

## ***Funerary Aspects in the paintings from the Apollo Monastery at Bawit***

### **Introduction**

Much has been written about the monastic settlement of Bawit and it seems a daring task to try and add something substantially new to this. First of all, we have limited access to the material on which we can base our conclusions. Only a small part of the total area occupied by the monastic settlement was investigated, and if one makes a rough estimate it may not be more than about 5 percent (Torp 1957: 513). The excavations by Cledat, Chassinat, Palanque, and Maspero in the beginning of the twentieth century were carried out according to the standards of those days and the material published by the excavators is fragmentary and leaves us with many questions. Even the valuable addition to the publication of Cledat by Dominique Benazeth and Marie-Helene Rutschowskaya (Benazeth and Rutschowskaya 1999) is not sufficient to answer all these questions.

One of the basic questions concerns the function of the buildings that have been called *chapelles* by Jean Cledat and *salles* by Gaston Maspero. In this chapter, I will try to shed light on this function on the basis of the iconography of the mural paintings that have been found here. When Cledat excavated the site of Bawit he mistakenly supposed he was dealing with a monastic cemetery and, as a result, named the non-[ecclesiastical](#) buildings that he found *chapelles*.

When Maspero continued the work from 1913, he corrected this after discovering that no tomb was to be found under any of the buildings and, more appropriately, interpreted them as the living quarters of the monks of the settlement, giving them the name of *salles* in his publication (Maspero 1932-43, vol. 5). The names by which the buildings were indicated was changed, but this does not imply that all questions surrounding their functions have been solved. In his lemma on the

Of building operations in the area of the *kom* of Bawit, at least in the fifth and sixth centuries, we know nothing for certain (extent, architectural form, and function), and therefore, for the time being, should rule out neither any future confirmation of the conventional interpretations nor the possibility of perhaps surprising new insights (such as the possibility that the first building phase was a cemetery). (Severin 1991: 366)

There are reasons to believe that at least a number of the buildings were not just cells, but had other functions. As in the monastery of Apa Jeremias in Saqqara, many cells were equipped with an oriented niche containing painted decoration that resembled the paintings in apses. Some of these rooms have an elongated shape, with a width that is a multiple of its depth.

This is the case in, for instance, *salles* 5 and 6 (Maspero 1932-43: pl. I). In other cases, rooms are more or less square or rectangular, but for none of them does a liturgical function seem likely. The presence of an apse-like niche, however, suggests that they were used for devotional purposes, in the case of the elongated rooms allowing the monks to stand next to each other in a row, facing the apse/niche.

According to the *Historia Monachorum in Aegypto*, the monks would celebrate the liturgy daily, apparently in one of the churches (Rufinus, *Historia Monachorum* 7: 13,4; Schulz-Fliigel 1990: 302). That could mean that the *chappelles* or *salles* were mainly used as *oratoria* for the prayers of the hours and other prayers. This is not a new conclusion, but the next question would be what the painted decoration in these rooms can tell us about their use and function.

The decoration in the eastern niches, as mentioned, has in most cases a clear reference to apse decoration and as such raises no specific questions, but a number of recurring subjects on the walls of these

rooms, such as hunting scenes, are more difficult to explain in the context of *oratoria* for groups or individual monks.

In 1957, Hjalmar Torp published an article in *Byzantion* that apparently and unfortunately has remained unnoticed by many. It is rarely mentioned in publications concerning the use and function of the architecture of Bawit, but it could give us a clue nevertheless concerning additional aspects of the rooms in Bawit and their decoration. Torp draws a [parallel](#) between the construction of monastic dwellings such as the ones in Bawit and the architecture of late antique and early Christian tombs.

Of the approximately seventy buildings unearthed in Bawit, more than forty have barrel vaults, mostly in combination with remains or evidence for the existence of an upper floor. These upper floors were not supported by the barrel vault, but by wooden beams, a construction highly unusual in house architecture, but all the more usual in tombs, such as those in the cemetery of Tuna al-Gebel, fifteen kilometers north of Bawit (Torp 1957: 526–29).

