

## ***ECONOMIC ACTIVITIES OF MONASTERIES***

Despite schisms, persecutions, occasional devastation by the barbarians, and the Persian and Arab conquests in 619 and 641, respectively, the history of the Egyptian monasteries from the fourth to the eighth centuries constitutes a whole. The period was one of expansion and material prosperity. Various categories of sources—literary, papyrological, and archaeological—indicate this. This is not the place to analyze them or to appraise their value. It is enough to say, by way of delineating the limits of the present essay, that they do not allow of a rigorous, objective, quantified grasp of the facts. Hence, the way in which the subjects broached here have been treated is largely impressionistic.

### **Institutional and Legal Bases of the Monastic Economy**

According to the times and places, the Egyptian monastic economy varied with regard to individual liberty and hierarchical centralism—at times leading to collectivism. Nor is this simply a reflection of the well-known opposition between the lifestyles of the hermit and the cenobite.

Throughout the fourth to eighth centuries, an important element of monasticism wholly escaped the framework of the monasteries. These were the ascetic extremists who had withdrawn into the desert places and were completely isolated, but it also involved an entire urban and village population of both sexes, such as the *remnuoth* spoken of by Saint Jerome with disdain (*Epistle* 22.34), or those [women](#) who “withdrew” into their own houses (cf. Rémondon, 1972, p. 260), or semitramps like Mark the Mad (Clugnet, 1900, pp. 60-62), not to mention the itinerant monks, or *gyrovagues*. These people kept body and soul together as circumstances permitted or their own desires suggested, sometimes in little informal groups, working, trading, or living on their income. In these instances, the monastic economy was indistinguishable from a private domestic economy.

Within organized monasticism, economic individualism played a significant part, but the monasteries displayed some reticence about taking in people who were in financial difficulty. This was to prevent encumbering their own finances and especially to test vocational genuineness. Thus, many monks at the beginning of an ascetic career were in easy circumstances (cf. Cadell, 1967, pp. 195-201 for the papyrological examples, and Martin, 1979, pp. 14f., for the literature). When they entered a monastery, they were entirely at liberty to get rid of their wealth (*Sancti Pachomii Vitae Graecae*, Vita prima, 80) if they thought that by doing so they were doing good works. But generally they held on to it and thereby their full economic and legal capacity. They continued to manage their property in their own way (cf. Cadell, 1967). Moreover, they had at their disposal the products of their labor and what it brought in.

During their time in the monastery, they entered into all sorts of contractual negotiations, whether with their “brother” ascetics or with civil society. Thus, one finds recorded loans (Rémondon, 1972, p. 259, notes in this connection that the monks most frequently figure as creditors), sales, the leasing of houses or lands (cf. Cadell, 1967), and the emancipation of slaves “to redeem their sins.” The cells (*kellia*) and the monasteries themselves were often the property of their lay or ecclesiastical founders.

These assets could give rise to security arrangements or mortgages. They could be passed on to one’s heirs, as in the case of the monastery of the renowned ABRAHAM OF HERMONTHIS (Armant). Despite the protests of the emperor JUSTINIAN, the Egyptian monasteries could be sold even to lay people. For example, the Melitian establishment of Lavla (Hawwarah) and that of Abba Kopreous at Oxyrhynchus were both sold in this way.

To sum up, the institution of monasticism often seems weak and insubstantial in the face of all the private interests involved in it, and in

these instances one might hesitate to speak of a monastic economy. However, historically the trend appears to have reinforced the institution in two ways: the establishment of a specific economic administration going beyond the individual actions of the monks or regulating them, and the working out of protective legal, constitutional rules.

As to the first point, the Pachomian cenobites may have provided an example to follow. In this environment, the economic primacy of the institution was a question of principle. The ways of putting this into practice are well known: an authoritarian division and planning of the work, specialization in the houses, careful bookkeeping, the early institution of local *oekonomi*, or stewards, and of the general stewardship of the order (*Sancti Pachomii Vitae Graecae*, Vita prima, 28, 59, 83).

