence of this *topos*, however, have not yet been explored.¹⁷

The female monastic phenomenon consolidated and spread from the first decades of the fourth century in parallel with the spread of male forms of monastic life. Women, however, were marginalized in the contemporary literature on the topic, which was written exclusively by male authors. But even while monastic women were pushed to the margins in ancient sources (and in modern scholarship), female *virginitas* was the subject of constant reflection, from Tertullian (d. after 220), to Athanasius (d. 373), to Aldhelm (d. 709).

Families in the Monastery: Mothers, Daughters, and Sisters Still

In renouncing their sexuality by devoting themselves to virginity or to chastity and following the ascetic path, these women became spouses of Christ. They were also willing to give up their houses, husbands, and children to become members of a new monastic family as mothers, sisters, and daughters, either for a limited period of time or indefinitely. In some cases, however, it is possible to observe the preservation of familial bonds "in the flesh." Biological sons and daughters might follow their mothers in the monastic choice, or women might follow their children, husbands, and, more easily, their brothers. This may have happened more frequently in the West as the result of its family typology and the structure of its first monasteries: there, whole families, many from noble or wealthy backgrounds, moved into or founded monasteries, taking with them all the members of their household, including the servants, as in the case of Melania and Pinianus or the community of St. Honoratus, on the island of Lérins. From its beginnings in the fifth century, many of Lérins' aspiring ascetics came from the same family. Eucherius (d. 449) and Salvianus, for example, abandoned the world with their wives and children and joined the island monastery.¹⁸ The case of Jura offers the best comparison with Oriental monasticism. Romanus, a monk whose story is narrated in the biographies of the fathers of the Jura, was soon joined by his brother and sister.¹⁹ In this way, he anticipated by a century the famous story

¹⁷ John Anson, "The Female Transvestite in Early Monasticism: The Origin and Development of a Motif," *Viator* 5 (1974): 1–32.

¹⁸ Roberto Alciati and Maria Chiara Giorda, "Legami carnali e spirituali nel monachesimo cristiano antico (IV–VII secolo)," in *Famiglia monastica. Prassi aggregative di isolamento*, ed. Maria Chiara Giorda and Francesca Sbardella (Bologna, 2012), 92–5. On Lérins, see also the articles by Brooks Hedstrom and Dey, Alciati, Diem and Rousseau, and Lauwers in this volume.

¹⁹ On the monastery of Condat in the Jura, see the article by Bully and Destefanis in this volume.

of the monastic choice of Caesarius of Arles (d. 542) and his sister. The typological similarities (an ascetic monastic community in the process of organizing itself) and the fact that the familial bonds were not only kept, but also were not hidden by the sources, allow us to compare the case of Lérins and that of Jura to the Egyptian circles.

Along with a discourse of renunciation of the familial/biological bonds—first and foremost in the written sources, and in monastic rhetoric, but also in the visual arts—one can simultaneously observe the maintenance of bonds within what is called the monastic family.²⁰ From the senatorial aristocracy of Rome to the farmers of Coptic Egypt, the organization of the family influenced the spread of different monastic forms throughout the Mediterranean basin, even as the biological family remained present within monasticism.²¹ The importance of the relationships between siblings, in particular, was expressed right from the origins of Egyptian monasticism. Palladius' (d. before 431) *Historia Lausiaca* recounts the story of Ammonius (d. c. 242), one of the most famous monks of the Egyptian desert of Nitria. Ammonius undertook the hermitical life with three brothers and two sisters. The siblings lived in separate and distanced cells, which they occasionally left to visit one another.²² The most famous case, however, is that of Amun (d. c. 357). According to Palladius, Amun retired into the desert after years of unconsummated conjugal life.²³ What is noteworthy here is that Amun's wife chose to live under the same ascetic conditions, first in communion with him, and later separated from him, remaining in the family house.

The choice of a husband and wife to live an ascetic life together epitomizes the tension and ambiguity that can be observed throughout monastic literature when family relationships are in view. That some couples cohabited for years is evidence that monastic life does not necessarily imply a total annihilation of pre-existing bonds. Examples of this sort of cohabitation can also be found in the West, both between husband and wife and among the members of both sexes of the same family. Beyond the aforementioned Melania and Pinianus, there are the cases of Paulinus and Therasia (husband and wife) and of Sulpicius and Bassa (son-in-law and mother-in-law, the latter in fact substituting for Sulpicius' dead wife), who declared that they were living

²⁰ Maria Chiara Giorda and Francesca Sbardella, "Esperienze monastiche e logiche famigliari: un'ipotesi di ricerca," in *Famiglia monastica. Prassi aggregative di isolamento*, ed. Maria Chiara Giorda and Francesca Sbardella (Bologna, 2012), 13–24.

