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The Way of the Desert in Early Christian Egypt

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Abstract

This paper engages the topic of imaginary landscapes and ascetic self-fashioning. The essay examines the cultural myth of the desert as the product of selective and purposeful memory. When Athanasius came to write the *Life of Antony*, for example, he “forgot” the urban ascetics, who had been so instrumental in protecting him, and tied ascetic renunciation firmly to the physical practice of withdrawal. The stature of these desert dwellers, already enhanced by their rugged surroundings, was further bolstered by a narrative process that redrew these heroes in the powerful but simplified likeness of biblical figures and erased the complex confessional diversity of early monasticism. The way of the desert was thus “both a product of the emerging Christian culture of orthodoxy and an important player in its success”.

Keywords

Desert, monasticism, *Life of Antony*, ascetic landscape, Late Antiquity

Introduction

Through a process of selective and often purposeful memory, ascetics, believers, and authors elaborated on figures and events of the recent past to fashion “one of the most abiding creations of late antiquity”¹. The myth

¹ P. Brown, *Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, Columbia University Press, 2008, p. 216. The myth naturally drew on the desert

drew its power in part from its association with historical figures, an association that increased the believability of its claims by linking them to factual events. In its preserved memory, however, the myth enhanced the concept of withdrawal from society through its emphasis on the spatial imagery of the desert, increased the spiritual stature of the ascetics through miracle stories and a process of selective memory, and purified their landscape through the equation of monasticism and orthodoxy.

The way of the desert² that emerged served not only to recruit new ascetic disciples but also to buttress the values of the larger Christian culture through the example of the desert saints whose angelic lives provided evidence of the power inherent in the new faith. Their stories served as guide-books³ for ascetic and lay Christian alike. They played a central role in the development of late antique Christian spirituality and, perhaps even more impressively, have continued to influence Christian culture through the

imagery prevalent in various biblical accounts. The Bible supports such an idea of the desert as the place where God reveals himself to men and women: think of Moses on Mount Sinai in the wilderness of Sin (Exod 19), or of Elijah's encounter with God on the same mountain (on this occasion called Horeb: 1 Kings 19:8; or of John the Baptist, the Forerunner, "preaching in the wilderness of Judea" (Matt. 3:1), or of the place of desert solitude in the life of Jesus himself, where he was tempted for forty days before the beginning of his ministry (Matt. 4:1-11 and parallels), where he often retreated to pray to his Father (Luke 4:42, 6:12, 9:18, 11:1, etc.), and where on Mount Tabor (or perhaps Mount Hermon) he was transfigured (Mark 9:2-8 and parallels). On this theme, see Andrew Louth, "The Desert in the Bible", in idem, *The Wilderness of God*, Darton-Longman-Todd, London, 2003, pp. 26-42 and W. Harmless, "Biblical Motifs" in idem, *Desert Christians. An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism*, Oxford University Press, 2004, pp. 69-70.

² The period from the third to the seventh centuries of the Christian Era witnessed one of the most extraordinary movements in Christian history. Thousands of people, both men and women, in Egypt, Palestine and other parts of the Middle East, took themselves off to the Desert to live as monks and hermits. They were remarkable people, living lives of great asceticism, sometimes individually on their own and sometimes in monastic communities, deliberately enduring great hardship, and spending their time in silence, prayer and meditation, in obedience to their understanding of the Christian Gospel. This „desert movement“, as it may be called, took place not only in Egypt but in various parts of the Near East and the eastern Mediterranean, wherever there was at hand an area of wilderness and solitude (See, Alexander Ryrie, *The Desert Movement. Fresh Perspectives on the Spirituality of the Desert*, Canterbury Press, 2011).

³ On this subject, see Part I, „Books as Guides“, in Blake Leyerle, Robin Darling Young (eds.), *Ascetic Culture. Essays in Honor of Philip Rousseau*, University of Notre Dame Press, 2013, pp. 11-126.

The Way of the Desert in Early Christian Egypt

centuries until today. In the following pages, I would like to explore one example from antiquity that illustrate the role played by selective memory, whether conscious or unconscious, in the production of the myth of the desert, namely Athanasius's *Life of Antony*. And, indeed, the desert movement in Lower Egypt is indelibly associated with the name of Antony, usually regarded as the great pioneer and initiator of the eremitic or hermit life. Athanasius' biography became something of a best-seller, and through it the fame of this lover of solitude spread far and wide. How much historical fact lies behind this tale is not clear, but the fact that the story was widely circulated testifies to the widespread popularity and influence of Antony. The story also bears witness to the existence of a desert movement prior to Antony's own vocation to the eremitical life.⁴

In another words, in this paper, we will focus on the role of memory in the formation of the myth by exploring the creation of a physical space of otherness in Athanasius's *Life of Antony*.

