

## FIVE

# TELLING STORIES ABOUT THE EGYPTIAN MONASTIC LANDSCAPE

THIS CHAPTER IS ABOUT STORIES AND THE PERCEPTION OF THE MONASTIC landscape created by stories – stories told about famous monastic leaders and famous places, and stories told about communities to create identity. But more importantly, it is about the stories of the Egyptian desert embedded within the Late Antique hagiographies that gave meaning to the stories about leaders, places, and community.

Aside from the fact that it makes up the majority of Egypt's natural landscape, the desert was a central component of ancient Egyptian and Christian theology. The nature of the desert as both a positive and a negative space for spiritual encounters is rooted in ancient pharaonic thought. Before the introduction of Christianity, Egyptians conceived of the desert (*dšrt*) as the realm both of evil gods, such as Seth, and of the sacred.<sup>1</sup> As early as the Old Kingdom (2686–2181 BCE),<sup>2</sup> the land for the dead was associated with the sacred or segregated land (*t3 dšr*) and was always located in the desert cliffs that hug the cultivated land below.<sup>3</sup> The western bank of the Nile in particular was associated with the land of the deceased. From this space, the deceased could move into the afterworld.<sup>4</sup> Despite the fact that the desert has an important place in the religious topography of ancient Egypt, sedentary populations throughout antiquity did not elect to inhabit the desertscape. Family members often visited tombs to make offerings to the spirits of their relatives, but they never lived alongside the tombs.<sup>5</sup> A few individuals did reside in the desert, but this was linked to their occupations, such as quarrymen and miners, tomb builders,

soldiers on outposts, caravan drivers, and nomads who elected to call the desert their home. In all cases, those living in the desert were only temporary residents. They lived in natural caves, older abandoned tombs, and even the quarries they were cutting for just so long as the job required.<sup>6</sup> Yet, monastic stories created a desert that was devoid of the presence of these others and did not recount their narratives. For the conquest of the desert was a story of triumphal occupation by monks, like Antony: “Indeed it was only in the loneliness of this environment, devoid of life and its quiet hardship, that the naked ascetic mind, emptied of all vain images, could attain true spirituality.”<sup>7</sup>

This chapter examines Egyptian monastic space in the broadest of terms from the imagined landscape of foundation narratives found in the hagiographic tradition linked to five famous monastic sites. Three were locations well known to monastic communities within the Mediterranean worlds of Byzantium and western medieval Europe. Two were known only within Egypt, and yet they were two of the largest and most important for Egyptian monasticism. Read together, the stories of these communities demonstrate how monastic authors spoke of the land, its suitability for spiritual living, and how founders laid claim to the land for monastic habitation. The sites of Wadi al-Natrun and Kellia in the Delta, Bawit in Middle Egypt, and the sites around Tabennesi and Sohag in Upper Egypt offer rich stories for analyzing how monastic authors described the environment and the need to build in locations not previously inhabited. I use these five examples to illustrate the rhetorical strategies utilized by monastic elites to construct a particular perception of the monastic mindscape that would come to define monastic literature for centuries to follow. But in order to understand how the stories of relocation and occupation developed, we begin by exploring why monastic communities moved to the fringes and how they were part of a longer tradition of moving outside of the city to inhabit new landscapes.

#### THE IMPULSE TO MOVE TO THE FRINGES

The desert is an important spiritual realm in biblical topography and naturally expanded into monastic teaching as a land both terrifying and beautiful.<sup>8</sup> Both the Old and New Testaments contain references to the desert as a space conducive for powerful spiritual encounters – both positive and negative. For the Hebrews, the desert was a space of punishment for forty years. The environmental challenges of the landscape provided all the necessary tools for teaching the Hebrews to rely on God. In the New Testament, the author of *Hebrews* evokes the bleakness of the desert when describing the prophets and their suffering as they “wandered in deserts and mountains, living in caves and in holes in the ground” (Heb. 11:38).<sup>9</sup> Despite these harsh and punitive qualities, other biblical writers described positive and protective elements of the desert

for those called to God's service. For example, David and his men successfully eluded Saul in several deserts (1 Sam. 23, 24); later Elijah lived in the Judean desert, fed by ravens sent by God (1 Kings 17); and gospel accounts tell of John the Baptist living and preaching in the desert of Judea, subsisting on locusts and honey (Matt. 3:1–4).

The most powerful biblical image of the desert is found the temptation of Jesus (Matt. 4:1; Luke 8:29). With this story the desert is both a teacher and a facilitator for encounters with the spiritual realm. It is in the desert that Jesus meets the devil, and we have the fullest development of the desert as the home of demonic beings. Although the desert could be used for God's ultimate purpose for training and protection, it was clearly also the residence of creatures opposed to God or those removed from God's care (Lev. 17:17; Isa 13:21; 34:14; Matt 12:43).<sup>10</sup> Jesus consciously and deliberately left his community to enter into a space that would provide the appropriate conditions for fasting and for prayer. The experiences of Jesus in the desert set up the model for later monastics who regard the desert as the training ground for their spiritual disciplines. The immediate encounter with the devil, who resides in the desert, allows Jesus to employ tools for spiritual combat. He recites Scripture and affirms knowledge of his true identity, thereby deflecting Satan's temptations. Similarly, monks would regard the desert as a spiritual training ground, akin to an athletic training ground, that would force a confrontation with their own temptations and demons.<sup>11</sup> The desert provided an environment for individuals to test the depths of their desires and dedication. It became an essential part of the spiritual topography of monastic life, such that monks would seek out caves, holes, deserts, and mountains where they could hope to prove themselves worthy.

The desert was a place of temptation, but it was equally a demanding teacher: "Truly that desert leads each person into feats of asceticism, whether he wants to or not."<sup>12</sup> The very nature of the desert provided physical and emotional challenges, testing the resolve of individuals who wished to emulate Christ.<sup>13</sup> It was not a space for the weak-willed. Sometimes the desert was used episodically for training a monk. Shenoute sent a monk to live in a cave for just under a year until the weak spirit fled from his body. On acknowledging the strange phenomenon of seeing the spirit leave, Shenoute invited the monk back into the community, who then left the desert.<sup>14</sup> Monastic literature recounts several stories of individuals who are either turned away or required to wait a period of time before being accepted into the community. The individual was constantly tested, and many were found lacking in maturity or even practical skills needed to sustain a life in the desert. Such a life was not impossible. Numerous men elected to relocate to the desert in substantial numbers. According to Athanasius, even the devil started to feel the encroachment into his land when Antony modeled successful ascetic living. Antony's success was

so great that the devil feared Antony “would turn the desert into a city of asceticism.”<sup>15</sup>

#### RELOCATION TRADITIONS IN ROMAN EGYPT

The impulse to move to a new location and to embrace a new philosophical outlook was not unique to Christianity or even monasticism.<sup>16</sup> The Mediterranean world witnessed how Cynics, Epicureans, Stoics, Neo-Platonists, and Neo-Pythagoreans all endorsed a moderate form of *askesis*, or training, that monitored the body and the mind in order to meet larger goals.<sup>17</sup> The ultimate aim was to practice restraint in indulgences rather than to abstain entirely from the pleasures of the world. Moderation, as espoused by Plato, was a larger challenge than complete asceticism or indulgence; to practice restraint reflected one’s ability to control the body with limits.<sup>18</sup> The mechanism for control grew from the delicate balance between controlling one’s desires and actions. The foods one ate, the amount of sex one had, and the bonds one held to another could all enhance or hinder progress in the philosophical life.<sup>19</sup> To prepare and to train oneself was the basic meaning of *askesis* for many athletes and gladiators as well as the philosophers. They practiced in spaces with like-minded individuals and often worked at the pleasure of their trainers and sponsors. It is therefore not surprising to find monastic authors speaking about their lives as ones dedicated to philosophy and using language evocative of athletic training: “[I]f one were to call them a choir of angels or a band of athletes or a city of the pious or a new choir of seventy apostles, one would not err in appropriateness.”<sup>20</sup> Just as athletes and philosophers trained their bodies, monks trained to monitor and control their diets, sexual activity, and interactions.<sup>21</sup> One essential component of this new life was the need to move to spaces with others who shared the same goal.

In Roman Egypt philosophers, athletes, and monks shared an *ascetic imperative* – a need to move away from the culture of the world and toward a culture that elevated the divine.<sup>22</sup> In particular, the ascetic movement involved a widely held belief that particular areas should and could be set aside for religious activities. These sacred spaces were the only appropriate areas for the practice of contemplation, or the act of seeing the divine. The relationship between the divine and the individual was enhanced by the condition of the space. This belief matches well with Lefebvre’s definition of social space as a place that is altered through the ideas individuals hold about a particular space. The link between spaces with acts of contemplation was central to ascetic beliefs and behaviors. Two examples from Roman Egypt illustrate the critical importance of spatial separation for fostering spiritual living prior to the emergence of monasticism. Both provide a rhetorical context for understanding why monastics moved into the deserted regions, whether in houses in a town,

the fringes of the fields, or in the escarpments. The examples also contextualize how the generalized monastic landscape emerged in Egypt.

Porphyry (d. ca. 305) preserved an account of the old Hellenistic-Pharaonic priesthood in Egypt, as reported by Chaeremon, a first-century CE Memphite priest, in *De abstentia* 4.6–8.<sup>23</sup> Chaeremon's report demonstrates that observers of the practices of these priests had an awareness of the use of architectural space for spiritual living and of the necessity to be within that space for maintaining spiritual commitments.

[T]hey (the priests) chose the temples as the place to philosophize. For to live close to their temples, was fitting to their whole desire of contemplation, and it gave them security because of the reverence for the divine ... And they were able to live a quiet life ... They renounced every employment and human revenues, and devoted their whole life to contemplation and vision of the divine. Through this vision they procured for themselves honor, security, and piety; through contemplation they procured knowledge; and through both a certain esoteric and venerable way of life.<sup>24</sup>

Chaeremon and Porphyry consciously linked a devotional life to philosophy. The quietude of the temple enhanced the conditions the priests desired for living a contemplative life. Residence within the temple required that the priests reject the typical forms of wage-earning that were common in the cities and towns of Roman Egypt.<sup>25</sup> They could live in quarters in the temple and dedicate their time to all spiritual matters. Chaeremon describes how participation in temple life necessitated that priests separate themselves physically from others. The physical area of the temple served as a distinctly social space for encountering like-minded individuals and for contemplating the divine. The space beyond the temple's precinct held distractions that would be detrimental to the goals of the priests for a quiet and noble life.

Similar themes for a generalized religious landscape are found in a portrait of a contemporary group of Jewish ascetics living near Alexandria and known to Philo of Alexandria (20 BCE–50 CE) as the Therapeutae.<sup>26</sup> In a short treatise called *On the Contemplative Life*, Philo describes in detail the beliefs and customs of the Therapeutae and then describes how they live.<sup>27</sup> No archaeological evidence has been found to belong to the settlement of the Therapeutae, and many scholars doubt whether it was an actual community. Despite its questionable existence, Philo's presentation contains elements of a generalized and idealized landscape that reflects ideological expectations of a well-designed life. His classification of the community as philosophers illustrates his belief that the Therapeutae were pursuing knowledge akin to other philosophical communities of the time.<sup>28</sup> Philo's account includes a thorough consideration of how daily activities were conducted in particular spaces; how these activities differed from, or were superior to, practices of urban life; and how the overall

goal of the Jewish philosophers was met only when they physically relocated to an area outside of Alexandria.

The Therapeutae originally resided throughout all of Egypt, but Philo points out that they preferred an area near Lake Mareotis, south and west of Alexandria.<sup>29</sup> Here individuals, motivated by their “longing for the deathless and blessed life,” established themselves in a new settlement.<sup>30</sup> Philo explains that the Therapeutae possess a logical rationale for relinquishing personal goods and relocating to foster their new identity: “[T]hey do not migrate into another city” for they regard the city as a place “full of turmoils and disturbances,” electing instead to live “outside the walls pursuing solitude in gardens or lonely bits of country.”<sup>31</sup> Philo seeks to explain the rationale behind the belief that divesting oneself of possessions will produce a type of mental freedom from the anxieties of ownership. Philo is determined to prove that these individuals were different from those who moved aimlessly from city to city. The Therapeutae moved deliberately to free themselves from the disturbances found from living in close proximity to one’s family. The resettlement outside of Alexandria did not stem from fear but rather from a serious consideration of how to construct the proper environment for fostering the pursuit of wisdom.