Outside the Pachomian world, and probably matching the increase in the monasteries' own wealth and the varied developments in economic and commercial links with civil society, the same tendencies reveal themselves, but without such extreme results. Everywhere one can find some evidence of *diakoniai*, "general" and "special stewards," and *dioiketai*, or special funds, though one cannot always define exactly how these words were understood, other than that they related to the management of the common finances and the common property (Kahle, 1954, Vol. 1, pp. 30-40, Vol. 2, fol. 312r).

Sometimes there appears to be a confusion of the superior with the steward, and in all sorts of ways the spiritual director of an establishment carried significant responsibilities of a material and financial nature, especially as regards taxes. In this connection, one must note that the interests of the superior are distinguished on the bookkeeping level from those of the rest of the community. This position was open to purchase at a very high price—up to fifty-three golden solidi. This sum served as caution money for good management (cf. Schmidt, 1932, pp. 60-68; Kahle, 1924, Vol. 2, fol. 312r).

Parallel to the preceding, there developed legal safeguards, with legal personality (*dikaion*) embodied in the person of the superior and legal competency—early attested—to receive legacies and consequently to make a settlement of an estate *in propria persona*. From the sixth century, many monasteries with assets held the status of foundations of public law, comparable to that of the imperial *domus divina* or of the bishops' churches.

Consequently, these assets were *res extra commercium* and thus, in principle, inalienable and not subject to distraint or attachment. Justinian's anger on learning that Egyptian monasteries were sometimes put up for sale demonstrates that in his mind this status must already have been the norm. No trace has been preserved of the legal measures that could enforce it, but one can, without the slightest doubt, gauge their effects. Thus, life leases or long leases were practiced by certain monasteries.

These are instances of direct borrowing from the system of public land grants and implied sizable restrictions on the right to transfer property, in conformity with the general rule expressed in Justinian's Novella 7.1. Also typical of this system, which had a sacralizing effect, was the use of fiscal terminology (e.g., the word *demosion*) to refer to monastic income (cf. the well-known record of the *Kinderschenkungen* [children given as gifts] from western Thebes). Levies on long leases were themselves assimilated to a form of tax (Gascou, 1985, pp. 14-15).

## **Resources of the Monasteries**

A monastery's resources came first and foremost from the monks' work. On this point Egypt gives an example to the rest of the world (Cassian *De institutis coenobiorum* 10.22). However, work in the monastery was not seen as an economic activity but as a form of asceticism, of high moral and religious value, and necessary for mental stability (cf. Guillaumont, 1979, pp. 117-26). Over all, work was divided into "tasks" and "trades." By the

former is meant activities connected with subsistence and with the well-being of the communities. Cooking, baking, weaving, shoemaking, working the fields and the gardens and local mineral resources such as salt, building cells, and the like were often done by the monks themselves. The more manual aspects of these forms of work seem to have been the responsibility sometimes of special staff of relatively low standing, such as the novices or penitents.

The purpose of the trades was the production of goods that could be exchanged. On this point the monasteries specialized very clearly in basketmaking and ropemaking. Evidence for this comes from an abundant [literature](#) and from papyrological documentation. The raw material, palms and reeds, was easily obtained. This simple, mechanical, repetitive activity, which did not require much intellectual concentration and could be accomplished in the seclusion of one's cell, was regarded as well adapted to spiritual discipline.

Thus, in the long run, the monasteries ended up by virtually monopolizing a good proportion of Egyptian production of baskets, mats, and ropes. These articles could be exchanged—MACARIUS THE EGYPTIAN thus obtained bread from the guards at the nitreworks of Scetis—but above all, they were sold. Selling could be the responsibility of the community, of lay wholesalers, or of the workers themselves. The marketing outlets could be very distant; thus, the Pachomians went from Pbow to Alexandria to trade their mats. A legal text preserves a request for a passport submitted to the Arab authorities in the name of Theban monks who wished to go to the Fayyum to sell ropes. On some occasions the customers came to the monastery (e.g., the sailors spoken of in Orlandi, 1975, pp. 66-67).

One of the best-attested trades is weaving. Documentation comes primarily from the "Holy Mountain of Djeme" at western Thebes. There one finds archaeological traces of the installation of weaving looms in the cells, and the written sources give detailed information on the raw

materials, palm fibers and flax (so much sought after that some Alexandrian monks came to the Thebaid to look for it), and production standards. A whole manufacturing organization, which had an influence on civil society, had developed around DAYR EPIPHANIUS and required the aid of employees. The establishment supplied the neighborhood with linen and cloths. Some monks contracted with the peasants for the production of tow.