In this analysis, I use the concept of memory broadly not only to include what is remembered over time as opposed to what is forgotten but also represent what is chosen by a storyteller or author from the past as the focus of his or her story as opposed to what is played down or ignored. A cultural myth, of which the myth of the desert represents a case in point, arises over time as the latter process transforms itself into the former. That which was left out or ignored for whatever reason is eventually forgotten. The original authorial focus of the stories comes to define the cultural memory of the past and through it to shape the cultural agenda for the future. As such, myth plays a fundamental role in cultural change. Created by human agency, it becomes the agent of human change.

Athanasius's *Life of Antony*: Text and Context

The publication of the *Life of Antony* by Athanasius shortly after the ascetic's death in 356 marked a seminal stage in the emergence of the myth

⁴ Athanasius was a skilled literary artist. He was also a gifted theologian who brought all his theological talents and biases to this work. Therefore, as W. Harmless has remarked, „the international cult of Antony came not from relics, but from a text. In other words, Athanasius's *Life* made possible a new type of cultic devotion, a cultus of text” (William Harmless, *Desert Christians. An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism*, Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 100).

of the desert⁵. While the discovery of the Egyptian desert as an ascetic arena by figures like Antony obviously predated Athanasius's effort, it was his *Life of Antony* that captured the moment, translating the historical practice of a relative few into a social and spiritual force that far transcended the direct reach of the individual ascetics. In Athanasius's hands, Antony became the ideal ascetic, and through the *Life of Antony* the ideal ascetic became a desert monk.

Much of the cultural power of the *Life of Antony* lies in its forceful linkage of the concept of ascetic renunciation with the actual physical practice of withdrawal into the desert. Athanasius connects ascetic progress and perfection to the ascetic's increasing separation from the world of the average Christian. The reader follows Antony as he withdraws from his home in the village the places close by the village, from there to a nearby desert cemetery, from the cemetery to a deserted fortress beyond the river, from the fortress to the upper Thebaid, and from the Thebaid to his inner mountain retreat near the Red Sea⁶. Each withdrawal increases Antony's ascetic authority and fame, which in turn encourages those from the civilized world to follow him out into the desert, undoing his solitude and forcing his retreat further into the desert. In the *Life of Antony*, in fact, Antony's final retreat near the Red Sea becomes the *telos* or final goal toward which his successive withdrawals lead. In describing Antony's earlier move to the deserted fortress, for example, Athanasius writes, "Intensifying more and more his purpose, he hurried toward the mountain"⁷. The spiritual *telos* of ascetic practice is here joined to the physical *telos* of

⁵ *Vie d'Antoine*, Bartelink's intro., 27; *Life of Antony*, Gregg's intro., 2-3; and *Life of Saint Antony*, Meyer's intro., 8. Indeed, one of the first to hear the call of the desert was an Egyptian peasant who came to be known as Antony the Great. As Andrew Louth has noted "Antony's life brings out, not just the importance of the desert in his life, but something of the meaning the desert had for him. Take first the description of his appearance after twenty years' solitude on the Outer Mountain: Antony appears in his natural state, in the form of perfect manhood, maintaining a perfect balance between the contrary unnatural extremes that the human form can take. More precisely one can say that there is glimpsed in Antony the natural state of man, as God intended it, in paradise, in the Garden of Eden. The desert, for Antony, has become a way to paradise, to the lost state of harmony and perfection. Briefly, the desert, in its simplicity and austerity, is a place of beauty" (Andrew Louth, *The Wilderness of God*, Darton-Longman-Todd, London, 2003, pp. 46-47).

⁶ *Vit. Ant.* 3, 8, 12, and 46.

⁷ *Vit. Ant.* 12, trans. Gregg, *Life of Antony*, 40. The statement describes Antony's preparation to move across the river to the deserted fortress.

The Way of the Desert in Early Christian Egypt

withdrawal into the desert. The reader of the *Life of Antony* sets the book down with a clear understanding of the link between Christian asceticism and the call of the desert. Withdrawal, which had earlier indicated a person's renunciation of certain culturally expected patterns and behaviors, came increasingly to include a spatial dimension that connected the true athletes of such renunciation with the concept of relocation beyond the immediate reach of civilization⁸.