According to Philo, the Therapeutae selected a variety of locations to live in, such as sites outside of walled settlements, gardens, and abandoned or deserted areas. However, these sites were not completely isolated, for they were in sight of farms and villages.<sup>32</sup> It was in these areas that Philo says the Therapeutae pursued solitude and wisdom. He uses *eremia* (Gk.) in three distinct but related ways to convey various notions of the desert and desert places. First, *eremia* is a state of mind; second, a physical place; and third, a quality or nature of a place. In all three usages, *eremia* links ideas of solitude, wilderness, desertion, and abandonment.<sup>33</sup> However, these ideas do not equate to isolation, but rather to a clear separation between individuals and *other* built environments.<sup>34</sup>

After moving to the new residences, the Therapeutae devised a way of living that was remarkably similar to that of later Christian ascetics.<sup>35</sup> The Therapeutae lived in simple houses to provide protection from the extreme heat of the day and cold at night.<sup>36</sup> Although Philo does not expressly state whether or not the Therapeutae built these dwellings, based on the descriptions of the activities that were carried out in these spaces, it is unlikely that they were already in existence in this area.<sup>37</sup> Philo describes the general layout to include a sanctuary (*semneion*) or monastery (*monastērion*).<sup>38</sup> The houses contained at least two rooms, if not three, with one designated as a special room for spiritual activities. The room is described as a holy or a solitary room (*monastērion*). The *monastērion*, or sacred room, existed solely for the occupant to aid in the cultivation of the memory of God.<sup>39</sup> Specifically, Philo says this space helps them be aware of God while awake and while dreaming. Within these spaces individuals prayed at appointed times, dedicated the day to the reading of Scripture, and studied

the allegorical interpretation of Scripture for hidden meanings. The obvious similarities between the practices of Philo's Therapeutae and Athanasius's Antony impressed Eusebius so much that he considered the Therapeutae as an early Christian community.<sup>40</sup>

In the end, the two examples may not reflect actual practices of Egyptian priests or those of later Alexandrian Jewish ascetics. However, the portraits do highlight a religious and philosophical tradition about space, religious devotion, and the underutilized landscape. The desert and deserted places both in a village and on the edges of the inhabited areas became very attractive locations for monks to use as new settlements. The importance of the desert in biblical topography is clear. It is a space to confront demons, to challenge oneself, and to encounter God. Together these ideas combined to make a compelling argument for the value of the Egyptian desert as a spiritual training arena. In seeking out locations outside of the normative urban environment, monastics were part of an older tradition first started by athletes, but developed fully by Hellenistic philosophers and other religious groups that found separation beneficial to their success in reaching disciplinary goals. Monastic descriptions of the desert, their settlements, and how they selected locations for their communities reveal the complexity of ascetical spatial beliefs. The efficacy of the landscape for success in monitoring and maintaining progress was essential for every monk. As we will see, how monastics explained the value of the desert location would take on unique qualities as monastic authors crafted a narrative of the generalized desert landscape to explain the spatial value of where they lived for a spiritual existence.

#### DISPLACING DEMONS IN THE BYZANTINE DESERT

Monastic relocation into new areas was motivated by a shared belief that the goals of true monastic living could be best met in areas with other monks and away from societal distractions. To construct new physical environments, monastic communities articulated a message of the spiritual benefits for both monks and those who benefited from their prayers. Rather than seeking a quiet landscape, monks consciously sought battle and engagement with a *noisy* desert – a place that was occupied not by people, but by demons. Monastic authors explained why, in moving to the fringes of the occupied land, ascetics made a choice to occupy an already inhabited place populated by demons that claimed the desert as their domain.<sup>41</sup> David Brakke's analysis of monastic–demon encounters in the desert highlights the importance of the desertscape as an area of engagement not effectively available in the urban communities: “By striking out in the desert, however, the *monachos* or ‘single one’ radicalized the quest for simplicity of heart and likewise intensified an ambivalence about the multiplicity of human relationships that was deeply rooted in the

late antique project of self-cultivation and particularly acute for Egyptian villagers of this period.”<sup>42</sup> Monastic sites were arenas for intense spiritual activity. The battlefield imagery of the ascetic life occurs frequently in the descriptions of monks as warriors and as soldiers of Christ.<sup>43</sup> *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers* offer numerous examples of this theme, best expressed by Poemen: “If I am in a place where there are enemies, I become a soldier.”<sup>44</sup> The theme of military combat and occupation was an essential characteristic of what it would mean to embrace ascetic practices.

The Coptic *Life of Phib* incorporates much of the topographical language found in Late Antique documentary sources.<sup>45</sup> The hagiographer Papohe writes: “After all these things, we went to a mountain (*toou*) of the desert (*daie*) opposite a village (*time*) called Tahrouj. We found some holes in the rock (*petra*) there and made some small dwellings (*manšōpe*) and stayed in them and lived the monastic life with numerous ascetic practices.”<sup>46</sup> Despite the general nature of the terms, the steps for establishing a monastic settlement are clearly laid out and reflect Old Testament themes that were used again and again in the accounts of many monastic communities throughout the Byzantine Near East (Heb. 11:38). The desert “was a *topos* overlaid by a plethora of other *topoi*” that could be used by monastic authors to “articulate a new type of Christianity” that allowed for a Christian conquest of the landscape.<sup>47</sup> The landscape would then be settled and used for a new purpose.

Only monks were adequately prepared to see the demons that resided in the desert and defeat them, for the “air which is spread out between heaven and earth is so thick with spirits ... For no fleshly weariness or domestic activity or concern for daily bread ever makes them cease.”<sup>48</sup> Since ordinary humans were not emotionally or spiritually prepared to bear the sight of demons, it was the responsibility of ascetics to render the demons ineffective. John Chrysostom vividly represents this belief in the bravery and spiritual power of a monk in *A Comparison between a King and a Monk*: “The king alleviates poverty ... but the monk by his prayers will set free souls who are tyrannized by demons ... For prayer is to a monk what a sword is to a hunter. In fact, a sword is not so fearsome to the wolves as the prayers of the just are to the demons.”<sup>49</sup> Chrysostom’s analogy of the monk to a hunter provides context for Poemen’s statement that monks become spiritual swords used in battle. Monastics moved into demon-inhabited lands in order to provoke a spiritual confrontation, thereby forcing demons to concede territory to the monks. The villages “depend[ed] on the prayers of these monks as if on God himself,” for the monastic settlements provided a protective barrier around the villages.<sup>50</sup>

Early monastic literature is clear that monastic settlements transformed the topography of Egypt both physically and spiritually. Monastic settlements adopted features that architecturally resembled clouds of earthly angels: “There is no town not surrounded by hermitages as if by walls.”<sup>51</sup> In addition to



monastic sites located near the towns, nonmonastics were aware of other settlements in remote places and in desert caves. Mindful of the comparisons between those living in remote locations and those in the immediate vicinity of the towns, the author of the *History of the Monks in Egypt* states that “those living near towns or villages ma[d]e equal efforts, though evil troubles them on every side, in case they should be considered inferior to their remoter brethren.”<sup>52</sup> Both groups of ascetics were vital for establishing the proper balance in the world.

The reclamation of the desert for habitation is a powerful image first introduced by Athanasius (296–373) in his *Life of Antony*.<sup>53</sup> For Athanasius, an urban bishop living in Alexandria, the movement of men into the fringes of the inhabited land in the fourth century reflected a conscious choice to establish a heavenly city dedicated to God: “[Antony] persuaded many to choose the monastic life. And so monastic dwellings (*monasteria*) came into being in the mountains and the desert (*eremia*) was made a city by monks: having left their homes, they registered themselves for citizenship in heaven.”<sup>54</sup> The actual landscapes that Antony moved through were of little importance to Athanasius, for “[a]lthough he differentiated between the ‘outer’ and the ‘inner’ desert, this apparent dichotomy seems to refer only to basic geographical facts of the Eastern Desert, which the Alexandrian bishop did not translate into any essential difference in how these landscapes out to be understood.”<sup>55</sup>

A later fifth-century Syrian text, *On Hermits and Desert Dwellers*, provides a salient description of how monastic settlement of the desert transformed the very nature of the space: “The desert, frightful in its desolation, became a city of deliverance for them, where the harps resound, and where they are preserved from harm. Desolation fled from the desert, for sons of the kingdom dwell there; it became like a great city with the sound of psalmody from their mouths.”<sup>56</sup> The physical nature and qualities of the desert were altered by the presence of the monks and their activities. The desert was no longer the space of punishment and the realm of demons – it was a landscape overrun by monks, conquering the demons and creating a pure landscape filled with athletes of Christ.

#### MONKS CIVILIZING THE DESERTED PLACES OF LATE ANTIQUE EGYPT

Narratives of relocation and settlement figure prominently in hagiographies and other forms of Egyptian monastic literature. The stories present carefully crafted accounts explaining why the founder of a community moved where he did and what incidents propelled his desire to seek out a desert place. But are these sources reliable historical accounts? Despite efforts to examine the redaction of the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers* in earlier generations for the kernels of historical events, most scholars are convinced that we can find little of the

“Desert Fathers of history” and are instead looking at the “Desert Fathers of fiction.”<sup>57</sup> In the *Sayings*, initially composed in the fifth century in Palestine and based upon oral transmissions of earlier stories, we can observe how a mind-scape of Egyptian monasticism emerged. A few of the *Sayings* refer to monastic buildings, the monks living within the landscape, and the importance of desert living. Certainly, details of those living in remote areas are extremely difficult to reconstruct except from passing references to individuals who reside in the more remote inner desert for short periods of time. In looking at the foundation narratives, we learn how monks were taught to regard the environment, their participation in a legacy of their founder, and the importance of God as a navigator to suitable locations for monastic living.

Wadi al-Natrun and Kellia are home to two of the most famous locations for the loose confederation of Desert Fathers. Known more for their individuality and independence as expressed in the *Sayings*, the two locations represent the essential founding of monastic life in northern Egypt. In Upper Egypt, Pachomius founded the first enclosed and self-defined communal monastery, *koinonion*, at Tabennesi. His foundation narratives, pieced together from the various later *Lives* and a handful of letters, provide an excellent comparison to the foundation stories for monastic communities in the north. Lastly, the sites of Bawit, in Middle Egypt, and Sohag, in Upper Egypt, are examples of sites with complex settlement plans and communities not well known outside of Egypt. Unlike the founders of the sites of Wadi al-Natrun, Kellia, and Tabennesi, who were revered in the broader Mediterranean monastic world, the founders associated with Bawit and Sohag had only a very minor impact on the exported history of Egyptian monasticism. The story of Apollo makes only a small appearance in the *History of the Monks in Egypt*, and yet the archaeological remains of his community at Bawit blossom into a massive monastic town and the monks participated in several monastic and lay economic networks. In the case of Shenoute, neither he nor his monastic federation is mentioned at all in the travelogues or histories recounting the birth and development of early Egyptian monasticism. Thus, we see a significant gap in the overall narrative of Egyptian monasticism. And, this is exactly the uneven portrait of Egyptian monasticism that has been recycled, retold, and codified as the mythology of Egyptian monasticism, one based on Delta monasticism and only select encounters with Upper Egyptian monasticism through the accounts of Pachomius.<sup>58</sup> A strong possible reason for this lacuna is that Apollo and Shenoute were not necessarily the founding monastic fathers for these sites, but later became honorific founders in the generations that succeeded them. Therefore, the foundation narratives did not circulate outside of Egypt. Taken together, the five sites illustrate how monastic authors crafted a generalized monastic landscape that overshadowed the actual landscape of connected monastic communities.