Of course, other trades were practiced, too, but these occupations are much less well documented than the foregoing. However, one must mention at Scetis and in the Fayyum work done in the fields for a wage, (18), painting, and the copying of books.

Income from work in principle allowed everyone to cater to his own needs and to save a little. In weaving, it was even possible to [grow](#) rich (up to one hundred solidi, according to Jerome, *Epistle* 22.33). Thus, economically speaking, the work of the monks was in no way either a token performance or a marginal activity.

Very soon, and above all among the Pachomians, the monasteries came to control other, very powerful resources. It is correct to say that to a great extent they owed these to their own endeavors and ingenuity, for instance, in the Tabennesiote Nile flow transport business that was so characteristic of this milieu; likewise, they owed it to their toil, for instance, in clearing land or working mines at Qalamun. Many acquisitions of land or items of equipment were financed from the communities' own funds or from the "portions" contributed by the monks. Here one must mention banking as contributing to gains in this category.

Individually, but also as a body, the monks indulged in the giving of credit. Credit— which is to say usury—was veiled by sales on delivery, a type of transaction several times attested in the archives of the Hermopolis Monastery of Abba Apollos of Titkois (cf. Harrauer and Sijpesteijn, 1982, pp. 296-302), relating to wine and grain.

It would, however, appear that the chief road to wealth was by way of assistance from the outside world, the diocesan ecclesiastical hierarchy, the upper echelons of the administration, and the laity. This aid was not always spontaneous. The monks would canvass, soliciting from door to door. A letter sent by an Oxyrhynchus community to a lay potentate illustrates this: “We beg your Lordship to ordain that we be sent the liberality which it is the custom of your illustrious house to bestow on us, so that we may give your Lordship our thanks and, sinners as we are, may send up to heaven our customary prayers for the health of your Lordship and for the prosperity of your illustrious house” (Rémondon, 1972, p. 272).

The import of this text lies in its indication that the “consideration” that lay people preoccupied with their salvation were entitled to expect was prayers. This concern was paramount when a person was “at the article of death”; thus, some donations to the monasteries are in the nature of funerary foundations. In 570, Phoibammon, the principal physician of ANTINOOPOLIS, bequeathed to a Monastery of Apa Jeremiah an inalienable plot of vineyard “as an eternal memorial for the rest of his soul” and for the expense of his perpetual commemorative mass (prosphora). His body was to be buried in the monastery, and his name recorded in the register of deaths. The preferred location of monasteries on the *jabal* (mountain), the traditional site of the cemetery, predisposed them to carry out the service of taking charge of corpses.

It is hard to list the entire range of oblations. These could be occasional gifts or bounties in kind, in cash, in precious articles, or even in the form of servants with the standing of oblates, which would be left behind by visitors or pilgrims, or left in their [wills](#) by pious people thinking of their approaching demise, or fulfilling a vow. They could also be acts of patronage, like that of Caesarius, who built or restored the church of DAYR ANBA SHINUDAH, or the White Monastery (cf. Monneret de Villard, 1925-1926, Vol. 1, pp. 18-20).

[Oblations](#) were frequently presented in the form of regular annual payments, which was of particular economic advantage: thus, a widow of Oxyrhynchus provided the Monastery of SAMU'IL OF QALAMUN annually with three measures of oil (van Cauwenbergh, 1914, p. 117). Other offerings were more substantial: the consul Apion II, around 565, was sending annually two hundred double measures of low-quality wine to an establishment of Abba Jeremias. Archbishop John the Almoner maintained the monasteries that he had founded with the income from [lands](#) that he possessed in his native township of Amathonta. Finally, one should mention that the emperor [Zeno](#) ordained that the monks of Saint Macarius of Scetis be provided with all they required in the way of corn, wine, and oil, and all they needed to equip their cells.

Many a gift boiled down in the end to a capital endowment: ships, cattle, workshops, agricultural lands, and, above all, real estate. Thus the monasteries, despite the apprehensions of Theodorus (*Sancti Pachomii vitae graecae*, Vita prima, 146), quickly found themselves in charge of substantial patrimonies.