The positive formulation of this connection between asceticism and the desert gains additional strength in the *Life of Antony* as the more familiar urban forms of ascetic practice fade into the background. Recent scholarship has understood the prevalence of urban (city, town, and village) asceticism in Egypt⁹, and there can be little doubt that Athanasius knew and interacted more closely with such urban ascetics than with true desert figures like Antony¹⁰. Given this fact, there is considerable irony in the possibility that Athanasius composed the *Life of Antony* during his exile under Constantius (356-62), hiding on occasion in the homes of urban ascetics in the city of Alexandria.

Monastic Wisdom for a Life in the World

Antony died on January 30, 356¹¹. Less than a month later, in the early morning hours of February 8-9, Athanasius went into hiding in Alexan-

⁸ Goehring, "The Encroaching Desert: Literary Production and Ascetic Space in Early Christian Egypt", *Journal of Christian Early Studies*, no. 3, 1993, pp. 281-296. On the earlier patterns of asceticism, see A. Emmett, "Female Ascetics in Greek Papyri", in *Jahrbuch der Osterreichischen Byzantinistik*, 32:2, 1982, pp. 517-524, p. 513; Goehring, "Through a Glass Darkly", in idem, *Ascetics, Society, and the Desert: Studies in Early Egyptian Monasticism*, Trinity Press International, Harrisburg, pp. 53-72; Choat, "The Development and use of Terms for 'monk' in Late Antique Egypt", in *Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum* 45, 2002, pp. 5-23.

⁹ Goehring, "Encroaching Desert," "Withdrawing from the Desert: Pachomius and the Development of Village Monasticism in Upper Egypt", in *Harvard Theological Review*, no. 89, 1996, pp. 267-285; and Wipszycka, "Monachisme égyptien", in *Travaux et Mémoires*, 12, 1994, pp. 1-44.

¹⁰ The best study of Athanasius's interaction with and use of ascetics is David Brakke, *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism*, Oxford University Press, 1995.

¹¹ The date of 356 is generally accepted (*Vie d'Antoine*, Bartelink's intro., 27; *Life of Antony*, Gregg's intro., 2; *Life of Saint Antony*, Meyer's intro., 7), Timothy D. Barnes (*Athanasius and Constantius. Theology and Politics in the Constantine Empire*, Harvard University Press, 2001, p. 97) cites Antony's death as ca 355. January 30 is Antony's feast day in the Synaxarion.

dria. Condemned the previous summer at the Council of Milan, he had outmaneuvered the Arian opposition within his own see until that night. Meeting in vigil in the Alexandrian church of Theonas in preparation for Holy Communion the following day, Athanasius and his followers were scattered by a large military force under the control of the dux Syrianus. Surrounding the church and urged on by Arian sympathizers, they eventually broke down the doors and stormed inside. Many died in the attack. Athanasius escaped, spirited away by a group of monks and clergy¹².

While he must have moved frequently during his exile to avoid capture, and probably spent considerable time in the deserts of Lower Egypt, various accounts suggest that female ascetics within the city played a significant role in protecting the fugitive archbishop¹³. The most famous and most legendary account is that of Bishop Palladius of Helenopolis. In the monastic history that he dedicated to Lausus (*Historia lausiaca*, 63), he reports that Athanasius remained hidden in the city for the entire six years of his exile in the home of a young and beautiful virgin, who, apprehensive at first, eventually took him in, cared for his bodily needs, and borrowed books for his use. Fanciful as the story sounds, aspects of it gain credibility from the brief reports of these years preserved in the Festal Index¹⁴. There it is indicated that Athanasius remained hidden within the city, somehow avoiding the oppressive searches for him conducted by the authorities¹⁵. The index further reports that in the year 359-60 the perfect Faustinus

¹² Barnes, *Athanasius and Constantius*, pp. 118-20.

¹³ Barnes, *Athanasius and Constantius*, p.121. In his chronology for Athanasius (xii). Barnes lists "in hiding in Alexandria and elsewhere in Egypt" for the years 356-62. David Brake (cf. *Athanasius*, pp. 130-31) suggests that "while Athanasius spent most of his six years in the villages and desert, he made sporadic clandestine trips into the city." That Athanasius did not spend the entire time in the city is made clear by his own statements in his *Letters to Serapion* (*Ep. Serap.* 1.1,33): cf. Shapland, trans., *Letters of Saint Athanasius*, 59 n. 3. Gregory of Nazianzus (*Orationes* 21.19.6) similarly places him in monastic cells in the desert during this exile.