*The Desert of Macarius in Sketis*

Wadi al-Natrun was one of three areas in the northwest Delta to quickly earn an international reputation as the center for the monastic movement. Travelers such as Evagrius, John Cassian, and Palladius provide the major portraits of this desert as they traveled to Sketis and Kellia, often becoming temporary residents.<sup>59</sup> Palladius describes the monastic landscape as including a variety of locations: “I visited many cities and very many villages, every cave and all the desert dwellings of monks.”<sup>60</sup> Since he traveled in both the Egyptian and Libyan deserts and then visited monks in Upper Egypt, Mesopotamia, Palestine, Syria, Rome, and Campania, Palladius offers a comparative assessment of the Egyptian desertscape as he recounts it for his reader, Bishop Lausus.<sup>61</sup> Palladius traveled to Egypt and lived at Kellia with Evagrius, before the latter’s death in 399. When John Cassian described Egypt and the settlements of the monks, he invited his listeners to “bear in mind the character of the country in which they dwelt, how they lived in a vast desert.”<sup>62</sup> As a native of Scythia, Cassian placed the unusual landscape at the center of monastic training for his community that he founded in southern Gaul and highlighted the need for isolation in a place where monks are single-minded in their spiritual pursuits. Thus, the travelogues function not as naturalist accounts but as didactic treatises for authors and their audiences, who did not have first-hand knowledge of the landscape. While the desert became a central component of monasticism throughout the Mediterranean, descriptions about the Egyptian landscape, monastic settlements, and the records of foundations were embedded in larger themes to offer spiritual edification for contemporary communities.<sup>63</sup>

The importance of Sketis as a place for monastic training was both physically and rhetorically constructed through the works of visitors to the communities and later *Lives* written about the monks who lived in Wadi al-Natrun. The physical space of Wadi al-Natrun with its salt lakes and the importance of the desert for both physical and mental challenges provided authors with rich imagery to build a myth of the monastic desert. Wadi al-Natrun was the center of a healthy salt trade, as the materials gathered there were used in the millennia-old practice of mummification (see Fig. 34).<sup>64</sup> The numerous salt lakes span a length of 30 kilometers in the Western Desert. Of this trajectory, an area of roughly 8,400 hectares was modified in some form for monastic habitation, with pockets of dense habitation in at least four areas with settlements ranging from 160 to 250 hectares.<sup>65</sup> The belief in the efficacy of Sketis for correct teaching and monastic living was a powerful tradition that led to the rapid mythologizing of the desert.<sup>66</sup> Early visitors, such as Palladius and John Cassian, referred to the area as Sketis (Coptic *Shihit*), but it was equally known as the “Desert of St. Macarius,” reflecting the importance of its first and most famous inhabitant and monastic founder.<sup>67</sup>



34. Salt accumulation by one of the shores of a lake in Wadi al-Natrun, Egypt.

How did Sketis become the “Desert of Macarius?” This is a difficult story to extract from the hagiographical sources we have, but is necessary, as the attribution of a famous monastic founder to one’s community and landscape provided a sense of identity and unity for later authors.<sup>68</sup> David Brakke honestly states the vexing nature of the historical study of early monasticism is that “many of our literary sources are, to be blunt, not true ... few literary works come directly from Egyptian monks of the fourth and early fifth centuries.”<sup>69</sup> Therefore, reconstructing the story of Macarius as the founder of monasticism in Wadi al-Natrun truly is an effort in reconstructing a mosaic from bits from later traditions, possible oral histories, and much later community perceptions about Macarius. Despite this distance from the historical Macarius, it is invaluable to consider the accounts that were told about him. For “fiction may tell us as much about early monastic culture as the papyri and archaeological remains that more positivist historians value so highly.”<sup>70</sup> The exploration of how the desert of Sketis became “Macarius’s Desert” provides a path of inquiry that is just as informative for reconstructing perceptions of the landscape as reading letters and contracts from Late Antique monastics. In pulling together threads from a wide range of literary sources, and in one case from the letters and sermons of one founder, Shenoute, we can observe the construction of

a monastic landscape through the eyes of later generations. It is a landscape that requires good stories and memorable individuals, but in the end, those accounts are not historical truths, but historical stories that lend authority to existing communities.

Macarius of Egypt, also known as Macarius the Great and a contemporary of Amoun of Nitria, was the first monk to build his monastic residence in Sketis. His biographies in the *Sayings* and various Coptic sources differ as to whether he was married or not. In the *Sayings*, Macarius lived a monastic life in a cell near a village.<sup>71</sup> The villagers, after learning of his piety, desired to make him their priest. Macarius effectively rejected their efforts by moving to another place where he could live in peace, this time living with another ascetic. Then a woman, who had become pregnant, leveled accusations of impropriety against him. Once he was found innocent of fathering the child, he moved yet again farther away from the town. With this final encounter, Macarius went to the desert of Sketis and built his own cell.

The horizontal movement from the populated to the uninhabited land reflects a vertical movement in terms of spiritual achievement and maturity. In the early fifth century, Palladius recounts his stories of Macarius after his own sojourn through the monastic deserts of Egypt and several years living as a monk at Kellia.<sup>72</sup> During his lifetime, Macarius had at least two residences in Sketis and lived there for sixty years.<sup>73</sup> One was a cell where he resided with two other monks, and the second was a cave. Macarius could retreat to the cave, which was connected to his cell by a 90-meter tunnel running underground.<sup>74</sup> While Macarius the Great is an important figure for the section on the monks of Sketis, the place is not yet equated with him or his first settlement. For Palladius, Sketis is the “great desert” or the “great interior desert,” and therefore is known more for its physical size and its interiority, in contrast to the other monastic settlements he visited.<sup>75</sup> John Cassian, similarly, associates Sketis with greatness, for it is home to the “most celebrated fathers of monasticism, the ultimate in excellence” and Macarius has only a limited appearance in the stories that Cassian tells his fellow monks.<sup>76</sup>

The Coptic *Life of Macarius*, which follows the biography of the *Lausiac History*, details how Macarius shared his ascetic life with two disciples, one who lived with him and another who lived in a cell nearby.<sup>77</sup> The Coptic version also identifies Sketis as the “great desert,” which “leads each person into feast of asceticism, whether he wants it or not.”<sup>78</sup> To be sure, this model of apprenticeship departs from the more communal house model of several individuals living under the guidance of a house father that will be common in the Pachomian and Shenoutean communities in Upper Egypt, or the later development of dwelling places in Sketis.<sup>79</sup> In all the descriptions of the landscape, the desert is described as the land of monks, and we hear little about who was the “first,” except for the short entry on Macarius of Alexandria in the *History*

*of the Monks in Egypt* in which he, and not Macarius the Great, is identified as “the first to build a hermitage in Sketis. This place is a waste land laying at a distance of a day’s and night’s journey from Nitria through the desert.”<sup>80</sup> The tradition of Macarius as the first inhabitant is mentioned only in passing in the *Sayings*, linked to Macarius the Great when he is described as “the only one living as an anchorite, but lower down there was another desert with several brothers.”<sup>81</sup>

By the eighth century, a slightly different story is detailed in the Coptic *Life of Saint Macarius of Scetis* that firmly places Macarius as the spiritual founder of desert monasticism in Wadi al-Natrun.<sup>82</sup> In this vita, Macarius married against his wishes and adopted a spiritual marriage, always maintaining his purity. His only avenue to escape his marriage was to participate in the salt-mining trade in Wadi al-Natrun.<sup>83</sup> The topography mentions mountains of natron and the routes workmen used to move their camels back and forth between the salt areas and the villages. During one of his trips to the lakes, Macarius spent the night on an outcrop with other salt traders. While there, he had a dream or vision that would provide the basis for his eventual move to the desert.<sup>84</sup> The passage provides a vivid description of the landscape and then offers a gendered image of Macarius as a nursing mother for his spiritual children.

Later that night he found himself dreaming; a man was standing above him in a garment that cast forth lighting and was multicolored and striped, and he spoke to him, saying:

“Get up and survey this rock on both sides and this valley running down the middle. See that you understand what you see!” “And when I looked,” he [Macarius] said, “I said to the person who had spoken to me, ‘I don’t see anything except the beginning of the wadi to the west of the valley and also the mountain surround[ing] the valley; I see it.’ And he said to me, ‘Thus says God: ‘This land I will give to you. You shall dwell in it and blossom and your fruits shall increase and your seed shall multiply [Gen 12:7] and you shall bear multitudes of spiritual children and rulers who will suckle at your breasts; they will be made rulers over the peoples and your root shall be established upon the rock.’”<sup>85</sup>

In this first identification of Sketis as Macarius’s land, God bestows the land and the promise of generations of children as a gift. The vision is a direct parallel to the promise made to Abram when he surveyed the land held by the Canaanites. Macarius does not, however, move into the desert of Sketis, but rather resides with other ascetics in cells on the edges of different towns. Eventually he adopts a cell of his own and receives a second visitation, this time from a cherub, who rebukes him for failing to respond to his earlier vision to relocate to the desert.<sup>86</sup>

After prayer, Macarius was ready, “leaving behind everything in his cell” as a sign of his commitment to his new mission in the desert.<sup>87</sup> The walk took

two days, which would roughly be between 48 and 95 kilometers, depending on the heat and the difficulty of the paths taken into the desert.<sup>88</sup> At this point the cherub asked Macarius to choose the location he would like to settle in, but he admitted that he did not recognize anything in the area. The cherub said: “See, the place lies before you; but examine it and take possession of a good site. Only, be on the watch for evil spirits and their evil ambushes.”<sup>89</sup> He selected a place at “the beginning of the wadi near the site where natron was extracted.”<sup>90</sup> In deciding to be close to the salt mines, he also made a conscious choice to be near others, the workmen and guards at the salt lakes, which would later prove to be detrimental to his solitude.

Forced to find a quieter location because of the noise of the salt mine industry, Macarius moved again – this time to a mountain cave. He went now into the desert and selected a natural rock formation for carving two caves. One served for his daily needs for plaiting baskets and the other was purely for liturgical use. His presence in the desert caused the demons to complain restlessly about his occupation of their territory. They voiced their fears that more monks might join him: “Shall we allow this man to stay here and allow the desert places on account of him to become a port and harbor for everyone in danger, and especially to become a city like heaven for those who hope for eternal life? If we allow him to remain here, multitudes will gather around him and the desert places will not be under our power.”<sup>91</sup> The conquest of the desert places surfaces again as a central theme in the stories of monastic occupation of the landscape. The deepest fear of the demons is quickly realized as multitudes start to gather around Macarius in the desert.

The *Life* describes how Macarius taught the monks how to build their own dwellings. They carved caves into the rock and also used palm branches, trunks, and stalks “from the wadi” to finish off the dwellings and create a good shelter.<sup>92</sup> At this point the community was made up of individual cave dwellings and the monks still fetched water from the wadi, as Macarius “had not yet dug cisterns.”<sup>93</sup> Practically speaking, the community’s building program needed to expand to accommodate both daily and spiritual needs of the residents. They built a small church together, then dug wells, and finally they needed larger dwellings.<sup>94</sup> As a sign of God’s pleasure with Macarius, a cherub told the saint: “The Lord has come to dwell in this place on account of you.”<sup>95</sup> The fact that God now dwells in the desert is directly linked to Macarius’s success in forcing the demons out of the land.

His achievements prepare him for his final relocation to an even more important area of the wadi that Macarius will bring to perfection. The *Life* offers yet another description of the land Macarius is directed to occupy:

The cherub led him and took him atop the rock at the southern part of the wadi to the west of the cistern at the top of the valley and said to him, “Begin by making yourself a dwelling here and build a church, for a

large number of people will live here after a while.” And so he lived there to the day of his death, and after his death they called that place “Abba Macarius” because he finished his life there.<sup>96</sup>

Macarius’s story of movement into the desert reflects similar patterns of movements for other monks. Many began by living alone in their town or village; some are even married and secretly agreed to a “spiritual marriage” with their wives in order to practice the ascetic life. When tensions arose that threaten the privacy of the private ascetic life, many sought out a more experienced monk to serve as a mentor and guide.

In the Coptic *Odes to Saints of Scetis*, Macarius is described as “the great net who drew everyone into the Way of God, and put upon them the holy habit, teaching them to dwell solitary in holes of the ground.”<sup>97</sup> The reference to “holes in the ground” invokes the language of the faithful prophets, who resided in the harsh landscape of the desert (Heb. 11:38). Sketis evolved from the residence of a solitary monastic to become an entire region, home to four well-known and still existing monastic communities. Christian Arabic authors often referenced the region as *Mizān al-qulūb*, meaning the place of the “Weighing of Hearts,” a literal Arabic rendering of the Coptic *Shi-hēt*, as a reference to the spiritual challenges one faced while in the region. In the bulk of the Arabic literature of Christians and Muslims, however, the region is identified as Wadi al-Natrun, the most common designation today, or as Wadi Habīb. Medieval authors, such as Abu al-Makarim and al-Maqrīzī, attribute Macarius as the founder of the monastic community in Wadi al-Natrun.<sup>98</sup> Abu al-Makarim reports that Macarius was directed by Antony to move to Wadi al-Natrun and then many monks took up residence in Wadi al-Natrun because of Macarius’s “noble deeds.” By the fifteenth century a listing of monasteries in al-Maqrīzī’s *Khītat* includes a description of Wadi al-Natrun and he presents an extensive etymology. Al-Maqrīzī listed eighty-six monasteries in the desert.<sup>99</sup> He describes Wadi Habib as being known by a variety of names such as Wadi al-Natrun, “Desert of *shihāt*,” “Desert of *askūt*,” and *Mizān al-qulūb*. His settlement history recounts how the monasteries dwindled down to seven in a land where “sandy flats alternate with salt-marshes, waterless deserts, and dangerous rocks.”<sup>100</sup> The great desert of Macarius had numerous monasteries “in ruins.”<sup>101</sup> The ruins would remain until the visits of Hugh Evelyn White, who also remarked on the ubiquitous nature of the “ruins” in the 1920s.