The surviving information about the management of patrimonies relates primarily to wealth in the form of land. Latifundia (large landed estates) were a rarity. Rather, because of the chance nature of [oblations](#) and acquisitions, one finds references to numerous lots, often small and isolated and quite far from the monastic centers themselves. Thus the [lands](#) of the renowned Dayr Anba [Shinudah](#) are scattered about in the village of Aphrodito, 31 miles (50 km) to the north, in the Panopolis, and in the Hermopolis and Antinoopolis areas.

In Panopolis one finds analogous cases with the Monastery of Zmin or Smin, which is the Tesmine of the Pachomian corpus. This parceling out and geographical dispersion explain in part why the most valued method of cultivation was tenant farming. Thus the monasteries were content to pocket the rents in cash or in kind that were made available from their tenants, who were treated with neither more nor less harshness than by

lay proprietors. They did not intervene in agricultural or industrial production. These revenues could give rise to resale. [Bishop Theodorus](#) of Pentapolis purchased fifteen hundred knidia of wine from the Tabennesiote monastery of Pouinkoris (Hermopolitan), and a curious little Coptic text in the John Rylands Museum relates the resale of cucumbers belonging to the Monastery of Saint Phoibammon.

It is difficult to measure the scope of land acquisitions. According to a fiscal roll dating in all probability from the beginning of the eighth century it is clear that the Monastery of Saint Jeremias of Saqqara was one of the biggest taxpayers in the region of Memphis. This enables one to gauge its wealth indirectly. The land register of Aphrodito from the beginning of the sixth century, relating to a quarter of the ground area of this village, shows that 33 percent of the [lands](#) were already in the hands of the local or neighboring monasteries.

There are reasons for thinking that for the other three quarters, the proportion hardly differed. On the level of villages like Aphrodito, the monasteries were therefore powers to be reckoned with and were standards of economic measurement, as indicated by the texts where the total amount of income is calculated in accordance with the bushel (*metron*) “of the mountain,” “of the monastery,” or “of the monk” (Drew-Bear, 1979, pp. 291ff.).

Only one monastery out of the twenty at present known appears in a list of the principal taxpayers of Oxyrhynchus, for a very modest payment. There is none in a comparable contemporary list. The records from Hermopolis and Antinoopolis, attesting to the existence of more than forty monasteries, in no way leads one to think that there was a significant concentration of landed property in their hands, though it is true that the Bawit archives are unpublished.

Actually, given the available information, which includes no data of consequence for Lower Egypt (Alexandrian groups, Nitria, Kellia, and

Scetis), it does not look as if the wealth of the monasteries in landed property had developed to the extent of that of the patriarchate, the imperial crown, the various bishops' churches, or the lay dignitaries, such as the Apions. As far as can be judged, the monasteries were reasonably well-to-do, but the distribution of their wealth was very uneven, for the road to riches depends on numerous circumstances that not every monastery could compass.

Geographical position was very important. It is, for instance, certain that the riches of the Pachomians owed much to their care not to settle their establishments too far from civil centers or waterways. The proximity of a city like Alexandria or Antinoopolis *a fortiori* favored the inflow of oblations. Allowance must be made for ability in popularizing the cult of a saint, establishing a bishop's residence (e.g., DAYR AL-BAHRI), and, in times of schism, maintaining trusting relations with the "Melchite" archbishop or the imperial power. It was simply a question of good management of their affairs, for there are examples of monasteries in difficulties, stripped of everything, burdened with debt or victimized by dishonest monks. Thus one finds an extreme variety of cases, from the richest to the poorest.

## Outlays

Monastic wealth and income basically provided for internal consumption and various redistribution purposes.

Despite their ideals of autarchy and hard work, the monks were not always in a position to be wholly self-sufficient. Receipts in kind helped directly, and income in the form of money served for the procurement of goods or services. For example, the stylites of Antinoopolis had a contractual arrangement for their supply of water with a professional ass-driver. The monks of the Oktokaidekaton purchased oil and wheat at Alexandria.

Part of the receipts had to be used for the maintenance of the buildings, especially places of worship, for which nothing was too fine, as evidenced in the excavations at Bawit and Saqqara. Divine service, with its multiplicity of funerary masses and festivals, certainly also involved sizable expenses for the sacramental species (wheat and wine) and for the lighting (oil). But clearly it was in redistribution activities that the monasteries swallowed up the best part of their surpluses.