Torp's explanation for the resemblance between tombs and monastic buildings is that the latter consisted of an upper story that functioned as the living quarters for the monks, while the vaulted ground floor rooms were intended as funerary chapels for burial and commemoration rites (Torp 1957: 530–38). In this conclusion, Torp returns partially to the [interpretation](#) of Cledat, who also attributed a funerary function to the *chappelles*.

*This* remarkable conclusion raises at least two questions. The first one is whether the painted decoration of these rooms can support Torp's view. A second question is why so many funerary chapels are present within the compound of a monastery. Would a church not be sufficient for such funerary rituals? In order to go deeper into this matter we will have to take a closer look at a number of iconographical themes that recur in the

decoration of these presumed funerary chapels. Although certain themes are unique, others can be found in a number of varieties. If Torp is right, these paintings should have a link with funerary iconography.

## Hunting Scenes

A small group of mural paintings that seems difficult to explain in a Christian monastic context depicts hunting scenes. One example can be found in *chapelle* XVIII, where we see representations of two childlike hunters, dressed in short [tunics](#) and trousers, and a gazelle in octagonal frames that are part of a geometrical pattern (Cledat 1916: pls. LXIV, LXV) (fig. 22.1). In *chapelle* XII, a hunter with bow and arrow is depicted as he shoots an arrow through the head of a lion (Cledat 1904–1906: pl. XXXVII).

The most elaborate, though only partly preserved, hunting scene known so far is in *chapelle* XXXVII, where a group of hunters (four are visible) are involved in a hunt for deer. Their dress also consists of short [tunics](#) and trousers. We know examples of hunting scenes from various contexts in late Roman art, such as floor mosaics, but from 220–30 onward they also occur in considerable numbers in so-called hunting sarcophagi (Koch and Sichtermann 1982: 92–97; Andrae 1980).

They represent the hunt of various kinds of game, such as deer and wild boar in, for instance, a sarcophagus from Arles [\[1\]](#) or of Hons as depicted in a sarcophagus from Spoleto. [\[2\]](#) Hunting scenes must have occurred frequently, not only as reliefs on sarcophagi, but also in the painted decoration of Roman tombs, though fewer of these tomb paintings have survived.

A provincial example of such a hunting scene was found in a tomb in Pantikapaion (nowadays Kerch, Ukraine) (Rostovtzeff 1919: pl. LXXIX). A good [parallel](#) for the hunting boys from *chapelle* XVIII is a painting from a Roman tomb in Silistra (modern Bulgaria), where a small boy, also

Monastery at Bawit 5 painted in an octagonal frame, hunts a wild boar (Dorigo 1971: fig. 184) (fig. 22.2).