The Greek, Coptic, Syriac, and Arabic traditions relating to the settlement of Wadi al-Natrun share and enhance the importance of its salt as a purifying agent in monastic living and Macarius as a builder. The salt of Wadi al-Natrun was a “spiritual salt” and was “an explicit contrast with the salt of death” found in the inhabited world.<sup>102</sup> The salt also became a physical representation of the theological importance of Wadi al-Natrun in the monastic imagination. By inhabiting the desert, the monks tamed the wilderness.<sup>103</sup> They caused the



salted land to be fertile again, both physically and socially, with athletes of God. In the end, all the accounts about Macarius speak to the importance of displacing demons through settlement and occupation.

### *The Quiet Retreat of Amoun at Kellia*

Traveling nearly forty years after the founding of Nitria and Kellia, the first long-term visitors and foreign residents at the two sites wrote accounts that were focused more on inspiring their readers or patrons than on offering an accurate recounting of the physical landscape or the monastic architecture that they lived in. Palladius lived for nine years at Kellia and Evagrius for sixteen; yet, neither writer is compelled to tell us much about the actual landscape, as they, like other monastic writers, are engaged in writing literature to inspire and encourage other monastics about how to live the ascetic life. Therefore, the story of Kellia's foundation needs to be pieced together from fragments of diverse monastic sources with very different objectives than recounting the life of one particular founder.

The foundation story of Kellia is linked directly with the older foundation story for Mount Nitria.<sup>104</sup> Both sites were located further north of Sketis and are often described in Late Antique travelogues in terms of distance relative to or from Alexandria, the closest urban center to the two settlements.<sup>105</sup> Unlike Sketis, where a sustained monastic community preserved and expanded earlier written traditions throughout the late medieval period, the communities at Nitria and Kellia were abandoned by the eighth or ninth century, resulting in fewer sources that document how monks reproduced their community's history. Therefore, the accounts of Palladius, Evagrius, John Cassian, and the anonymous author of the *History of the Monks in Egypt* provide an early record of oral traditions circulating within Egypt before the written form of the later fifth-century *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*.

The story begins with a man named Amoun, who left his wife after eighteen years to live in the Delta at the site of Nitria. When Palladius ventured to Nitria, it was a mountain located seventy miles from Lake Mareotis and inhabited by more than 5,000 monks, and it was Arsisius, a resident, who told him the story of the community's origins.<sup>106</sup> Having the blessing of his wife, Amoun set out to the "inner part" of the mountain of Nitira, "for there were no monasteries there yet – and he made himself two round cells."<sup>107</sup> The *Coptic Life of Antony* includes a chapter on Amoun, where he is identified as one who lived at the *Toou* of Nitria, and his death was known by Antony, who saw his soul ascend.<sup>108</sup> That story is the beginning of the account in the *History of the Monks in Egypt* for Amoun.<sup>109</sup> The area of Nitria, like Sketis, was associated with the mining of niter (potassium nitrate), a substance used in cleaning but not the same as natron.<sup>110</sup> Like Macarius, Amoun sought out the

remote settlements that others had inhabited, which illustrates he knew men were living in the fringes. Here in the flat desert, far from urban centers and rugged limestone cliffs, Amoun gained a following and encouraged his male colleagues to adopt both solitary and communal dwellings in the Delta.<sup>111</sup> The story of Kellia's founding is not found in the sayings attributed to Amoun, but rather in the stories about Antony, reflecting his greater significance as being a companion in the establishment of the settlement along with Amoun.

In the *Sayings* attributed to Antony we learn that he visited Amoun one day and they discussed a growing concern surfacing at Mount Nitria – the mountain was too crowded and too noisy.<sup>112</sup> Amoun felt restless because his fellow monastics were arguing about how to live and where to live in great silence. He asked Antony: “How far from Nitria are these brothers to go before building their new dwellings?”<sup>113</sup> The two monks set out after breakfast and walked into the desert until the sun set. They covered roughly 19 kilometers that day.<sup>114</sup> As a sign that their relocation was sanctioned by God, the two monks were protected from the intensity of the sun that day. Once they had stopped for the night, they planted a cross to mark the location.<sup>115</sup> Antony said that others would recognize the cross as a sign and would know that this would be a peaceful place to live, if they wished to live in such a manner.<sup>116</sup> It was here that Amoun began the community later known to Evagrius, Palladius, and John Cassian (see Fig. 14).

The distance between Kellia and Nitria was enough for a day's walk between the two communities, but also significant enough that there was a separation between the two groups. The location was in the inner desert, removed farther from paths of activity than Mount Nitria, and in a deserted area.<sup>117</sup> The settlement would become known as a monastic retreat from more bustling sites, for to live here was “to live a more remote life, stripped down to the bare rudiments.”<sup>118</sup> The remarkable nature of Kellia is that the settlement grew from Amoun's desire to find solitude and to escape the crowds, but it is a later story, one that emerges perhaps in response to the growing popularity of monastic tourism in the late fourth and early fifth centuries. In the end, the site superseded that of Nitria and literally became the city in the desert that Athanasius hoped would one day develop. Archaeological evidence exists at the site for definite settlements in the fifth century, but the earliest levels do not correspond with the time of Amoun, Evagrius, or Palladius. The site's eventual decline in the late eighth and ninth centuries would also mean a decline in monastic literature about the settlement as the built community became a part of the desert topography. Both Kellia and Sketis, as representatives of desert monasticism in Lower Egypt, convey how monastic literature was shaped within Egypt and in non-Egyptian sources. For those who transmitted the accounts of Egypt's northern desert monasteries, the stories of foundations were of lesser importance than the lessons to be learned in hearing the words

of the Desert Fathers. And despite the importance of Kellia as a location welcoming to foreign, monastic guests, it was other monastic sites, such as Sketis, that seemed to capture the imagination of monastic authors more than the location of the “Cells,” the colloquial name for the site. For Sketis, where monasticism still thrives in Wadi al-Natrun, we have a rich history to consult for later medieval perceptions of Delta monasticism. But by the ninth century, Kellia had vanished from the early medieval geography of monastic Egypt, not to be found again until 1964.

### *Pachomius’s Community of Village Monasteries*

After the Desert Fathers of Lower Egypt, the most often referenced communities of monks of Egypt were those associated with Pachomius (292–346) and his *koinonia* in Upper Egypt.<sup>119</sup> His place in the history of Egyptian monasticism is as central as Antony’s. Both Antony and Pachomius hold positions of authority more through the retelling of their ascetic lives as recounted and recycled by later authors and biographers than by what they actually built. James Goehring explains the difficulties surrounding Pachomius’s place as a founder:

The picture of Pachomius’s originality is, however, literary rather than historical ... The *Vita* makes clear through these stories that Pachomius’s innovation had little to do with the coenobitic institution itself. It was rather the organizational principle of a *koinonia* or system of affiliated coenobitic monasteries and the development of a monastic rule that are credited to Pachomius... The theory of a Pachomian origin of coenobitic monasticism must thus be discarded ... The vast number of monasteries in Egypt in the late Byzantine era simply cannot be traced to a single point of origin.<sup>120</sup>

Philip Rousseau urges for a similar corrective in the reading of monastic foundations by asserting “the formal establishment of a communal way of life did not represent a sudden lurch in a new direction.”<sup>121</sup> For the discussion here, the story of Pachomius’s monastic foundations provides a useful case study for assessing how monastic communities looked at the desert and constructed the story of monastic settlement in Upper Egypt. But, like the narratives of the northern Delta deserts, the sources we have are deeply layered in generations of authors and redactors, consciously constructing a life of Pachomius. The authors were motivated to create history and thereby ensure the community’s identity.<sup>122</sup>

Goehring has written extensively about the nature of village monasticism as a phenomenon that is more significant than scholars once believed: “Properly understood, Pachomian monasticism is not a product of the desert, but a form of village asceticism.”<sup>123</sup> The repositioning of Pachomius out of the desert and

into the cultivated land is an important component of nuancing the history of Egyptian monasticism. Do the accounts of Pachomius's reoccupation of the village share any themes with the famous accounts of the communities in the north? And in what ways do the descriptions provide a regional, Upper Egyptian story of monastic settlements?

Pachomius's story is unique in comparison to that at the other four sites discussed in this chapter, as we do not have any substantive archaeological remains for any of the six monasteries that he built or the three other monasteries that later joined his *koinonia*. Given the rich literary sources surrounding Pachomius and his importance in monastic history both in Egypt and in the wider Mediterranean monastic world, the lack of physical evidence is an unfortunate lacuna in the archaeology of monastic Egypt. Physical indications of monastic settlements and the presence of monastic travelers are certainly evident in the form of Christian graffiti and dipinti in the towns and villages, in such areas as Wadi Sheikh Ali, Abydos, Naqada, and even around Pbow, where Pachomius lived.<sup>124</sup> The only probable physical remains associated with Pachomius are linked to a small church at Faw al-Qibli, ancient Pbow, which was excavated in the late 1970s and 1980s.<sup>125</sup> Working in the late 1960s, Fernand Debono interpreted some mud brick walls at Pbow as possible monastic structures, but his excavation areas have been lost and subsequent explorations in the area by Bastiaan Van Elderen, and later Peter Grossmann, did not locate Debono's excavation areas.<sup>126</sup> Therefore, we do not have any extensive monastic remains available for archaeological study that would allow us to examine the physical realities in comparison with the monastic literature associated with Pachomius.

Let's begin by looking at the numerous stories of Pachomius's life to learn how he came to start a monastic movement that embraced the fringes but not the desert. The *Life of Pachomius* is preserved in several manuscripts in Coptic (Boharic and Sahidic), Greek, and Arabic.<sup>127</sup> The Boharic *Life* (also called the Great Coptic *Life of Our Father Pachomius*) provides the richest description of Pachomius's movements, building methods, and the settlements. On his release from conscription, Pachomius set out to live in service to others, but he was not yet a monk, according to the Boharic *Life*. He arrived at his first "deserted village" called Šeneset (Gk. Chenoboskion), which had only a "few inhabitants."<sup>128</sup> He walked down to a standing temple called Pmampesterposen, "the place of the baking of the bricks."<sup>129</sup> God directed Pachomius to "settle down here" and he planted both a vegetable garden and palm trees so that he could provide for himself and serve some villagers with his food.<sup>130</sup> The location was "scorched by the intensity of the heat," but it was not entirely abandoned, as other Christians lived there, and he was baptized in a local church.<sup>131</sup> As a result of Pachomius's generosity and charismatic Christian example, the population in the town began to increase, and the burden of community service caused Pachomius to spend a lot of time teaching others.<sup>132</sup> After a plague ravaged the

population and Pachomius tended to the sick and dying, he decided that his physical ministry was not suitable and he needed greater solitude. It was during this period of searching that Pachomius encountered Apa Palamon, a monk who lived on the outskirts of the village. Pachomius decided he would rather live with Palamon and away from the needs of the villagers. Before his departure, Pachomius entrusted the responsibility for his garden and date palm trees to an old monk. Despite Palamon's efforts to send Pachomius away, Pachomius convinced Palamon of his will to pursue the ascetic life and trained with the older monk for three months.<sup>133</sup>

The location of Palamon's dwelling is not clear in the *Lives* except that it is just beyond the village of Šeneset and near or on a mountain of the desert. Palamon was considered a father and teacher for a collection of other like-minded monastics who resided in the mountain; but only Pachomius lived with Palamon.<sup>134</sup> Palamon and Pachomius trained their bodies by carrying baskets of sand up and down the mountain.<sup>135</sup> Pachomius, being younger than Palamon, also ventured into the acacia forest and the "far desert" to practice his *askesis*.<sup>136</sup> In addition to the natural environment, Pachomius also used the abandoned tombs "filled with dead [bodies]" for prayer; he was so dedicated to this practice that the ground beneath him in the tomb would be muddy because of his perspiration.<sup>137</sup> Other monks resided nearby on the mountain, but only Pachomius appears to have traversed the desertscape. After Palamon experienced a severe illness, Pachomius took a further step to seek independence from Palamon and pursue his own path, but away from others at Šeneset. He left the mountain, crossed the desert, and arrived at the large acacia forest by the Nile: "Led by the spirit, he covered a distance of some ten miles and came to a desert village on the river's shore called Tabennesi."<sup>138</sup> It was here that Pachomius was instructed by a heavenly voice to reside.