²¹ Schroeder, "Women in Anchoritic and Semi-Anchoritic Monasticism," 280–1.

²² HL 11.

²³ HL 8.2.

together not only in chastity but also with total indifference toward gender.²⁴ Their complete dedication to asceticism led to the emptying of gender and the overcoming of sexual differences. Their bond did not prevent them from progressing in asceticism, but instead helped them along their spiritual path. It is interesting that Paulinus and Therasia gave a precious gift to Sulpicius and Bassa, validating this sort of spiritual twinning.

Precept 143 of the corpus of rules from the Pachomian circle gives some instructions for the monastery of virgins:

Let us also speak about the monastery of the virgins. None shall go to visit them unless he has there his mother, a sister or a daughter, relatives or cousins, or the mother of his children. If there is the necessity to see them, either because, before they renounced the world and entered the monastery, they were entitled to an inheritance from their father, or for some other evident reason, an elderly man of proven conduct shall be sent with them: they will see the virgins and they will come back together. None shall go to them, except those we just mentioned. If these ones want to see them, they shall first of all inform the father of the monastery, and he will send them to the elderly men (*ad seniores*) who have been delegated for the spiritual service of the virgins (*ministerium virginum*).²⁵

Since the addressees of the Pachomian rules are male, it is evident that this exhortation focused on the conduct of the monks, with particular attention to their relationship with the nuns. That only monks with relatives in the female monasteries were allowed to visit the latter shows that the monastic choice was shared, in some cases, by members of the same family, and suggests that this kind of relationship within the different communities was fairly frequent.

A non-cenobitic monastic context more akin to that described in the *Apophthegmata* is that of the monk Frange, who lived in a tomb in the western part of the Thebaid in the seventh century. The precious dossier of sources, comprising mainly letters written by and to this exemplary monk, documents the familial bonds among the men and women who shared his experience of retreat and isolation. It would thus seem that it was possible to live an ascetic life within the family in a domestic environment or, in any case, in ways less radical than those followed by Frange. Of particular interest is a group of five

²⁴ R. Alciati M. Giorda, *Possessions and Asceticism: Melania the Younger and Her Slow Way to Jerusalem*. In: "Zeitschrift für Antike und Christentums/Journal of Ancient Christianity", 14(2) (2010): 425–444 p. 235.

²⁵ Amand Boon, ed., *Pachomiana latina. Règle et épîtres de St. Pachôme, épître de St. Théodore et "Liber" de St. Orsiesius. Texte latin de St. Jérôme* (Louvain, 1932), 57.

ostraca that refer to a quarrel that involved a woman from Pétémout.²⁶ One of Frange's sons played a role in the episode, although it is not clear whether he was a spiritual or a natural son.²⁷ The appellation "father" has caused scholars to interpret this as a mixed monastic environment, within which biological family ties were maintained and nurtured.

The Monastery as Family: New (Spiritual) Mothers, Daughters, and Sisters

If the monastery can be considered a family, it is necessary to ask what role the women played in it and how that role compares to the one that they had held in their worldly families, as wives, mothers, sisters, and daughters. The term "wife" or "spouse," central to the experience of the virgin ascetics styled as spouses of Christ, was made less prominent through new functions that women performed within the monastic family. In the new setting, religious women were essentially either mothers or daughters, as well as sisters to each other. The epithet "mother" is used extensively in cenobitic contexts in reference to the mothers superior of the monasteries, as in the case of Maria, Pachomius' sister, who was mother of the virgins for her whole life.²⁸

The documentary texts from the fourth to the seventh century are filled with attestations of spiritual mothers, *ama/amma*, also referred to by diminutives such as "godmother" and "nurse," which is similar to the use of *apa*, originally a term of endearment for a father. Mothers unquestionably could hold roles of responsibility, even toward monks, as some letter exchanges attest.²⁹ SPP X 35 (sixth century, Oxyrhynchus) names *ama* Herais as a spiritual mother of nuns within a list of monasteries. An inscription from the monastery of *apa* Geremia in Saqqara, mentions Susanna, mother (*ama*) of the great monastery.³⁰ In most of the occurrences the term "mother" is found in the singular form; this is a female authority for a group of nuns.