¹⁴ Timothy Barnes describes it as "a picturesque story" (cf. *Athanasius and Constantius*, p. 121). But see Badger, *The New Man Created in God: Christology, Congregation and Asceticism in Athanasius of Alexandria*, Duke University, 1991, pp. 209-11.

¹⁵ *Festal Index* 29 (356-57 CE) reports that Athanasius "had fled and was sought for in the city with much oppression": *Festal Index* 30 (357-58 CE) records that he "lay concealed in the city of Alexandria." *Festal Index* 35 (362-63) does report his flight to the Thebaid, but this occurs only after his initial pardon and return under the Emperor Julian. He is forced subsequently to flee from the city as a result of Julian's renewed order against him (cf. *Athanasius, Select Writings and Letters*, trans. Robertson, 505).

The Way of the Desert in Early Christian Egypt

and the dux Artemius entered a private home that contained a small cell in search of the archbishop. If Athanasius had been there, he had already flown. The confidence of the officials in their information, however, is suggested by the fact that they proceeded to torture the apparent owner of the home, the dedicated virgin Eudaemonis¹⁶. While Palladius has elaborated the story, it seems evident that Athanasius found support among and was occasionally concealed by urban ascetics in Alexandria during his years (356-62) as a fugitive.

The possibility suggested in the Pachomian corpus that he sought refuge in one of their monasteries in Upper Egypt, even if is reliable, only reinforces the point¹⁷. While Pachomius is often associated with Antony and Amoun as one of the founders of Egyptian monasticism, his coenobitic innovation was in fact a form of village, not desert, asceticism. Antony and Amoun represent desert ascetics. Pachomius and the communities of his *koinonia*, on the other hand, illustrate the continuing and innovative expansion of asceticism within towns and villages¹⁸. If Athanasius did find refuge among the Pachomians, it would once again underscore the role played by urban ascetics in protecting the archbishop, the very ascetics whom he essentially ignores in his *Life of Antony*.

The juxtaposition of Athanasius's composition of the *Life of Antony* with his rescue and concealment by both urban and desert ascetics suggests something of the draw of the desert landscape in the formation of the late antique myth of the desert. Valiant urban ascetics filled the archbishop's world, yet when he sought to encapsulate the goals of the ascetic life in a single story, he turned to the desert anchorite Antony, about whom his knowledge was limited.¹⁹

Athanasius recognized that the ascetic ideals of renunciation and withdrawal, forged in the urban environment of Christian origins, acquired in

¹⁶ *Festal Index* 32. Sozomen (*Historia ecclesiastica* 4.10) reports that Athanasius initially took refuge with acquaintances in the city, being hidden underground. There is no mention of a virgin in this story, but rather a serving woman who eventually revealed his whereabouts, forcing him to flee to the country.

¹⁷ David Brakke notes that "this search (for Athanasius) extended (probably without good reason) even to the Pachomian monasteries in the Thebaid" (cf. *Athanasius*, pp. 130-31).

¹⁸ Goehring, *Withdrawing from the Desert*.

¹⁹ It seems likely that his sojourn in the deserts of Lower Egypt in this period gave him access to stories about Antony. It may also have focused his interest on the desert ascetics, which bore fruit in the *Life of Antony*.

the desert a spatial dimension that resonated for the storyteller and audience alike. The desert supplied the indispensable elements of the heroic figure and the exotic location on which any good story, romance, or myth depends²⁰. As the earlier persecutions had spawned a literature centered on the struggles of heroic Christians in strange and exotic places (prisons, coliseums, and arenas), inhabited by fierce adversaries and wild beasts, so now the ascetic's story could be told in similar terms. The exotic desert became the new arena for heroic conflict, and the renunciations and struggles of the monk, portrayed as realistic battles with demonic beasts, replaced the external torments imposed upon the martyr. In the process, the desert was refashioned as a literary landscape of Christian trial and perfection.

In his focus on Antony and the desert, Athanasius virtually ignores the familiar urban ascetics that filled his own environment. The dedicated virgins to whom Antony entrusts his sister and the old solitary ascetic in the neighboring village, both of whom appear at the beginning of the story, serve but to anchor what follows in a reality known to its readers²¹. The average Christian, after all, knew and had frequent contact with the urban and village ascetics who populated their immediate landscape. In the *Life of Antony*, however, these ascetics fade into the background as Athanasius fashions an alternative picture that locates the spiritual otherness of the ascetic visibly in the physical otherness of the desert. He unbalances the classical view of the city as center by presenting the desert as an emerging alternative city of God on earth, imbuing its ascetic inhabitants with a semblance of biblical saints and angels²². The otherness of the desert serves to enhance the otherness of the ascetic in the minds of the reader.