A description of the desert on the east bank of the Nile tells more about Pachomius's ability to withstand difficulties than about the specific topography: "Around that mountain was a desert full of thorns where he was frequently sent to gather and carry wood. And since he was barefoot, he was sorely troubled for some time by the thorns which fixed themselves to his feet."<sup>139</sup> On another walk through the desert, he ended up near the deserted village of Tabennesi (Nag' al-Sabriyat). Here he heard from God while in prayer: "Stay here and build a monastery; for many will come to you to become monks."<sup>140</sup> Pachomius agrees to expand his dwelling in a "deserted village" to a monastery.<sup>141</sup> On his return to Palamon, Pachomius shared his account with his spiritual father. Together they built a cell at Tabennesi for Pachomius, and Palamon affirmed his ties to Pachomius as a "true son" so that they would visit each other after Pachomius remained in Tabennesi. The importance of mutual visitation was a tangible component of their relationship.<sup>142</sup> The fact that the site is called a "deserted village" in

all accounts, including the Arabic *Life*, suggests that Pachomius and other monks like him had found standing buildings or ruins, at the very least, and that the spaces could be repaired for habitation.<sup>143</sup> The ease of adding and repairing a mud brick structure would have made the processes relatively quick.

Soon afterwards Palamon died, and Pachomius returned to Šeneset to bury his teacher.<sup>144</sup> It is at this point that Pachomius was visited by his biological brother, who went north on learning of Palamon's death to live with Pachomius. The Sahidic *Life* records in an abbreviated form a significant disagreement between the two brothers, and in the Boharic *Life* we learn that the cause stems from a difference of opinion regarding whether to expand their monastic settlement and invite others to join them. It is a rich passage in early monastic hagiography about monastic construction and attitudes toward the built environment at Tabennesi: "One day, as they were building a part of their dwelling, Pachomius wanted to extend it because of the crowds that would come to him, but John's mind was that they should stay alone. When Pachomius saw that John was spoiling the wall they were building, he said to him, 'Stop being foolish!'"<sup>145</sup> The tension between the two brothers is expressed in the building itself and in how well the walls were made for the expansion. John's deliberate sabotage of the built wall reflected his displeasure with changing the two-person dwelling into one that would accommodate more monks and thus expand their settlement.

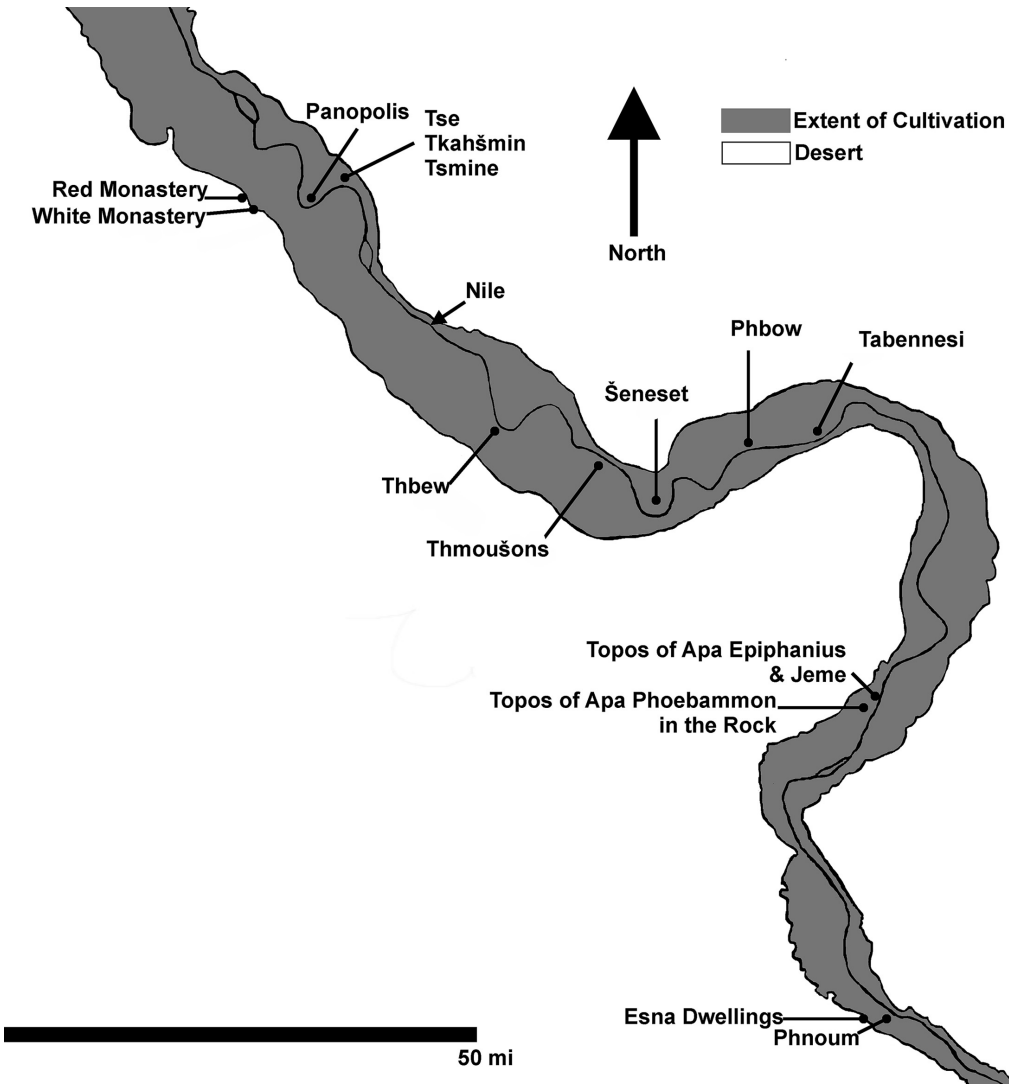
In the Sahidic *Life*, Pachomius's response to the difference of opinion involves an unusual account of a brick used for prayer. It demonstrates the use of materials and their response to the spiritual devotion of Pachomius. Apparently he stood on a mud brick for discomfort in an underground cell in order to deter sleepiness. After a night of fervent prayer, the brick had dissolved because of the great volume of Pachomius's perspiration. On a second night of prayer, necessitated by another bout of conflict with his brother, Pachomius prayed and perspired so much that the brick did not just break up but actually became a muddy pile.<sup>146</sup> This story reveals one of the rare instances of construction materials, such as mud bricks, being used in ascetic practice.<sup>147</sup> His prayers were effective, for many individuals began to visit the brothers, thereby proving Pachomius to be correct in his desire for expansion.

Individuals from the surrounding villages started to join Pachomius and build dwellings for themselves. Pachomius's fame was not tied to just Tabennesi, and within a span of a few years Pachomius ruled over nine monastic settlements spanning a distance of more than 220 kilometers of the Nile, from Panopolis to Latopolis. Pachomius's network was one of governance and a shared monastic rule – the *koinonia*. The nine monasteries that formed this network, in order from north to south, were Tse, Tkahšmin, Tsmine, Tbew, Tmoušons, Šeneset, Pbow, Tabennesi, and Phnoum. In

addition to these, Pachomius also formed two communities for women, stemming from a desire to build a community where his sister could practice monasticism.<sup>148</sup> Of the nine male communities, Pachomius and his brothers built six, sometimes only building a wall around existing structures. Unlike Macarius, whose authority extended only to those immediately living around him and his successors and did not cover the entirety of the 30-km-long stretch of the natron lakes, Pachomius's leadership spanned an extensive area of Upper Egypt. This does not mean he had jurisdiction over all the monastic communities that lay between and among the eleven communities. The accounts of those who elected to seek membership in Pachomius's *koinonia* reveal the prevalence of other monastic communities in the region. Even if we look more conservatively at the concentration of the five male monasteries around Tabennesi, Pachomius was traveling in a 55,000-hectare district, often by boat.<sup>149</sup> The fact of the matter is that the area Pachomius moved into was not entirely deserted and was already home to a variety of cities and villages along the Nile banks, associated with cultivated fields and easy access for river travel.

The account of how the nine men's monasteries came to be part of the *koinonia* is a complex story of building and incorporation. Tabennesi was the first Pachomian community built in a deserted village, likely meaning an area with low population and some vacant buildings that Pachomius and others could repurpose (see Fig. 35).<sup>150</sup> But then the population in Tabennesi started to increase; however, we are not told whether this is a natural increase in population after the plague or if Pachomius and his brothers were a point of attraction. He and his fellow monastics built a church for the lay community, and eventually even the monastic population increased enough that they needed their own sanctuary within the monastery. However, the "cramped" and "crowded" nature of Tabennesi forced Pachomius to pray for wisdom as to what he should do.<sup>151</sup> For reasons we are not told, further expansion at Tabennesi seemed out of the question. God answered Pachomius's request for guidance through a vision and provided a clear directive: "Go north to that deserted village lying downriver from you which is called Phbow (Pbow), and build there a monastery for yourself."<sup>152</sup> With this vision relating to the founding of Pbow, we have the first of the monasteries that formed Pachomius' *koinonia*, as he was no longer the head of a single community, but the leader of a nascent federation.

Similar to Tabennesi, Pbow was a deserted village and presumably had some standing mud brick structures and possibly even a few inhabitants. In examining the foundation passages and how the *Lives* present the villages, Goehring raises the question as to the literary nature of the phrase "deserted village" and whether it is a conscious choice by the authors to describe an area that had experienced depopulation: "While the Pachomian accounts suggest a



35. Map detailing the possible location of Pachomian monastic establishments in relationship to other monastic sites in Upper Egypt.

completely vacant village akin to the ghost towns of the old American West, it is possible that the label indicates nothing more than that a sufficient degree of vacancy and open space existed within the late antique villages to enable Pachomius to establish ascetic communities there.”<sup>153</sup> At the very least, there was vacancy in the village so that Pachomius was not challenging village or town authorities by adding settlements to the area. The deserted nature of the village may, therefore, also imply it was deserted by administrative secular authority. There seems to have been some ecclesiastical authority over the village, because the Boharic *Life* states that when Pachomius built the “celebration



room,” he needed the permission of the bishop in order to do so.<sup>154</sup> Whatever the state of Pbow, Pachomius also built a wall for the monastery and houses for the monks. The third monastery added to the *koinonia* involved the addition of an already preexisting monastic community at Šeneset.<sup>155</sup> Further north, and across the river on the west bank, Apa Jonas, the leader of the monastic community at Tmoušons, asked Pachomius for affiliation with the *koinonia*.<sup>156</sup> With the addition of Šeneset and Tmoušons, Pachomius now had four monasteries in a 400-square-kilometer area under his leadership.

The second wave of expansion took Pachomius’s vision significantly further downriver, about 80 kilometers from Tmoušons to Tkahšmin, which is located near the city of Panopolis (Coptic Šmin).<sup>157</sup> Although it is not described as a desert village, the brothers traveled down the Nile to the site to build the monastery and dwelling places (pl. *mna shope*) for the monks. On completion, the community was given the name Tse. The sixth settlement to join the *koinonia* was facilitated by a letter from Arios, a bishop from Šmin.<sup>158</sup> The full participation of the brothers even included Pachomius, who carried the clay used for making the bricks on his back, just like the others.<sup>159</sup> The story of this construction project takes on an interesting turn when a segment of the population in Šmin regarded Pachomius’s building activities as a threat and vandalized the construction site at night, “throw[ing] down what the brothers had built up during the day.”<sup>160</sup> In the end, God instructed an angel to provide a protective barrier around the building site and wall with a ring of fire, protecting the site from further vandalism. The monastery of Tbew was the seventh monastery incorporated into the *koinonia*.<sup>161</sup> Following the pattern of earlier existing monasteries that sought affiliation with Pachomius, Tbew was the last of the five core monasteries in the immediate 50-kilometer stretch of the Nile, running north from Tabennesi, to join the *koinonia*.