Mothers, however, were not the only authorities within monasteries. They were often accompanied and supported by, and sometimes subjected to, a male head of the family. This model is easy to observe in double monasteries,

²⁶ Fragments 167–71 of Frange's archive in Anne Boud'hors and Chantal Heurtel, *Les ostraca coptes de la TT 29. Autour du moine Frangé*, vol. 1 (Brussels, 2010), 19.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 17–18, with regard to familial bonds, and 142 for the relationship between Frange and this son.

²⁸ Louis Théophile Lefort, ed., *S. Pachonii Vita, Bohairice Scripta* (Louvain, 1925), 27.

²⁹ Boud'hors and Heurtel, *Les ostraca coptes*, 19.

³⁰ James Edward Quibell, *Excavations at Saqqara 1906–1907* (Cairo, 1909), 36–7, no. 27.

where the female precinct was adjacent to the male one.³¹ The case of Moses, who lived in the second half of the fifth century, is revealing because he wrote as father (and thus as the highest authority) to his spiritual daughters who lived in the monastery under the guidance of their mother.³²

Finally, the role of mother within monasteries was also exercised by the women who contributed physically to the expansion of the monastic family by ceding their children to the monastery. In this case, they were not mothers of nuns or of monasteries, but mothers *within* the monasteries, and their main role was to contribute to the growth of the number of monks or residents (sometimes lay people). This is the case in several instances of the donation of children, entrusted to the care of a spiritual father or directly to the monastery, as attested by the literature and the papyri.³³ The sources do not discuss the role of these mothers after the donation but, because of the way in which the monastic life was organized, it is likely that they were no longer involved in the rearing of their children.

The high level of integration between genders in the Shenoutian family is particularly striking. Shenoute was the highest authority figure for the women, in an even more direct and decisive way than Pachomius (d. 348) for what can be called his female monasteries. The texts of Shenoutian monasticism contain a rhetoric of unity within the monasteries; the monastic experience was said to unite men and women and provide a model that could be followed by both. This aspect of Shenoutian monasticism reveals the fraternal bonds between monks and nuns, who were called and who referred to themselves as brothers and sisters. Shenoute, in fact, uses the Coptic term for brothers (*sneu*) to refer to both monks *and* nuns.

While the women were integrated into the monastic family, there was no intention on the part of the father of the monastery to erase their female nature. Shenoute led his monks, the brothers both male and female, in two distinct communities: his, which was male, and another one, female. While there is no denying Shenoute's rhetoric of unity, he repeatedly provided tools aimed at distinguishing gender roles, restraining women, subordinating them first to himself and second to the other authoritative monks, and separating the men and women. In the Shenoutian monasteries, power relationships between the two sexes remained asymmetrical, reproducing the family

³¹ On double monasteries, see the article by Beach and Juganaru in this volume.

³² "Vie de Moïse," in Émile Amélineau, *Monuments pour servir à l'histoire de l'Égypte chrétienne aux IV^e et V^e siècles* (Paris, 1895), fasc. 2, 694.

³³ See bibliography cited in Maria Chiara Giorda, *Il regno di Dio in terra. I monasteri come fondazioni private (Egitto V–VII secolo)* (Rome, 2011), 156, n. 123.

structure and the positions of power and authority that were to be found within natural families: Shenoute was thus the father of the monastic family, and the monks and nuns his children. The familial model that inspired his monasteries was a patriarchal one that expected the male head of the family to be a present and strong authority. He followed and created no fracture with the patriarchal model that was to be found in secular society. The nuns were sisters among themselves, and the daughters of a mother and a father.³⁴

Finally, all of the nuns who were subject to the mothers and fathers in charge of monastic communities were included within the category of spiritual daughters. There were also several cases of women who approached the spiritual fathers who lived within the monasteries to ask for prayers and for spiritual support. In papyrus P.Lond.Copt. VI 1926 (c. 340), for example, a certain Valeria writes to an ascetic living in Heracleopolis, *apa* Paphnutius, her spiritual father. She asks for his help and entrusts her daughters Bassiane and Theoklia and her whole household to him. A similar father–daughter relationship is reflected two centuries later in surviving documents from Wadi Sarga (where the monks call themselves brothers and a father of the monastery is mentioned). Here (P.Sarga 164), a woman addresses a holy father, as she already had in the past, recognizing his capacity for praying, as well as for granting forgiveness and offering intercession. Even more clearly than in the previous example, this daughter did not reside within the monastery, which was more certainly a strictly male environment. Nevertheless, I think that it is correct to speak again here of a monastic family.

