Monks and Their Children: Family and Childhood in Early Christian Monasteries

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Introduction

- Monasticism as familial renunciation
- Major monasteries considered today

Social history of children

- Education, discipline, and care
- Sex and adolescence
- Food and physical vulnerability

Genealogy and Cultural Reproduction

Nursing Virgin, Monastery of the Syrians, the Wadi Natrun
Egypt: A Birthplace of Christian Monasticism, 300-400

Rhetoric: monasticism as a retreat to the desert

Desert cliffs with monastic cells behind the Monastery of Saint Antony
The contemporary Monastery of Saint Antony at the Red Sea (left). Behind the monastery, stairs up into the desert cliffs, home to Antony and other monks (right).
“And so, from then on, there were monasteries in the mountains and the desert was made a city by monks, who left their own people and registered themselves for the citizenship in the heavens.”

-Life of Antony 14

ca. 360

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-Life of Antony 14

ca. 360

Kellia: unexcavated mounds and partially excavated sites=monastic settlements

From Les Kellia: Ermitages coptes en Basse-Egypte
Do not bring young boys here. Four congregations in Scetis are deserted because of boys.

Aba Isaac of Nitria

When you see a cell built close to the marsh, know that the devastation of Scetis is near; when you see trees, know that it is at the doors; and when you see young children, take up your sheep-skins and go away.

Aba Macarius the Great

Entrance to the Monastery of Abba Macarius, the Wadi Natrun (Nitria)
Monasticism = Renouncing (even abandoning? sacrificing?) children?

One of the inhabitants of the Thebaid came to see Abba [Father] Sisoes one day because he wanted to become a monk. The old man asked him if he had any relations in the world. He replied, “I have a son.” The old man said, “Go and throw him into the river and then you will become a monk.” As he went to throw him in, the old man sent a brother in haste to prevent him. the brother said, “Stop, what are you doing?” But the other said to him, “The abba told me to throw him in.” So the brother said, “But afterwards he said do not throw him in.” So he left his son and went to find the old man and he became a monk, tested by obedience.

-From the Sayings of the Desert Fathers, Alphabetical Collection
Sacrifices of Isaac and Jephthah’s Daughter [Genesis, Judges], 13th c., Church of St. Antony’s Monastery

Photograph from E. Bolman, ed., Monastic Visions
If some have offered up to you their children as sacrifices, like the great Abraham the patriarch and Jephthah, while others again did not do it for you, it is you who rewarded them with what they had no power ever to obtain. You rewarded all of them here and allowed them to inherit eternal life, these among whom Christ came in the flesh, your only-begotten Son who exists before the ages. It is he whom you sent to the world at the last days, [who] gave himself for our sins and for our impiety, and [who] rose on the third day.

-Shenoute, *I Have Been Reading the Holy Gospels*
Major Monasteries in Late Antique Egypt

Map from Derwas Chitty, The Desert a City

* Major monasteries in which there were certainly children
12th c. wall painting of Pachomius in the church of St. Antony’s monastery. Photo: Schroeder.

Monastic federation founded by Pachomius
Wall painting of Shenoute in the church of the Red Monastery. Photograph: Schroeder

Monastic federation of Shenoute
White Monastery “Federation”: 2 men’s residences, 1 women’s plus caves in cliffs for hermits

Late antique door (incl. Ptolemaic spolia) of Red Monastery (2nd men’s community)
White Monastery church (main men’s community)
Temple of Atripe, site of women’s community

Photos: Schroeder, 2012
Sanctuary of the church at the Naqlun Monastery (Dayr al-Malak). Photograph: [Image]
Children in early monasteries lived in a precarious situation, simultaneously cherished and nurtured as a gift from God *and* vulnerable to the dangers of ascetic discipline and the vicissitudes of the adults around them.
Language of age is often the language of monastic rank

The “father” of the monastery = the leader
Subsequent ranks:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Male Terminology</th>
<th>Female Terminology</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“old man” = male elder</td>
<td>“old woman” = female elder</td>
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<tr>
<td>“great men” = senior male monks</td>
<td>“great women” = senior female monks</td>
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← “parents” = prominent male and female members →

male “house leader (masc.)”
“child/boy” = male junior monk

female “house leader (fem.)”
“child/girl” = female junior monk
Minor child?

Novice?

Both
Education, discipline, and care
Or do you not know that boys especially are not able to continue in virtue unless they are granted some relaxation or small comfort?

Pachomius, in the Parilopomena
Children will make better monks…

“It is easier for children to reach this degree, that, being obedient from their earliest age, they may eagerly strain ahead to the things that are before (Phil 3:13) until they reach perfection…. For ground that has been cleared is ready to be planted.”