Both the [literature](#) and the papyri forcefully proclaim that one of the first duties of the monks is to aid the weak and especially the poor, though it is not clear what was meant by this at that period. Almsgiving was practiced on an individual basis by drawing on income from work or in the name of the community itself. Internal services and special funds were expressly dedicated to this purpose, subsidized by the monks' personal surpluses or by foundations. Thus these establishments were enabled, for example, to undertake food distributions.

[The White Monastery](#) and the Monastery of Samu'il of Qalamun were well known for their generosity. People who were in difficulties either begged directly from the establishments or used third parties, by way of written recommendations, in sufficient numbers to discern a "routine" for charity. One may justly assume that on such occasions many unfair advantages and injustices must have crept in. The "weak" also included those in prison, whom the monasteries were much exercised to feed and to assist. The redemption of captives also constituted part of the good works that certain donors wished to ensure was done.

Not very different from charity was the welcome afforded to travelers, pilgrims, or monks on the move. This involved sizable expenses. The monastic inns (*xenodochia*) could make a profit. In Nitria, hospitality without a consideration in return was afforded only for a week.

These budgets, already severely encumbered, had to bear the additional burden of "gifts" to the bishop's church, which were never spontaneous

but were demanded on certain feast days. Even the bishop seems to have carved out for himself the lion's share of the income of the religious establishments (Wipszycka, 1972, p. 130).

In the Byzantine period, the monasteries paid taxes because of their landed estates. It was for tax purposes that their [lands](#) were entered in the land register, and in fact, many monasteries are found among payers in the Hermopolis fiscal codices of the beginning of the seventh century. Under the Umayyads there was to be added the personal tax, which was rather heavy. In this field the financial liability lay on the superior. The monasteries also provided their fiscal guarantee to any taxpayer who was in distress, and this meant that sometimes they had to pay.

### **The Monasteries and the General Economy of Egypt**

For lack of overall data, this part of the subject is the most delicate and the most difficult to handle in an objective manner. A.

M. Jones (1986, Vol. 2, p. 933) is slightly patronizing in his description of a "huge army of clergy and monks" as "idle mouths, living upon offerings, endowments and state subsidies." It is quite true, in line with Jones, that in certain respects the monasticism of the late empire, and especially in Egypt, represented a burden and a high economic and social expense.

Reliable figures as to the population of the Egyptian monasteries, both in detail and in general, are lacking, but there is every indication that it must have been in the tens of thousands of men and women (see the summary of the literary sources in Johnson and West, 1949, pp. 67f.). But as there is no acceptable means of estimating the total Egyptian population, one may jibe at speaking of the monks as a "huge army." On the basis of the archives, the impression is that civil society did not find monasticism importunate or burdensome.

Nevertheless, the monks did represent a significant population that was

withdrawn from the function of reproduction and established in the often very difficult conditions of the desert fringes of the valley or of the interior desert, and was that much more difficult to feed, clothe, house, and care for. Also, these regions were insecure, being the first to be exposed to the incursions of Libyan and Saracen tribes, and this involved costs for their protection. The pilgrim known as Antoninus of Piacenza thus saw in Wadi Feiran in Sinai part of the local civil population organized into territorial militias that drew their provisions and uniforms from Egypt and whose purpose it was to defend the monasteries and the hermits against the Arabs (Geyer, 1964, p. 150).

Sometimes the army was quartered in the monastery, as at Pbow under Justinian. It is known that the upkeep of personnel was a burden on the budgets of the neighboring municipalities of Antaeopolis and Apollinopolis Parva.

One cannot mitigate the drawbacks associated with the monks by citing the multiplicity of their humanitarian activities, for despite their high social and moral value, they were sterile in a strictly economic sense. There are, however, certain subtle aspects to this reproach of sterility that cannot be ignored. Demographically speaking, although it is true that the monasteries took in very young people and sometimes even children and thus withdrew them from the generative cycle, it is also true that many a monk was the father of a family but found in the monasteries the opportunity for an honorable retirement after a very full life.