The Wadi Sarga text also highlights the growing separation between East and West from the sixth century onward. As the bonds loosened between the Greek and Latin parts of the Mediterranean, so does the possibility of a comparison between their various monastic environments. In the West, the Jeronian and then the Benedictine line progressively established themselves, creating an anti-family monastic mainstream.³⁵ In the East, however, and particularly in Egypt, the regional divisions and the later Islamization of the country, as well as a very different economic situation, led to a change in the balance of power and to both a different conservation of familial bonds and a different role for women.

We can, therefore, observe in the East the creation of a new *familia*, not biological but spiritual, with some bonds tight and others loose. In this family,

³⁴ Rebecca Krawiec, *Shenoute and the Women of the White Monastery* (New York, 2002), 136 and 144–7.

³⁵ Roberto Alciati, “Da Oriente a Occidente: contatti fra le due parti dell’Impero,” in *Monachesimo orientale*, ed. Giovanni Filoramo (Brescia, 2010), 193–229.

some features were different from the existing non-monastic familial model, apart from the concrete and essential physical separation between the two sexes.³⁶ Within the monastic environment, and thanks to the combination of a rhetoric of unity and equality that tended simultaneously to distinguish and separate, women now became mothers, now sisters (though in some cases absorbed and intermixed among the brothers), now daughters, and their position was one of a greater symbolic equality with the monks. The deeply rooted sexist and patriarchal structures present in the biological families were not entirely eradicated and overcome, especially within double monasteries. The nuns did, however, gain greater responsibility and autonomy. It is interesting to reflect upon the fact that the women who lived in monasteries without men, or far from men, had such independence and autonomy that they were able to manage even the economy of their communities.³⁷ The intersections between social, affective, and economic bonds that the experiences of female monastic life highlight are complex. Indeed, female asceticism could be an instrument of liberation, an attestation of greater independence, or a way to increase security and protection through affiliation with or proximity to a male monastery.³⁸

Conclusions

Complex and intertwining spiritual, social, cultural, and economic factors make any attempt to construct a rigid monastic taxonomy of practices, places of residence, and organization for monastic women (as indeed also for monastic men) fruitless and misleading. Some tentative conclusions, however, can be drawn. This article has attempted to cast some light on the roles of religious women by reflecting upon the ways in which they rethought and maintained their familial roles, and by examining the strategy for (re)generation that they carried out in the absence of the possibility of biological generation. This is an anthropological and historical trait present within every human society, whatever its specific expression in terms of family, domestic organization, and ways of parenting. It is not possible to determine whether the denial of the reproductive function weighed more heavily upon monks or nuns. Since one of the most common roles among the women of that era was that of biological mother, however, the choice of the monastic life

³⁶ Roberto Alciati M. Giorda *Famiglia cristiana e pratica monastica (IV-VII secolo)*. In: “Annali di storia dell’esegesi”, 27(1) (2010): 265–290.

³⁷ Schroeder, “Women in Anchoritic and Semi-Anchoritic Monasticism,” 14–15.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 16–17.

must have represented a clear demarcation between the nuns and the women active in the lay world. But the testimonies given by the sources seem to support a reevaluation of the notion that entry into the monastic life in this era demanded the *total* fracturing of worldly biological and familial ties. There are numerous references within the sources to maintaining both horizontal and vertical familial bonds, regulated according to the different sensibilities of the heads of monasteries, who might be more or less strict in dealing with situations of cohabitation, with the proximity of members of the same family who had embraced the monastic life, and with the possibility of visiting relatives coming from the world outside the monastery. Such familial ties were maintained not only concretely but also narratively and metaphorically.

These relationships can be ascribed to the survival strategies of monastic families, as a paradoxical reversal of the interruption of natural reproduction. As with biological families, there was a generative necessity within monasteries, not only spiritually and theologically, as monastic literature and art show, but also socially, economically, and legally, as demonstrated by the persistent presence of children, parents, brothers, and sisters, by the relationships with biological families and the external world, and by the use of an easily recognizable terminology of the family.

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