Pachomius, in The Life of Pachomius (G¹ 49)
“For what constitutes a child? Ignorance. What constitutes a child? Want of instruction; for they are our equals so far as their degree of knowledge permits."

Epictetus, *Discourses* Book 2
...and must be diligently trained

Pachomius “set a little one in the midst of his disciples saying, ‘Anyone who shall receive a young child such as this in my name receives me (see Mt 10:42).’ But as for other little ones who have acquired an evil bent in their [youth] [the ms breaks off for a few words]…. [as Solomon] says, ‘Anyone who lives wantonly from his youth shall become a slave (Prov. 31:21).’ And so my brothers, every young child as well as those who are older whom the Lord has brought to us for the rebirth, let us be zealous … many times, let us teach them…."

Tenth Sahidic Life of Pachomius, Fragment 2
Education

Program in the Pachomian *koinonia*

- God as creator
- Prayer
- Scripture (esp. Psalms)
- God’s will & law
- Monastic rules
- Discern heresy
- Literacy & Reading
Education

Program in the Pachomian *koinonia*: Literacy

Then the fundamentals of a syllable, the verbs, and nouns shall be written for him and even if he does not want to, he shall be compelled to read. There shall be no one whatever in the monastery who does not learn to read and does not memorize something of the Scriptures.

Pachomius, *Precepts*
Education

Shenoute’s monastery: indirect evidence

White Monastery, photo: Schroeder. White Monastery manuscript: Bibliothèque nationale, Paris
As for some people who have children who were entrusted to their care, if it is of no concern to them that they live self-indulgently, joking with them, and sporting with them, they will be removed from this task. For they are not fit to be entrusted with children. It is in this way also with women who have girls given to them. But if they are children who grew up and they have reached the age of majority, then it will be done to them as it is written for us. If they are disobedient and they do not learn to be wise, they shall be cast out from us.

Shenoute, *Canons* vol. 9
“The measure of children is apparent. Those who will cause them to sin in these places every time, they will be cast out.”

Shenoute, *Canons* vol. 9

White Monastery, nave of the great church (originally built ca. mid 400’s). Photo: Schroeder
As for the manner of keeping [the children], there is no need to say many words; one word is sufficient. The man who cleanses his own conscience to perfection (Heb 9:14, 2 Cor 7:1), in the fear of God and in truth, he it is who can keep the little ones with the Lord's help—for he needs his help.

-First Greek Vita of Pachomius 49

6th-8th. c. Coptic child tunic. Photo: Christies Auction House
Children may be beaten by their superiors without Shenoute’s approval

They know from God that there is a great injury and there is a great condemnation on everyone among us who will do anything for themselves on their own by their own authority without (approval by) the elder in our domain, whether man or woman, whether old or young, including him who will deal one in our domain or in your domain a blow with a rod or a slap, with the exception of boys and girls.

Shenoute, *Canons* vol. 4

Textile fragment from Panopolis (near Shenoute’s monastery), Photo: National Museum of Ireland
Sex and Adolescence
If someone among the brothers is caught easily laughing and playing with boys and having friendships with those of tender years, he shall be admonished three times to withdraw from their intimacy and to be mindful of honesty and of the fear of God. If he does not desist, he shall receive the very severe punishment he deserves.
Shenoute’s federation

Cursed is anyone who will kiss a boy passionately.

Cursed is anyone who will kiss or embrace each other in a desirous passion, whether small or great, whether father or son, whether male or female....

Cursed is any boy who will shave a child without authorization or apart by himself.

Cursed is any boy who will remove a thorn from the foot of a boy without authorization or apart by himself.

Cursed is anyone who will wash or anoint a boy without authorization.
Naqlun monastery

- boys as “stumbling blocks”
- speaking to boys and young men forbidden
- no “friendship” and “familiarity”
- expulsion of “young men” who are novices for “scandal”
Food and Physical Vulnerability
Food

Shenoute’s Federation: two meals a day (also sick, elderly)

Mills at Shenoute’s monastery. Photo: Schroeder
Food

Shenoute’s Federation: two meals a day (also sick, elderly)

Pachomian Federation: extra food and bread

Mills at Shenoute’s monastery. Photo: Schroeder
Child Labor at Shenoute’s monastery:

- Adolescents exempt from harvesting dates

- Supervisors condemned for beating children to get them to do the adults’ work
Child Labor at Shenoute’s monastery:

- Boys: distribute weaving materials for the monks ONLY when supervised (vol. 5)