The last two monastic foundations are discussed in the Boharic *Life*, but only mentioned in passing in the Greek *Life*.<sup>162</sup> Pachomius receives divine directives for the last two settlements at Tsmine, near Šmin, and Phnoum, near the mountain of Sne (Gk. Latopolis). These monasteries create the north boundary (Tsmine along with the monasteries at Šmin and Tse) and the south boundary of Pachomius’s administrative presence in Upper Egypt. Tsmine’s building program was similar to the others as he “finished it well, like all the other monasteries.”<sup>163</sup> It seemed important enough that he transferred Petronios from Tbew to the region of Panopolis to supervise the three monasteries located there: Tsmine, Šmin, and Tse. All three had been built under Pachomius’s hand.

The building of the monastic community at Phnoum by the mountain of Sne, 150 kilometers upriver from Pbow, was extremely far away from the heart of the *koinonia*. A final vision directed Pachomius to go south and organize another monastery.<sup>164</sup> The final building project was not without its problems. The author of the Boharic *Life* includes a brief report on the tensions

between Pachomius and locals. In this case a bishop, who rightly may have seen Pachomius's presence in his area as a challenge to his authority, organizes the protest. The erection of the monastic wall by Pachomius becomes a visual source of conflict for the inhabitants of Sne, who shared the same dislike for monastic construction as the inhabitants of Šmin. The passage demonstrates the symbolic power inherent in new boundary walls as a challenge to present authority in the region:

When he had begun building the wall of the monastery, the bishop of that diocese got a large crowd together; they set out and rushed at [Pachomius] to drive him out of the place. The man of God our father Pachomius withstood the danger until the Lord scattered them and they fled before his face. After that he built the monastery, a very large one, and finished it well, in full keeping with the rules of the eight other monasteries he had built.<sup>165</sup>

The final description of the ninth monastery states that Pachomius had in fact built all the others, when in reality the *Lives* clarify that he built only six of the nine. The other three became members either through self-election into the *koinonia* or by donation. The later conflicts in Šmin and Phnoum therefore highlight the sharp difference between Pachomius's first monasteries built in the deserted villages where ecclesiastical authorities and local administration did not interfere with his efforts, perhaps owing to the lax attitude toward new building projects in Late Antique Egypt.

The foundation accounts of the village monasteries of the Pachomian *koinonia* provide a rich and variegated account of the many ways spaces became monastic outside of the desertscape. Despite the hagiographical tendency of these sources to commemorate Pachomius and his immediate successors, Theodore and Horsiesius, the stories provide several important components that reflect a generalized landscape of Upper Egypt. Pachomius was always commanded to build monasteries by God, and when other monastic communities desired his leadership, it was because their own leader recognized the benefits of the *koinonia*. The six monasteries Pachomius built included two sparsely populated villages (Tabennesi and Pbow), two cities (Šmin and Phnoum), and two areas located near the same city of Šmin (Tse and Tsmine). In the case of the three affiliated monasteries, two had very different origins: Šeneset was a loosely inhabited village like Tabennesi and Pbow, while Tbew was built on a wealthy family's estate.

When comparing the Pachomian foundation narrative material, whose complex history includes purpose-built structures and the occupation of abandoned buildings and monasteries, with the material from Middle Egypt and the Great Desert of Sketis, two parallels appear. First, the literary traditions use visions and dreams as mechanisms for legitimizing the actions of founders and foreshadowing the success of their settlement choices. Pachomius had received

the first indication of his future success on the night of his baptism with a dream. He was given a surrealist image of how God's pleasure with him would be a blessing for those around him. As dew fell from heaven upon his head, it condensed in his right hand simultaneously, transforming into a honeycomb. This sweet sign of blessing and favor – his honeycombed right hand – fell to the ground and spread honey over the earth.<sup>166</sup> His blessedness spreads throughout the land of Egypt and beyond.

Another similarity between the monastic narrative sources is the importance of the generalized landscape and its topography with the physical markers of the monastic settlements. The deserts, caves, mountains, forests, villages, and the Nile appear as real places for monastic living. Towers, dwellings, and walls mark the texts as signs of monastics laying claim to the land. As athletes and soldiers of Christ, monks could quickly build a mud brick structure or repair a wall, which was vandalized in the night, with the end goal of fulfilling God's vision. If they were faithful in building, God would reside in the new locations and bless the community.

The one significant difference between the village monastic settlement narratives of Pachomius and the accounts of the desert dwellings is the importance of displacing demons through habitation. In the case of Sketis and the regions around Nitria and Kellia, the natural environment was certainly inhabited, but not by bishops, villagers, or administrative officials. While we know that miners were living in the Delta, the narratives present the only real threats in the deserts as nonhuman. Demons could hide in the desert, camouflaged by the caves, quarries, and mountains. The monastic settlement then forces demons to become beings without homes as the desert and its associated areas transform into heavenly realms of angels on earth.

Village monastic narratives do not dwell on demons and their locations because people already inhabited the villages they wished to live in. The dangers were different in village monasteries: monks refusing to follow the coenobitic rule, family members who continually visit, and even bishops who tear down walls. Pachomius and his followers carved out different spaces for themselves in the towns. They remodeled abandoned buildings as others remodeled quarries. In the end, building near others who did not share the monastic goal of the ascetic life could result in significant conflict, just like the conflict with demons in the desert. In all cases, the sources do not focus on the spatial configuration of the settlements, or how monastic buildings differed from nonmonastic structures.

### *Apollo Builds a Monastery for Phib in Bawit*

The monastic settlement of Bawit, located 310 kilometers south of Wadi al-Natrun and 250 kilometers north of Tabennesi, is in the heart of Middle Egypt,



36. Wall painting from Chapel 56 at Bawit showing three monks: Apa Makarios, Apa Moses the Freeman, and Apa Jeremias.

and is the site of the Monastery of Apa Apollo. In contrast to Sketis's, whose reputation spread widely outside of Egypt to the Mediterranean world, Apollo's community was less well known, perhaps because of its southern location and the fact that fewer foreign, Late Antique Christians traveled to it. The Monastery of Apa Apollo's location should not, however, suggest it was small or insignificant. The central built community covered an area of 40 hectares and its walls were painted with the faces of numerous monks who may have once lived at the community in the sixth and later centuries (see Fig. 36). If the remote cliff dwellings are included in the area, the community expands to an area of 78 hectares, although not all of the land was used for building. Bawit is roughly half the size of Al-Ashmunein (Gk. Hermopolis Magna) (65 hectares), one of the largest cities in Upper Egypt for this period. This comparison illustrates that Bawit was a medium-sized town in its own right. Given Bawit's size and significance as a major settlement in Middle Egypt, how does its foundation narrative history contribute to a history of monastic authors crafting a generalized landscape, which overshadowed the reality of the actual monastic landscape?

The earliest account to reference Apollo as a founder is the late fourth-century *History of the Monks in Egypt*. The anonymous traveler who visited Egypt recounted a foundation narrative of the settlement by Apollo in

the Hermopolite nome. While not the main intent of the text, the account includes the evolution of Apollo's community from solitary dwellings to a thriving community that welcomed foreign visitors such as a pilgrim from Palestine.<sup>167</sup> The pilgrim's report states that Apollo was a leader of 500 monks, who lived in desert hermitages at the foot of a mountain.<sup>168</sup> During Apollo's eightieth year (385 or 388), he founded his own "great monastery" that likely was the collective term for the monastic houses.<sup>169</sup> The *History of the Monks in Egypt* presents an oral history of Apollo's community, beginning with the monk's withdrawal from the world and a forty-year sojourn in the desert. This period ended with a divine call to return to the "inhabited land" in order to assemble a group of followers.<sup>170</sup> Apollo established his dwelling in a cave at the foot of the mountain that adjoined the "settled region."<sup>171</sup> Here he lived with five other monks and his gifts as a healer attracted other ascetics who lived in hermitages around him.<sup>172</sup> The *History of the Monks in Egypt* states that these individuals shared a "common life" with each other and ate at a common table.<sup>173</sup> As a Latin source, the topographical indicators are few: a mountain, a desert, and the inhabited land. Given the nature of the source from an oral tradition, it is difficult to use this account to establish a firm ecological history of the area. The foundation account of the monastic settlement in the region of Hermopolis and the charismatic personality of Apollo are at the heart of the story. The environmental accuracy of the description is not necessarily important to the author or his readers. The focal point is Apollo and the blessings he could offer as a living angel.<sup>174</sup>

Numerous Coptic texts collected from the nome of Hermopolis speak of a *topos* of Apa Apollo in the Hermopolite nome. Sarah J. Clackson translated and edited several of the documentary texts from the region with the objective of attributing them to either of the monasteries of Apollo at Bawit or at Titkooh. Clackson's reading and analysis led her to conclude that there may be other monasteries dedicated to Apollo in the area.<sup>175</sup> In most cases the documentary sources do not speak at all to the question of foundation, narrative stories, or the spatial configuration of the settlements. For this information we must turn to a later source to see how the community memorialized their founder and how the community continued to elevate Apollo as a spiritual leader whose physical dwellings exuded sacredness.

The Sahidic Coptic *Life of Phib* is a hagiography chronicling the life of Apollo's closet companion Phib and their links with a settlement at Titkooh. It is a tenth-century *Life* and makes it clear that Apollo is the patron for a large monastic foundation for the region.<sup>176</sup> In comparing the fourth-century Latin travelogue with the later *Life*, Apollo's authority has extended from a story of solitary sojourn to a more detailed history explaining why Apollo was called to return to the settled land, how he moved between the desert lands, and

what the general topography of the area consisted of. The attractiveness of the ascetic lifestyle practiced by Apollo and Phib is the reason given to explain why others wished to reside with them; the landscape has little attraction, for it is Apollo and Phib whose actions *within* the landscape demonstrate they are worthy of admiration.<sup>177</sup>

The *Life of Phib* begins with the partnership between Apollo and Phib pursuing the monastic life together “on the mountain (*toou*) of Titkooh.”<sup>178</sup> Tim Vivian observes that the Coptic use of *toou* can mean either a geophysical mountain or a monastic community.<sup>179</sup> If this is the case, then the reference to the mountain in the *Life* could carry dual meaning and therefore limit the topographical veracity of the foundation narrative. The story comes to us from Papohe, who was a younger monastic brother of the two saints. They spent a year in one location on a mountain (*toou*), but then traveled in all areas that were “completely mountainous, like wild beasts.”<sup>180</sup> Here the reference may echo the ideas of 2 Maccabees 5:27 in which Judas Maccabees withdrew to “a desert place, and there lived amongst wild beasts in the mountains with his company: and they continued feeding on herbs, that they might not be partakers of pollution.”<sup>181</sup>

After a word from the Lord, the three men elect to relocate again, this time by Tahrouj, the modern town of Dayrut. They went to a “mountain of the desert opposite a village” and “found some holes in the rock there and made some small dwellings.”<sup>182</sup> The monastic settlement is in proximity to a village with the desert mountain cliffs nearby. The use of rock holes or caves evokes the language of the faithful in Hebrews 11, and the description makes it clear that the monastics were adapting the natural environment for habitation, just as Macarius had in Sketis. However, unlike Macarius and his survey of the land, Apollo does not seem to realize until later that the community lacks easy access to water. He asks Papohe to dig into the “earth” and see what God will provide.<sup>183</sup> A natural spring was eventually converted into a well for long-term use, and the presence of the water is described in the *Life* as a sign of God’s favor.

The men then left for a visit to a monk living in the north when they encountered other monastics living on the mountain of Titkooh. The location is specifically described as a place where “God granted his blessing for eternal life.”<sup>184</sup> A further indication of the mountain’s unique qualities is that Phib died here and the other brothers buried him on the mountain. Apollo and Papohe continued on to see Apa Pamin’s community, and then Apollo received a vision from Christ that urged him to return to Titkooh. The narrative grants Apollo authority over the community and places Phib’s body as a further sign that the place is tied physically to Apollo through his affection for Phib. Just as Macarius and Pachomius were given the land as a spiritual inheritance, so too Apollo heard: “stay there, for my Father has given it to you.”<sup>185</sup>

Apollo resisted the divine invitation from Christ and eschewed the offer to be tied to the world. Christ's response to Apollo reflects a degree of sympathy for Apollo and other monks who did not wish to be tied to a particular location. In the end, the vision concludes with an elaborate discussion of the architecture of the settlement placing Christ as the general contractor and Apollo as the subcontractor. Christ decrees: "I am with you everywhere; I will give you a great and famous name, and all the people will hear of you and will come to your site for this gift and will worship at your holy place ... See now, I have shown you everything that will happen to you in all the designs of my Father ... I will place great blessings upon your sanctuary in every way and I will have your children called the lamp-bearers of Christ."<sup>186</sup> The holy *topos* is thereby a sanctified place built as a blessing both for God and for Apollo.

