

## **Report on Research in Coptic Monasticism 1988-1992**

A presentation of the publications on "Coptic Monasticism" cannot be limited to texts in the Coptic language, since writings of some Coptic monks-- or about them -- have been preserved in various languages other than Coptic; and also since some monks, like Evagrius, who had an enormous influence on Coptic monasticism did not write in Coptic.

It seems that Coptic monasticism has been the object of scholarly studies less during the last four years than during the preceding four-year period -- or the former decades, for that matter. I certainly have much less to report this year, in terms of publications on Coptic monasticism than I had to report at Louvain, four years ago. That, however, will allow me to dwell a little longer on a few really important publications.

The book by Samuel Rubenson on "The Letters of St. Antony" has been mentioned more than once since the beginning of this Congress. I will speak more about this in a moment; at this point I would like simply to mention that perhaps the most important aspect of Rubenson's work is to have made us a little more aware of the fact that we know pretty little about the first monastic generation in Lower Egypt, that is, the monasticism of Lower Egypt prior to the Origenist controversy. It obliges us to divide the story of Egyptian monasticism into two main sections, the year of Evagrius' death serving as watershed.

I said "Lower Egypt", because few studies have been made on Pachomian cenobitism during the past four years, as well as any concerning Egyptian monasticism in general. So let us begin with the first period, that is made famous especially by two great names: Antony and Evagrius.

### **I: BEFORE EVAGRIUS**

#### **Antony of Egypt:**

The most famous of all the early Coptic monks was obviously Antony. Both his life, attributed to Athanasius and his Letters continued to be the object of interesting studies during the last four years.

First, let us say a few words about the Life. You will remember that René Draguet, when he published his critical edition of the Syriac version of the *Vita Antonii*, in 1980 claimed that it was not dependent on the Greek Life attributed to Athanasius but was the translation of its source. At our last Congress, I mentioned the article of T. Barnes, followed by Andrew Louth, trying to give new life to that position. Since then the arguments put forward by Draguet and Barnes have been convincingly refuted by Rudolf Lorenz and most of all by Louise

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Abramowski in her article "Vertritt die syrische Fassung die ursprüngliche Gestalt der Vita Antonii? Eine Auseinandersetzung mit der These Draguets" which appeared in the "Mélanges Guillaumont" (p. 47-56). That question can be put to rest. But we are still waiting for the publication of the Greek text announced by G.J.M. Bartelink at Oxford in 1983 (article published in 1989).

Of saint Antony himself we have seven letters that have been preserved fragmentarily in Coptic and with various degrees of completeness in Arabic, Syriac, Georgian and Latin. They have been known for a number of years, especially since the excellent edition of the Georgian version along with the Coptic fragments by Garitte in 1955. Everyone who read them realized that if they were really from Antony, they revealed an Antony that was rather different from the one presented by Athanasius in his Life of Antony. That was probably the reason why nobody in the past dared to deal seriously with the question of their authenticity. This is precisely what Rubenson has done.

People may question some of Rubenson's lines of argumentation, but as a whole, his conclusion on that point seems inescapable: There is no serious reason to doubt that these letters are from Antony himself. They are attributed to him both in the Coptic original and in the Greek translation; they are mentioned by Jerome and quoted by fifth century authors. Their authenticity is as firmly attested as that of any other ancient writing.

The full title of Rubenson's book is: "The Letters of St. Antony. Origenist Theology, Monastic Tradition and the Making of a Saint". It is, therefore much more than a simple analysis of the Letters. In the second part of his book Rubenson studies the Image of St. Antony, as we can gather not only from these Letters but also from the Life of Antony, the *Apophthegmata* and other contemporary monastic sources, and compares the whole to what we know about the daily life in Egypt from the papyri and the gnostic texts.

His analysis shows that "the notion of Antony and his companions as ignorant and illiterate is a view that mirrors modern prejudice rather than historical reality". Antony appears as a cultured man who was in touch with the Alexandrine theology of his time, shows a clear dependence on Origen and some striking similarities with the theology of texts such as the *Teachings of Silvanus* and, to some degree, Athanasius' *Contra gentes*.

One of the conclusions of Rubenson is that "monasticism (was) not the product (...) of people on the margin of society, but of intellectuals dissatisfied with what tradition had to offer."

Although there is a basic accord between the Letters and the *Vita*, the difference between the two is explained before all by the fact that the latter is marked by the Arian conflict that was so decisive for Athanasius' entire life and literary production.

The difference between the Letters and the type of asceticism described by the *Apophthegmata* and the monastic literature of the 5th century is due to the fact that the Origenist crisis of 400 (the year after

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Evagrius' death) deeply changed not only the life of the monks, but also their interpretation of the tradition. The collections of *Apophthegmata* that were preserved all date after the Origenist controversy, and have all been purged of their origenist elements. It now seems more and more probable that the origenist tradition did not come to the desert with Evagrius and a few intellectuals, but that Antony himself may have played an important role in the making of that tradition.