- Girls: light lamps for the monks’ gatherings ONLY when supervised (vol. 5). Girls also distribute wool.
Health, Sickness, Physical Needs

- Children may receive extra wine when sick, as may sick adult/full monks – but only the “truly” sick (Shenoute Canons, vol. 4)

- Sick children may stay in their houses or be carried to the general prayer assembly (Shenoute Canons, vol. 9)
Health, Sickness, Physical Needs

If someone urinates in a narrow-necked vessel or in a jar or in anything else (like these ones who were not commanded by the Elder)—except for those in the infirmary alone, and the elders who are very advanced in their years and these others who seek out the Elder, and if it is necessary for some to act this way among us, so that they relieve themselves in some vessel like this due to a wound or an impediment on their leg, so that he is not able to walk outside, they shall ask the Elder—and apart from these ones (I have just mentioned), if some little boys or other people defecate in any vessel of this sort, they shall be cursed.

Shenoute, Canons vol. 3
- small population
- well integrated (even when a separate class)
- seen as requiring special consideration
- obstacle for adults and potential master ascetics
- neither fully monk nor fully laity
- Cherished yet vulnerable to abuse

Entrance to the church of the monastery of Shenoute. Photo: Schroeder.
Genealogies and Cultural Reproduction
Monastery as Classical *Familia*

- Family
- Legacy
- Paternity
- Inheritance
- Genealogy
- *Paterfamilias/ head of household*

“Abba, give me a word….” (common phrase between a newer monk and his spiritual father in the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*)
"But we ourselves, brethren, as long as we make a community with our companions, we are] the sons of a single man, who is God, and we are the sons of a single woman, who is Jerusalem, according to the scriptures. Is he chosen, namely our father and our mother who begot us and who nourished us according to the flesh, more than our Lord Jesus our father and true mother? This one who begot us in his holy blood...."

Shenoute, *Abraham Our Father*
"What is the work of God and our Lord Jesus but manual labor? It was his manual labor that formed us and created us….Lord Jesus despised shame as he remained steadfast on the cross for all our salvation, because he is our savior, our Lord and our father…. But let us be servants to one another, like Jesus, who took the form of a servant for us, and like Paul, the servant of Jesus, and like all the apostles and prophets who were servants to the Lord and his Christ….

Shenoute, *Canons* vol. 3
Red Monastery Tri-conch Sanctuary

Northern Apse

Southern Apse

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Photo requires permissions for electronic distribution
Red Monastery Tri-conch Sanctuary

Northern Apse: monastic fathers Bshoi, Pcol, Shenoute, Besa

Southern Apse: Christ as Logos (surrounded by Evangelists)
So that truly we may be like the sons of Abraham and the sons of all our ancient fathers, whom the Lord blessed because they not only loved their own sons and daughters and all their relatives, but they also loved everyone who believed in God and who kept God's commandments. And thus their offspring obtained as their inheritance everyone who is faithful and just, from the beginning until today and forever.

Shenoute, *Canons vol. 3*
The monastery is “the house that the fathers of your fathers built for them and the sons of the sons of their sons unto generations and unto all these forever.” (Psalms, Ephesians)

Shenoute, *Is It Not Written*
Shenoute intertextually connects the monastic fathers to the biblical patriarchs and apostles to create a biblical, prophetic-monastic genealogy of father and sons.

“And thus their offspring obtained as their inheritance everyone who is faithful and just, from the beginning until today and forever.”

The genealogy is eternal and eschatological.
Shenoute intertextually connects the monastic fathers to the biblical patriarchs and apostles to create a biblical, prophetic-monastic genealogy of father and sons.

Textually constructed through Shenoute’s writings

Socially constructed through the raising of children

Materially constructed through the buildings a
T: Church of Red Monastery (2nd men’s community), 5th-6th c.
M: White Monastery church and grounds (main men’s community), originally built 5th c.
Photos: Schroeder, 2012
Buildings and estates "produced a variety of human
genealogies."

Property itself exerts power as "inheritance,"
making "temporal and genealogical claims"
alongside its "spatial and material claims."

"[T]he highly competitive and sometimes
unpredictable process of becoming and remaining a
senatorial family in late antiquity meant that the
genealogical claims of property could extend both
backward in time and forward."

Catherine Chin, “Aristocratic and Apostolic Genealogies in Late
Antiquity, Or, the House that No One Could Afford to Buy”
Properties, as Chin reminds us, have both "histories" and "aspirations," and deploy their own "genealogical ambitions" on human agents.

Church of Red Monastery (2nd men’s community), 5th-6th c., paintings 6th-7th c. and later
White Monastery church and grounds (main men’s community), originally built 5th c.
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