The importance of Apollo as a known monastic and his spiritual children born in the mountain reinforces the importance of the desert as a place of fertility and spiritual birth. The same theme of spiritual fertility appears in the Sketis with Macarius as the mother of the monastic communities in Lower Egypt. The mountain as a holy residence with fecundity appears later in the voice of the brothers who rejoice in Apollo's arrival: "This is the mountain of the Lord, the exalted mountain, the established mountain, the fertile mountain. This is the mountain where God has wished to dwell forever. This is the house of God, the dwelling place of the righteous."<sup>187</sup> The monks build a small church over the body of Phib, but it is not sufficient for the needs of those who will eventually come. Christ appears again and directs Apollo to build an even bigger church. In this vision, Christ actually walks the grounds of the site with Apollo, telling the monk its exact measurements. Neither the dwellings of the monks nor the settlement are described in any detail. The *Life of Phib* recounts only the story of two church constructions and the importance of Apollo as the community's leader and Phib's body as a pillar.

The *Life of Phib* and the *History of the Monks in Egypt* therefore provide a broad foundation narrative for Apollo's community. Specific details of the unique features of the Middle Egyptian landscape are missing or entirely omitted. Apollo's community was much further inland, not associated with earlier mining activities, and not linked to any earlier pharaonic or temporary settlements. The importance of salt for Sketis and Nitria makes the natural resource an easy object to highlight as it effortlessly resonates with biblical imagery. Another difference with the Lower Egyptian narrative tradition is that Macarius and Amoun were monastic pioneers. In the case of Apollo and Phib, they were not the first to battle desert demons – they were building on the foundation of earlier, unnamed monks in the region. The difficult work of expelling evil beings had already taken place, but the mountain was not as beautiful and fertile as it could be without the presence and leadership of Apollo. The rhetorical strategy used by the author of the *Life* showcases Apollo's residency

as the direct catalyst for God's pleasure with the monastic community and his decision to reside with the monks. By following the architectural plans and vision of Christ, Apollo was granted the status as the namesake for the settlement. Apollo's leadership at Bawit warranted his elevation in the community's memory as a monastic builder in the late fourth century. However, his community also vanished, like Kellia, after the ninth century, not to be seen as a center of monasticism until Jean Clédat's work in 1901.

### *Shenoute's Monastic Community in Sohag*

Further south in Upper Egypt and west of the modern towns of Sohag and Akhmim, a collection of monastic settlements sits on the west bank of the Nile.<sup>188</sup> In the fourth century a group of men gathered to live together in small communal monastic settlements, while another group selected more modest dwellings in the nearby escarpment. To the south, near ancient Athribis, a group of women lived together in a village monastery.<sup>189</sup> Despite the presence of the Pachomian monasteries on the east bank at Šmin, Tse, and Tsmine, the west bank communities were independent and not subject to Pachomian rule. Together the west bank monastic settlements formed a large congregation or federation (*sunagōgē*), whose legacy was shaped by the leadership and teachings of Shenoute of Atripe (348–465), the community's third leader and namesake for the Monastery of Apa Shenoute (Ar. Dayr Anba Shinūdah).<sup>190</sup>

The Monastery of Apa Shenoute is situated in the ancient Panopolite nome, and the capital of the nome was the city of Akhmim, located on the east bank of the Nile.<sup>191</sup> Late Antique documentary evidence paints a complex Roman district that had active pagan cults and an ever-growing Christian population, very similar to the situation throughout much of late Roman Egypt.<sup>192</sup> The closest pharaonic site to the monastic settlement is Athribis, located 2 kilometers to the south, and this would become the site for a women's community under Shenoute's authority.<sup>193</sup> Archaeological remains were visible at the site of the Monastery of Apa Shenoute in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Egyptologist William Flinders Petrie appointed an assistant to survey the area over a two-day period in the early twentieth century and deemed the material to be from the period of Constantine and a monastery, without any explanation for this interpretation.<sup>194</sup> Until recent excavations, the knowledge of Shenoute's legacy was known primarily from the *Life of Shenoute*, his place in the *Synaxarion*, and early editions of some of Shenoute's writings, totaling more than 4,000 pages. Like those of other monastic founders, Shenoute's legacy was shaped by stories that often focused on the extreme differences in his actions from those of others, casting him as an anomalous actor in monastic history. As we will see, he shares much more with his fellow monastic leaders than once thought, and he is taking his place among other founders of Egyptian monasticism.





37. The church of St. Shenoute at the White Monastery in Sohag, Egypt.

According to the *Life of Shenoute*, he entered the monastic life as a child and was instructed in asceticism by his uncle Pjol.<sup>195</sup> By his mid-thirties he assumed the role of archimandrite, or abbot, and remained as head of the diverse community for an impressive span of eighty years. During his tenure he shaped a unique communal monasticism that was entirely his own. His community was far more modest in area than the communities under Pachomian control, but this does not mean his role in Egyptian monasticism was any less significant. In fact, there are several features of Shenoute's life and his contribution to the monastic movement that make him equally important in the development of Late Antique monasticism.

The monastery he established came to be known in medieval Egypt as al-Dayr al-Abyad, or the White Monastery. The title reflects the centrality of the most recognized architectural structure at the settlement even today: a massive ashlar masonry, limestone church, measuring 37 m × 75 m (see Fig. 37).<sup>196</sup> Built by Shenoute around 455,<sup>197</sup> the church stands as a physical testament of his ability to accumulate financial resources and labor to build one of the largest monastic churches of the fifth century, similar in scale to the Pachomian church at Faw Qibli.<sup>198</sup> The church includes a trilobed sanctuary, numerous

carved niches, pharaonic spolia, and figural paintings, and its exterior bears similarities to an ancient pharaonic temple.<sup>199</sup> The church is one of the best-preserved Late Antique Christian monuments, only after the church at Dayr Anba Bishay, the Monastery of Apa Bishay, and known now as Dayr al-Aḥmar, the Red Monastery, located 3 kilometers north.<sup>200</sup> The Monastery of Apa Bishay was part of Shenoute's federation, and therefore it is not surprising that the northern community built its own monumental church fifty years later and as a mirror of Shenoute's church, but on a smaller scale.<sup>201</sup> After Shenoute's church was built, it served as a continual point of reference in his writings as a tangible example for instruction for his monastic and lay audiences. Caroline Schroeder illustrates how Shenoute highlights "the building as a symbol and exemplar of ascetic purity," thereby elevating the church as a perpetual reminder of his and God's teachings regarding proper Christian and monastic conduct.<sup>202</sup> Given the enormous size of the structure, Shenoute also needed to contextualize the beauty of the monument within acceptable ascetic parameters.<sup>203</sup> Shenoute justified such a magnificent display of wealth to the community, as Ariel López argues, as an "earned" blessing from God for the unquestioned "ascetic discipline" of the faithful members.<sup>204</sup> The church of the White Monastery reflects both in physical form and in rhetorical strategies, within his writings, the profound impact of Shenoute on the legacy of the monastic community outside of Sohag.

The community at the White Monastery offers evidence for studying the longevity of monastic occupation from Late Antiquity until the late medieval period, when the monastery was abandoned, and is currently the focus for a major archaeological study by the Yale Monastic Archaeology Project.<sup>205</sup> The historical record is silent as to what factors led to the demise of the community. Sometime in the Ottoman period, Christian families built mud brick homes within the very walls of the great Late Antique church, using the very sturdy walls of the edifice as a protective enclosure for their community. The large church continued to serve the Christians in the area with at least one priest until the late twentieth century. The modern adaptive reuse of the structure was still observed by several visitors to the site until the 1980s, when mud brick homes were removed and a small community of monks was relocated to the site by Pope Shenoute III to reactivate the monastery. Today the community at the White Monastery thrives with the expansion of numerous buildings, a rising monastic community, and a popular feast day in July commemorating the life of Shenoute.

The sources for examining Shenoute and his community in the late fourth and fifth centuries are extensive and varied. We are fortunate to have fragments of more than 200 of Shenoute's sermons and teachings and a smaller collection of his successor, Besa.<sup>206</sup> Shenoute's writings offer the largest collection of Sahidic Coptic material for the study of Late Antiquity.<sup>207</sup> His writings

include sermons, letters, and monastic instructions. Based on Stephen Emmel's careful reconstruction of the highly dispersed Shenoutean fragments, we can speak of eight volumes of *Discourses*, which include primarily his letters and homilies, and nine volumes of the *Canons*, a collection that offer monastic instruction to his diverse homosocial community.<sup>208</sup> In the case of his homilies, Shenoute wrote not just to a monastic community, but rather to a mixed community of lay and monastic listeners, who gathered at the church to hear his teachings. The central reason why Shenoute is not well known is that his works were not transmitted as part of the narratives of early Egyptian monasticism that were circulated in the Byzantine Eastern Mediterranean and in the Medieval Christian West. Thus the Desert Fathers of Kellia and Sketis, along with Pachomius, far overshadow the stories of Shenoute's activities as a foundational leader for Upper Egyptian monasticism. Soon critical editions of his works will replace early twentieth century editions to bring Shenoute more into the pantheon of Egyptian monastic leaders. Scholarship on Shenoute over the last two decades has effectively illustrated his value for the study of Late Antiquity, the rise of monasticism, the value of Coptic sources for historical examination, and Shenoute's place in the canon of monasticism.<sup>209</sup>

A second source for examining Shenoute's foundation tradition is the collection of Sahidic letters and sermons by Besa (d. 474). They are far fewer in number in comparison to those of Shenoute's, but they have been published.<sup>210</sup> Although Emmel identified a few of the Besa letters to be written by Shenoute, the bulk of the fragments are Besa's and present an opportunity to assess the legacy of Shenoute's rhetorical strategies for presenting the built environment and its landscape to his audiences.<sup>211</sup> Akin to Shenoute's *Discourses*, the majority of Besa's writings were directed toward the monastics he supervised and in particular address violations of the community's rules. In addition to the amazingly rich corpus of monastic intellectual and theological sources from Shenoute and Besa, a fifth-century Boharic *Life of Shenoute*, attributed to but not written by Besa, offers a hagiographical presentation of Shenoute that includes familiar rhetorical themes.<sup>212</sup> Shenoute and Besa's works provide a unique opportunity to examine monastic construction and the development of the foundation narrative embedded within the *Life of Shenoute*. Together, the sources allow us to observe the immediate construction of a tradition regarding Shenoute's role as a builder and his prominence as a monastic leader within Upper Egypt.<sup>213</sup>

Unlike the other founders, whose biographies must be reconstructed from the much later hagiographical sources, the writings of Shenoute and Besa offer near-contemporary sources for writing a biography of Shenoute.<sup>214</sup> Shenoute began his life as a writer around 380, in his early thirties.<sup>215</sup> He was still a monk at the time when incidents of severe impropriety prompted him to confront and address his superior, the archimandrite Ebonh, to pursue more effective

action.<sup>216</sup> Shenoute was dissatisfied with how Ebonh handled violations of the monastic rule, apparently related to sexual misconduct and the stealing of food.<sup>217</sup> In two letters from *Canon 1*, Shenoute infused his language with biblical metaphors to express his intense concern for the impact of sinful actions left unchecked in the community.<sup>218</sup> So strong were his convictions that he imposed a permanent separation between himself and the community. He removed himself from the communal setting to a desert dwelling place – from this location, Shenoute could ensure he was far from the sin-infused community below. The desert (*daie*) offered a space that was free from pollution, for Shenoute believed, as Schroeder explains, that buildings could and did reflect the “purity of the monks’ bodies and souls.”<sup>219</sup>

In his early complaints against the community and Ebonh, Shenoute leveled criticism against the archimandrite regarding building projects. Shenoute addressed the community as a whole, imploring them to recognize the misplaced priorities and urged them to replace a love for things with a love for the poor and the needy:

Stop, congregation (*sunagōgē*), taking all that is left over to you due to the blessing of God and spending it on buildings (*topos*) and demolitions, the wages of architects and craftsmen, the luxuries and other things for the workers, so they knead and bring clay and carry bricks to build beautiful and fair houses (*ēi*)! Unless you had a surplus of wealth, you would not take care of all these things that are useless in the moment of your need (i.e., the final judgment).<sup>220</sup>

As a monk, Shenoute observed the community participating in construction projects and knew that the money to underwrite the project came from gifts provided by the community’s lay supporters.<sup>221</sup> He observed the need to hire laborers, the process of brick making, and the overall architectural planning involved. Not only were buildings made, but some were substantially remodeled in order to make way for new construction. Such activity, in Shenoute’s view, further reflected the damaged state of the community under Ebonh’s leadership – the archimandrite had allowed the devil’s desires to take root inside the garden and destroyed its beauty. By retreating to a desert location, Shenoute spared himself from watching and hearing the sounds of the very tangible mismanagement of God’s ideal plan.