This was so in the case of the *protokometes* (headman) Apollos, father of the poet DIOSCORUS OF APHRODITO. As to the cost of the monks' upkeep, it should be remembered that even without its reaching the excessive degree of privation related in the [literature](#) and without its being basically different from that of present-day Egyptian peasants, their lifestyle was most frugal: no meat and little in the way of genuinely cooked food. Moreover, there is every reason to think, as shown above, that the tasks and trades that occupied the monks covered in large

measure the costs of their upkeep.

What is more, it can be argued that monasticism offered a certain number of clear economic advantages for society and the state in Byzantine Egypt. In the first place, the monasteries were centers of population and, as such, developed regions normally given over to solitude or to burial grounds, like the fringes of the desert, or else abandoned by the civil populations. Sometimes the Pachomians installed themselves near deserted villages. By their activities in clearing the ground and in mining, the monks of Qalamun restored to life the site south of the Fayyum.

Dayr Abu Lifa maintained a human presence to the north of Lake Qarun, whereas the corresponding civil site, Soknopaïounesos, had long since returned to the desert (Munier, 1937, pp. 1-5). Regular links, commercial intercourse, and pilgrimages became established between these advanced positions of Egyptian society and the Nile Valley. The defense of the country acquired there a strategic depth that made up for the military costs.

Furthermore, the monasteries stimulated production, directly by their own activities, trades, and involvement in activities related to the surrounding world (e.g., Pachomian boat transportation) and indirectly by their role in banking (providing loans for putting ground under cultivation) and, above all, by developing safe economic areas through subinfeudation. For example, long-term leases created tenures that were more advantageous than private property.

For a relatively modest annual levy, the lessee obtained on a transmissible life basis an asset that was immune from seizure but open to transfer of rights, if necessary, and was tax-free, as the levy took the place of the taxes. It was thus possible to devote one's attention with every confidence to the improvement of the estate.

If truth be told, many private fortunes must have been built up at the

expense of the monasteries. One may instance those of the prosperous agricultural entrepreneurs such as Phoibammon, son of Triadelphos, a farmer of [the White Monastery](#) and of the Monastery of Apa Sourous (cf. Keenan, 1980, p. 151), or those of many lay people who protected their wealth by using it wholly or partly to found or endow a monastery, reserving the right of managing it on the material side by various expedients. An assured example of these slightly questionable foundations exists in the *diakonia* of the Holy Apostles of Aphrodito, established by Apollos, the rich yeoman, whose son Dioscorus later became curator.

Trusteeship by lay curators, which was an economic and financial administration, seems to have been widespread at the time. It could, moreover, be requested by the monks themselves as a remedy for material difficulties or as insurance against insecurity. There was what appears to be the beginning of a contract of trusteeship entered into by the Apions of Oxyrhynchus with an unknown monastery, showing the range of responsibilities granted to these potentates.

The result is as described by Rémondon (1972, p. 274): “On the one hand, the monastery is transformed into a production center, a workshop operating for a powerful family; on the other hand, into a distribution center for their personal alms, i.e., into a pressure or propaganda tool. Thus in P. Oxy. [16.]1952 is found the injunction from the illustrious house (of the Apions) to the most holy Pamouthios, [archimandrite](#) of the Monastery of the Consubstantiality, to distribute 600 loaves to the people of Tarouthinon, viz. 200 persons” (1972, p. 274). These extreme examples show the monasteries operating to the advantage of the lay world and in a position of total subordination.

Finally, the state profited, not only in fiscal terms but also by the multiplicity of services demanded. Thus very soon Pachomian boat transportation—that of the Tabennese monastery in this instance— had to take its share in the *navicularia functio* (naval operation), in the

transportation of the wheat tax. In the sixth and seventh centuries this service was still weighing on the Pachomians, in this case the renowned Alexandrian establishment of the Metanoia, whose boatmen sailed throughout Egypt. In the Arab period, the authorities continued to require the services of the monasteries for public transportation work: the Monastery of Qalamun thus had to lend out its camels to take wheat to Clysma. It is also known that the Byzantines deposited their fiscal receipts in the White Monastery, using it as a kind of bank.

To sum up, the Egyptian monasteries gave back to the civil world a good portion of what they had cost it, by the guarantees, the instances of patronage, and the various services and opportunities for profit that they provided.

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