Another work on Antony's letters could be mentioned: Wincenty Myszor has published a study on the relationship between the Letters of Antony and the Nag-Hammadi texts in *Jahrbuch fur Antike und Christentum* (32 (1989) 73-88). He finds in both works the same thought system, which, following Jan Zandee, he attributes to the influence of Plato's "Gedankenwelt". Nevertheless, he underlines the profound difference between the spirituality of the Letters and gnosticism, specially in the fact that according to the Letters of Antony, the unity resides in the subordination of the whole man under the Spirit, in which the body also takes part (the positive appreciation of the body should be noted). He claims that early monasticism could very well have had contacts with the authors of the Nag Hammadi texts, and that there could be contacts with the contents of works like "Authentikos Logos", "Teaching of Sylvanus", "Exegesis of the Soul", etc...No specific contact, however, can be documented.

## II: EVAGRIUS AND POST-EVAGRIAN PERIOD

### Evagrius:

Another great figure of Coptic monasticism is Evagrius. Although he was born in Pontus and wrote in Greek, he did live in the Egyptian desert for the last 16 years of his life, and had a deep and lasting influence on Coptic monasticism. Everything published about him belongs to a presentation of scholarly publications concerning Coptic monasticism.

For several years Antoine and Claire Guillaumont have provided us with excellent editions of Evagrius' works and as excellent introductions and commentaries. After their edition of the *Praktikos*, several years ago, they published the *Gnosticos* in 1989: ("Le Gnostique ou celui qui est devenu digne de la science.") It is a critical edition of the Greek fragments, and a full translation made with the help of the Syriac and Armenian versions.

Another specialist of Evagrius has emerged these past few years: G. Bunge, who gave us in 1989 an excellent German translation of the *Praktikos*. The table of Biblical quotations contains a number of additional items to that of Guillaumont. His commentary, although excellent, remains a commentary "of Evagrius by Evagrius". The commentary of Guillaumont went further in explaining the sources of Evagrius as well as his influence.

In another publication ("Geistliche Vaterschaft..."), Bunge demonstrated that Evagrius belongs to a tradition of "Spiritual fatherhood" which goes back to the Apostle Paul, finds its full

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expression in Clement of Alexandria and its embodiment in the Desert Fathers, and that this type of gnosis is at the antipode of gnosticism. In another article ("Mysterium Unitatis..."), he shows the deeply orthodox character of Evagrius' teaching on the Creation.

Finally, another important publication on Evagrius is Jeremy Driscoll's dissertation on the "Ad monachos" published a few months ago in Rome. (*The "Ad Monachos" of Evagrius Ponticus: Its Structure and a Select Commentary...*). He had published an article on Evagrius in *Cist. Stud.* in 1989: "Listlessness in The Mirror for Monks of Evagrius Ponticus".

### **Apophtegmata:**

The *Apophtegmata* continue to be the object of a few translations and of a large number of studies on their spirituality, among which those of P. Regnault are certainly the best. To be published in September 1992 is a very good book by Douglas Burton-Christie (*The Word in the Desert*). The author studies the interpretation of Scripture by the monks of the Desert, and instead of limiting himself to analyzing the relatively few texts of the Scripture that are actually quoted in the *Apophtegmata*, he describes how their monastic life was a concrete interpretation of the Scripture.

### **Palladius:**

Palladius, in his *Historia Lausiaca* describes monasticism around the year 420. Unfortunately we do not have, yet, an absolutely reliable critical edition of that work. On the one hand, Butler's edition was a pioneer's work; on the other hand, few if any will go along with Draguet in his theories about the Coptic sources of the *Historia Lausiaca*. But recent publications of Bunge and De Vogüé seem to give credence to at least some of the Draguet's insights. These two authors used what could be called the "lateral tradition", in particular the several documents found in the Coptic synaxaries, that seem to have clear Palladian characteristics. Examining the fragments on Evagrius, Bunge suggests that Palladius, prior to his *Historia Lausiaca*, wrote a first History of the Egyptian monks, for a more select audience. It would be that first work that inspired the Coptic synaxaries and also the historian Socrates in his notice on Evagrius. Palladius would have chosen stories from that first work in order to compose a shorter form for the chamberlain Lausus. In two subsequent articles A. De Vogüé published the Coptic version of the Life of Pambo and of the Life of Evagrius (with A. Bunge). A subsequent article will give the Life of Macarios.

### **Historia monachorum in Aegypto:**

Eva Schulz-Fügel, who gave some good communications on the *Apophtegmata Patrum* at the 1983 and the 1987 Oxford Patristic Conferences, (both published in 1989) has also published an excellent critical edition of the *Historia Monachorum* in the Latin version of Rufinus, dedicating a large part of her introduction to trying to solve the problem of what in that Latin version is really from Rufinus.

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## **Pachomius:**

Pachomius and Pachomian monasticism were not the object of any large basic study during the period we are concerned with. Among the various articles that did study some aspects of that monasticism, one should mention that of James E. Goehring: "The World Engaged: The Social and Economic World of Early Egyptian Monasticism".

## **A few other publications:**

Moses of Abydos was a Coptic monk of the 6th century. René-Georges Coquin, who had presented him in an early study, published of him a short fragment that was still unpublished, in the *Mélanges Guillaumont*: "La 'Règle' de Moïse d'Abydos".

Of course, several of the articles of the *Coptic Encyclopaedia* concern monastic authors and monastic topics. There is no need here of giving a list that would be rather long.

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## **REPORT ON RESEARCH IN COPTIC MONASTICISM**

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