The strong opinions evinced in Shenoute’s letters from 380 are moderated in the later writings by the 107-year-old Shenoute as he celebrates the beauty and blessings of his building projects during his leadership as archimandrite. Nearly seventy-five years had passed since he first retreated to the desert in protest. The sermons in *Canon 7* reflect Shenoute’s thoughts as a leader with several decades of experience. In the first five sermons found in *Canon 7* we learn of Shenoute’s building of the “Great House” (*neinoč nht*), the limestone church of the White Monastery, along with additional monastic structures,

houses, and washing areas.<sup>222</sup> In the sermon *This Great House*, Shenoute spoke directly of the roughly five months of construction of the church. He highlighted the speed of building as a reflection of God's blessing on the work he carried out.<sup>223</sup> Emmel has convincingly argued that the sermon marked the inauguration of the church for use.<sup>224</sup> It is fortunate that we have both the built space and Shenoute's reflections on that space available to assess how he presented the built environment to his audiences.

Throughout the first five sermons of *Canon 7*, Shenoute established his sense of place, and thus illustrates his vision of the monastic landscape that he wishes his community to adopt. He linked places to sacredness (purity or holiness); buildings, just like bodies, could become the dwelling places of God.<sup>225</sup> Equally so, dwelling places could be inhabited either by God or the devil and thus everyone should diligently monitor one's actions within the community.<sup>226</sup> The idea that actions create and foster a sense of holiness nicely accords with Lefebvre's theories that generic places are transformed into specific spaces through socially constructed beliefs. Shenoute drew on 1 Peter 2:4 and Isaiah 61:4 to invoke the language that humans are spiritual houses, made from tangible materials, just like the built environments they live in, and they can be abandoned because of neglect or sin of those living *within* the space: "But as for the soul, and also the body or the whole person of those who became desert (*daie*) and who were laid waste (*šōf*), it will be said about them instead of places and cities, 'They will build up the deserted places. As for the ones who first laid waste the cities that are desert, they will renew them forever, and for generations.'" <sup>227</sup> Building alone did not earn God's favor; rather, it was the nature of the individuals in the building: "It is not the ornamentation of the house and the writings that are inscribed on its edifications and its beams that will reconcile us to Jesus if we destroy his members but the souls that become ornaments by purification and that are inscribed in this single commonwealth of the angels."<sup>228</sup> This passage illustrates Shenoute's modified language of what the built environment could mean. Whereas once he would have seen construction as a form of misplaced priorities, as a much more experienced observer of the significance of the built environment for spiritual living, he was able to construct a church and expand his monastery to the glorification of God.

When we look at Shenoute's successor, Besa, we see little trace or commemoration of Shenoute as the monastic architect. However, this may be due in large part to the fact that Besa's letters and sermons are few in comparison to those of Shenoute. In a sermon addressing theft within and outside of the monastery, Besa reports on gossip that might be raised about the community's members by saying those outside will wonder why "the people of Apa Shenoute" are acting in sinful ways.<sup>229</sup> This is the only explicit reference to the monastic population as Shenoute's, and thus may indicate the emerging tradition to elevate the community's identity firmly to Shenoute as the founder.

It is therefore not surprising that the most fully developed sense of Shenoute as a builder appears in the encomium on Shenoute, the *Life of Shenoute*, where we can observe the development of the community's later identification with Shenoute after his eighty years as archimandrite. The date of the composition of the *Life* is difficult to pin down. As Nina Lubomierski has argued, Besa, who is attributed with authorship, could not have written the *Life*, although some Sahidic fragments exist that suggest some form of an early hagiographic tradition existed in the century after Shenoute's death. Later Boharic, Ethiopic, Syriac, and Arabic versions exist and offer fuller and more elaborate recounting of Shenoute's deeds while archimandrite.<sup>230</sup> The *Life* also shows the impact of Shenoute's legacy for the subsequent generations, as it would be read on his feast day in July.

With the *Life of Shenoute* we can observe similar patterns of constructing the monastic landscape through those who lived and experienced the buildings associated with the community, perhaps generations after the life of Shenoute. The accounts allow us to think in comparative terms with the accounts associated with Pachomius and with Macarius. The author of the *Life* prepares his audience for Shenoute's ascendancy to greatness as a monk and a builder in the opening story about his selection for the monastic life as a young boy. An angel appears to Shenoute's uncle, Pjol, while the boy sleeps, and states: "Truly he will be a righteous and illustrious man, and after him, no-one like him will arise in any country. He will build a monastery, and to everyone who enters his place will he be a comfort and a protection; his community will endure for [all] generations."<sup>231</sup> Shenoute's holiness provides him with the capacity to build the monastery and to create a thriving monastic legacy. In the next scene, Shenoute hears that he will become "archimandrite of the whole world," further solidifying his future as a leader for the community and a role model for all monastic communities.<sup>232</sup>

Two other stories from the *Life* relate specifically to Shenoute's building projects and the two most prominent Late Antique features at the site of the White Monastery still visible today: a red brick well and the limestone church of Shenoute. The first story recounts Shenoute's authority over the natural environment and building materials. After workmen began digging the well, part of it fell onto the workmen. Given the depth of excavation needed, the incident warranted Shenoute's attention and he was summoned immediately to the scene. On his arrival, he pierced the wall of the well with a palm branch and a tree sprouted and helped stabilize the well; "[f]rom that day to this, the well has never moved again."<sup>233</sup> The story follows an account of piercing in which Shenoute created a hole in a rock for a ship mooring. The rock, like the well, was also still visible at the site as a sign of Shenoute's miraculous interactions with the natural world – he could pierce rock with his bare fingers and he could stabilize the walls of a great well by planting a palm branch. Together

the stories fuse Shenoute to the physical artifacts of the monastery and its identity – a theme that occurs again and again in hagiographical sources.

The construction account of the White Monastery's church occurs shortly after the recounting of the pierced rock and unmoved well. The narrative begins with a familiar setting between Christ the architect and a monastic contractor. Christ gave a clear directive to Shenoute: "Arise, and measure out the church and the foundation of the monastery, and build a sanctuary in my name and yours."<sup>234</sup> The church and monastery are not Shenoute's glory alone but also Christ's, for together they will share in the blessings of the building project. Shenoute also receives his divine endorsement as the founder of the monastery, despite the fact that he had two predecessors, Pjol and Ebonh. However, Shenoute did not have the resources to undertake such a large campaign. Christ directed the archimandrite to go to his "dwelling-place in the desert" and pick up anything along the way, as it will help fund the building project. The author of the *Life*, perhaps anticipating that his monastic audience would know that Antony had a similar encounter along a desert path in which he needed to resist the devil's snares, has Christ reassure Shenoute that it is not the "devil's doing" but rather Christ's and he will provide the means to "build the church and the monastery in accordance with [his] will."<sup>235</sup> After a night of prayer in the inner desert, Shenoute walked back to the monastery and found a container with gold or some other item that would help underwrite the expense for the church construction.<sup>236</sup> The story concludes with a further reminder to the audience that Christ and Shenoute worked together to plan the church and the monastery: "They went off together and laid out the foundation of the sanctuary. My father then arranged for the workmen and craftsmen, the stonemasons and the carpenters. They worked on the church, and with the Lord helping them in all that they did with everything they needed, they completed it."<sup>237</sup> Shenoute fulfilled the prophecy that he would build a great monastery and church with divine assistance, much as Apollo was directed at Bawit.

By the mid-sixth century, Shenoute's place as a monastic founder was well established in Egyptian monastic writing, as exhibited in the *Panegyric of Abraham of Farshut*. Abraham would be the "last Coptic orthodox (non-Chalcedonian) archimandrite" before the federation's demise.<sup>238</sup> In the *Panegyric*, Abraham is positioned as a "good son"<sup>239</sup> following the laws and guidance of his "holy fathers of the federation (*koinōnia*):" Apa Pachomius, Apa Petronius, and Apa Shenoute of the "mountain" (*toou*) of Atripe.<sup>240</sup> The inclusion of Shenoute was not insignificant, but deeply intentional, for "after the demise of the Pachomian federation during the middle of the sixth century," writes James Goehring, "the federation of Shenoute filled its place in the history of Upper Egyptian Coptic orthodox coenobitic monasticism."<sup>241</sup> The hagiographical tradition points toward a need within the history of Upper Egyptian monasticism to lay

claim to Shenoute. The laws that he and Pachomius established formed a foundation that Abraham was compelled to follow and maintain.<sup>242</sup> In describing “our ancient fathers and forefathers, that is, Apa Pachomius and Apa Shenoute and Apa Petronius and Apa Horsiesius, the fathers of the world,” the author of the *Panegyric* was not merely grafting Shenoute into a Pachomian legacy, but rather offering an institutional history of the region that did not differentiate between “Pachomian” and “Shenoutean” monasticism.<sup>243</sup> While Pachomius’s community vanished, the two male monasteries of Shenoute’s federation continued for at least another 600 years. The author of the *Panegyric* contributed to the crafting of an Upper Egyptian landscape with two equally significant founders: Pachomius and Shenoute.

### CONCLUSION

The generalized monastic landscape as found in the literary sources discussed in this chapter is a carefully constructed set of stories to explain how the first monastics settled the wilderness, whether it be a mountain, a cave, or a sparsely populated town. The distinctness of where monks built was never in doubt. In many cases, the desert was a near place, and the monastic settlements were visible. The account of Elias, who lived in the desert of Antinoe, nicely illustrates the generalized divisions: “He was famous for having spent seventy years in the terrible desert. No description can do justice to that rugged desert in the mountain where Elias had his hermitage, never coming down to the inhabited region. The path which one took to go to him was so narrow that those who pressed on could only just follow its track with rough crags towering on either side. He had his seat under a rock in a cave.”<sup>244</sup> The account illustrates the fierceness of the desert as a land to be feared and one that is not considered viable for habitation. It stands in juxtaposition to the inhabited areas. The visitors in this story know how to find Elias, and the description of the rock overhangs might be specific enough to help pilgrims know they had taken the correct path to the ascetic.

The whole purpose for moving to new places and establishing residency was to create a new city or village dedicated to God. The athletes of Christ went to the physical arena of the desert and mountains to wrestle with demons, which claimed the territory as their own. By drawing on Classical and Hellenistic athletic imagery, monastic authors effectively replaced the gladiatorial arenas with desert arenas. The Egyptian arena held its own unique challenges. Monks needed to have access to water, to stay out of the sun, and to live in harmony with villagers. They also needed to be reminded that in the midst of the desert God, the Virgin, and Christ were willing to dwell beside them. The narrative accounts provide a social history of how particular individuals were



attributed as founders for seeing the land for the first time and for laying claim to an abandoned cave, mountain, village, or quarry for the honor of God. By building wells, dwellings, churches, and towers, the monks marked the land in general ways.

The divine spaces of the desert became monastic places. Macarius built his dwellings for his children in Sketis. Amoun built his residence at a quieter spot in the desert. Both Apollo and Shenoute walked with Jesus as he divinely outlined the churches in their respective communities. And Pachomius built wall after wall to set monks apart from nearby villagers. The generalized landscape that emerges from the words of the monastic hagiographers comes from the periods when monasticism thrived in Egypt. From the sixth century onward, monastic communities witnessed increasing popularity, and new settlements emerged alongside the original settlements. It is this world of the sixth century that we must turn to see the physical reality of where monks were living and how the actualized, monastic landscape differed from the generalized landscape found in monastic stories.