The spatial localization of this otherness witnessed in the *Life of Antony* supplies the setting for the myth of the desert²³. Myth operates in an alternative space, and the desert supplied that space. Urban ascetics were simply too close at hand and too familiar a part of the landscape to elicit

²⁰ Gregg's intro. to Athanasius, *Life of Antony*, p. 3.

²¹ *Vit. Ant.* 3.

²² *Vit. Ant.* 14.

²³ Note here the connection with the classical world's association of exotic peoples with remote places. See, in particular, G. Frank, *Memory of the Eyes*, esp. ch. 2: for the classical elements, Romm, *The Edges of the Earth in Ancient Thought: Geography, Exploration, and Fiction*, Princeton University Press, 1994; Francois Hartog, *The Mirror of Herodotus. The Representation of the Other in the Writing of History*, University of California Press, 2009.

The Way of the Desert in Early Christian Egypt

a sense of otherness. While they continued to play a vital role in Christian society and surely always outnumbered their true desert counterparts, they slowly lost their place in the history of asceticism as the literary tradition fostered by Athanasius's *Life of Antony* took hold²⁴. Urban ascetics were simply forgotten, or, like Pachomius, who had developed a form of village asceticism in Upper Egypt, were drawn into the interpretive sphere of the desert. Over time, the success of the *Life of Antony* transformed Athanasius's focus on the desert into a cultural memory. The myth of the desert became the story of Egyptian monasticism²⁵.

If the otherness of the desert served to locate the myth of the desert in a space beyond the usual boundaries of human habitation and history, the portrayal of the ascetic heroes who populated the landscape conformed them increasingly to the biblical and angelic ideals of the myth²⁶.

Finally, in the pursuit of this goal the monks of the desert movement have provided the basic pattern and model for the contemplative way which has influenced and guided Christian spirituality throughout the centuries. In our opinion, the spirituality of the desert can be followed anywhere.

²⁴ The nature of the desert and the ascetic's location in it relative to the settled land are important considerations. Many ascetics, like those in Shenoute's White Monastery, were located only nominally in the desert, at the edge of the fertile valley. They continued to function as an integral part of the broader social and political world in which they lived. On the use and meaning of the term desert, see Cadell and Remondon, "Sens et emplois to horos dans les documents papyrologiques", in *Revue des Etudes Grecques*, no. 379, 1967, pp. 343-349. Regarding the growing prestige of desert asceticism, note, for example, the effort by Jerome to "outdistance" Antony's withdrawal in his *Vita Pauli*. The desert withdrawal is carried to an extreme in the Coptic *Life of Onnophrius* (Paphnutis, *Histories of the Monks*, trans. Vivian). See also J. Goehring, "The Dark Side of Landscape: Ideology and Power in the Christian Myth of the Desert", in *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, no. 33, 2003, pp. 437-451.

²⁵ Many questions remain, of course, as to the precise nature and development of this association across time and geographical boundaries. One suspects, for example, that the urban ascetics faded from memory more rapidly as the stories moved outside Egypt, where the readers' contact with and knowledge of the Egyptian urban ascetics did not exist.

²⁶ G. Frank, *Memory of the Eyes. Pilgrims to Living in Christian Late Antiquity*, University of California Press, 2000, especially, chapters. 5-6; Patricia Cox Miller, "Desert Asceticism and the Body from Nowhere", in *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, 2, 1994, pp. 137-153 and Ellen Muehlberger, "Ambivalence About the Angelic Life: The Promise and Perils of an Early Christian Discourse of Asceticism", in *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, no. 4, 2008, pp. 447-478.

The desert, however we may happen to meet it, will never be easy to cross. There is nothing solicitous, considerate, or nice about the desert. To be frank, its arid wasteland doesn't give a damn about you or me. We have absolutely nothing that the desert needs. That can be frightening. We don't like to put ourselves in a place where we aren't wanted or needed.

The desert remained a place where human beings could encounter God, so that as Andrew Louth has remarked if the „Western technology in the service of consumerism may erase the desert much more effectively. We need to pray that our society does not so obliterate the desert that desperate remedies are required to recover it”.²⁷

²⁷ A. Louth, *The Wilderness of God*, p. ix.