

ANACHORESIS

The step by which an ascetic, following the example of Saint ANTONY, leaves his village “to withdraw” (Greek, *anachorein*) to the desert and thus becomes an ANCHORITE (*anachoretēs*). But the oldest attestations of [the word](#) in Egypt relate to a phenomenon of a social character. [Crushed](#) by excessive fiscal burdens, peasants fled from their villages to the desert or some other place. This phenomenon, already noted in [pharaonic](#) Egypt (Posener, 1975) and again under Arab domination, is particularly well known, thanks to papyri from the Greco-Roman period (Martin, 1934; Henne, 1956; Braunert, 1964).

Several historians, such as A. Piganiol (1947, p. 376), have thought that there is a close relationship between this *anachoresis* of the peasants and the monastic *anachoresis*. In 373 and 377 the emperor Valens adopted measures against those among the monks who sought to escape their civil and military obligations (Piganiol, 1947, pp. 380-81). The [monasteries](#) sometimes served as refuges for crowds of people who fled before the exactions of the civil officials, as is apparent in the fifth century from the testimony of Isidorus of Pelusium (letter 191 PG 78, cols. 305A and B). The Pachomian Rules (see PACHOMIUS OF TABENNESE), in prescribing the conduct to be adopted with regard to candidates for the monastic life, call attention to the case—which must therefore have occurred—of those who presented themselves in order to escape judicial proceedings. Such candidates were naturally to be rejected.

The monastic *anachoresis*, in fact, must be made, as it is said in the *Life of Saint Antony* (Athanasius, 1857, col. 853A), “out of virtue.” It is thus of a quite different nature from the *anachoresis* of peasants fleeing from their fiscal obligations. In accomplishing it, the monk separates himself from “the world,” that is, from all the objects (people and things) and occupations that excite the passions and distract the spirit, thus preventing him from being mindful of God alone. In this the monastic *anachoresis* is rather in the tradition of the philosophers and sages of

[Hellenism](#) who withdrew from public life to devote themselves solely to philosophy (Festugière, 1960).

Like them, the monk, by his *anachoresis*, sought what was called *hesychia*, the solitude and the leisure that allow one to devote oneself exclusively, without distraction, to what is considered the supreme good. But, more than that of the sages and philosophers, the *anachoresis* of the monks is a step of an essentially religious character and, as such, belongs to a phenomenon widely represented in the [history](#) of religions, particularly in Judaism and early Christianity. Before the appearance of monasticism, there had been faithful souls who, following the example of Jesus (cf. M. 1:35; Lk. 5:16), withdrew to the desert or into solitude to pray.

The anchoritic life took diverse forms, from the absolute anchoritism of a Saint Antony or a PAUL OF THEBES, who spent the greater part of their lives in complete solitude, to more moderate forms like the semi-anchoritism of the monks of NITRIA and SCETIS, where a judicious balance had been established between the solitary and the communal life. Complete and lasting solitude was not without its own dangers. If the monk in the desert was far removed from the passions and the occupations of the world, he still had to face up to his own thoughts and the assaults of demons; the desert was in fact considered the home of the demons (Guillaumont, 1975).

The [demons](#) warred against the monk either directly, according to the hagiographers, or indirectly, as is shown by the profound analyses of EVAGRIUS PONTICUS, by suggesting to him evil thoughts, which maintained the passions in him in an even more lively manner than the actual objects in the world. Thus, complete *anachoresis* was not advised for beginners and was recommended only for those who already had a long experience of cenobitic, or community, life (cf. Cassian, 1959, 18.4). Reserved for the perfect, it appeared as the highest form of monastic life, as an ideal practically inaccessible to the majority of monks. The

hagiographic literature has embellished with marvelous features the life of the anchorites in the desert.

It shows them dwelling in the company of wild animals, without any clothing, and subsisting on the desert plants. They are also said to have been miraculously fed by the angels, receiving from them, or sometimes from Christ himself, the Eucharist, of which the anchorites found themselves deprived by reason of their isolation. Completely ignored by humans, the anchorite is only discovered at the moment of his death, in order that a decent burial may be assured him and, above all, that his extraordinary life may be known and serve for the edification of all. A fine specimen of this marvelous literature concerning the anchorites is the story of the journey of the monk PAPHNUTIUS into the desert (Amélineau, 1885).

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