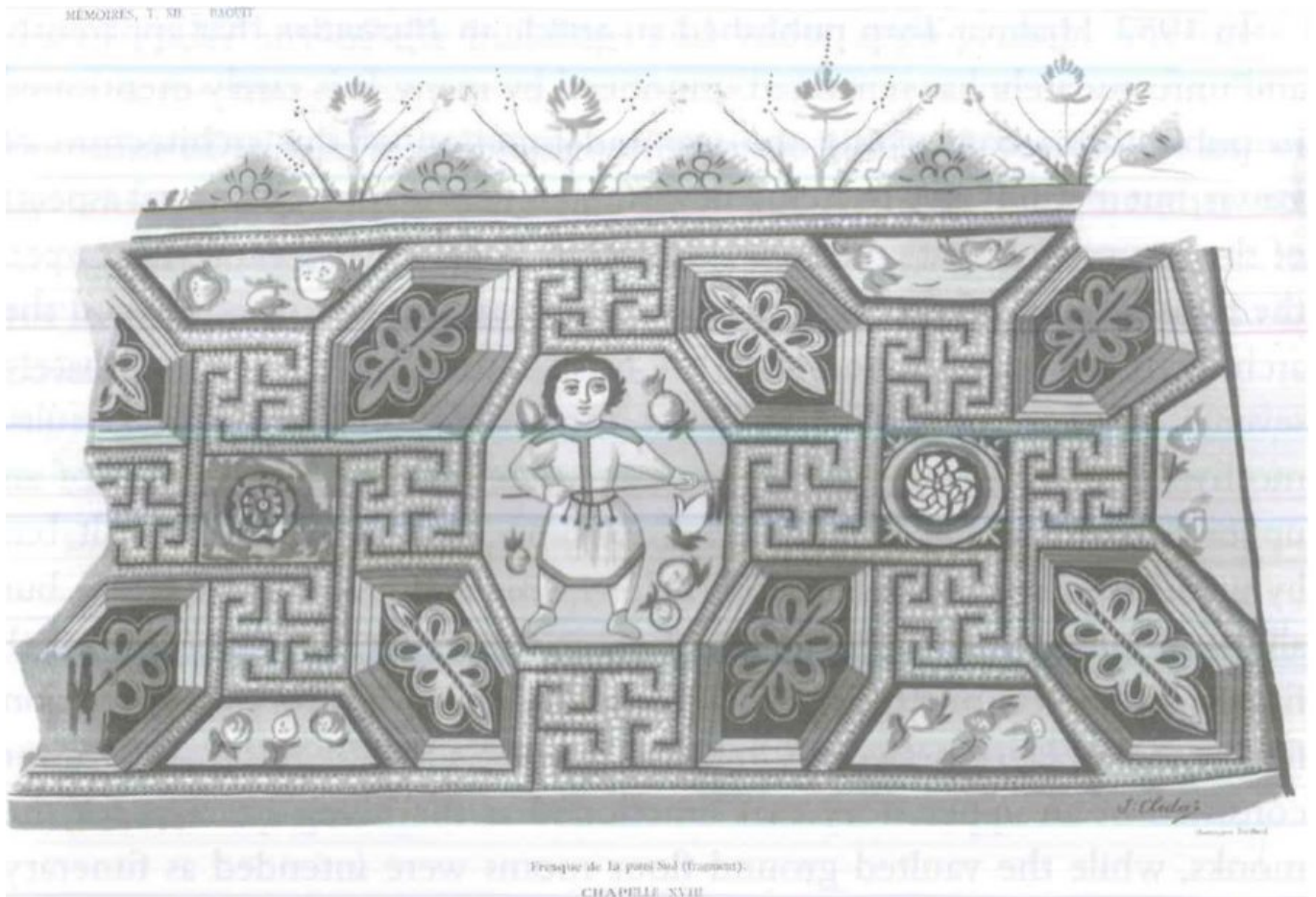


Fig. 22.1. Bawit, watercolor after a detail from chapelle XVIII: a boy hunting a gazelle (Cledat 1904-1906).



Fig. 22.2. A boy hunting a boar, detail from a tomb in Silistra (Bulgaria) (Dorigo)

### **The *Imago Clipeata***

In a number of rooms in Bawit, we encounter representations of busts in a round frame (*clipeus*) supported by winged figures, in this Christian context to be identified as angels. In *chappelle XVIII*, for instance, over the niche in the eastern wall, two angels lift a *clipeus* that most probably contained a bust of Christ (Cledat 1916: pl. LIX).

In 1976, a painting of a bust of Christ in a *clipeus*, *lifted* by two angels, was excavated in Bawit by the Egyptian Antiquities Organization and moved to the Coptic Museum (Gabra 2006: fig. 56) (fig. 22.3). Not only Christ, but also saints have been represented in a similar way. In *chappelle XXXII*, for instance, John the Baptist and Zachariah have been painted in

this way in niches on the northern and eastern walls (Cledat 1904–1906: pl. VIII).

The origin of this *imago clipeata* lies in the Roman iconography of the apotheosis, a theme often occurring in a funerary context, in which the portrait of a deceased is supported by *genii* or *erotes*. As such it occurs frequently on marble sarcophagi<sup>[3]</sup> (Koch and Sichtermann 1982: 238–41) (fig. 22.4), and also in mural paintings, such as, for instance, in the tomb of Aelia Arisuth in Gargaresh (Libya) (Dorigo 1971: fig. 165).

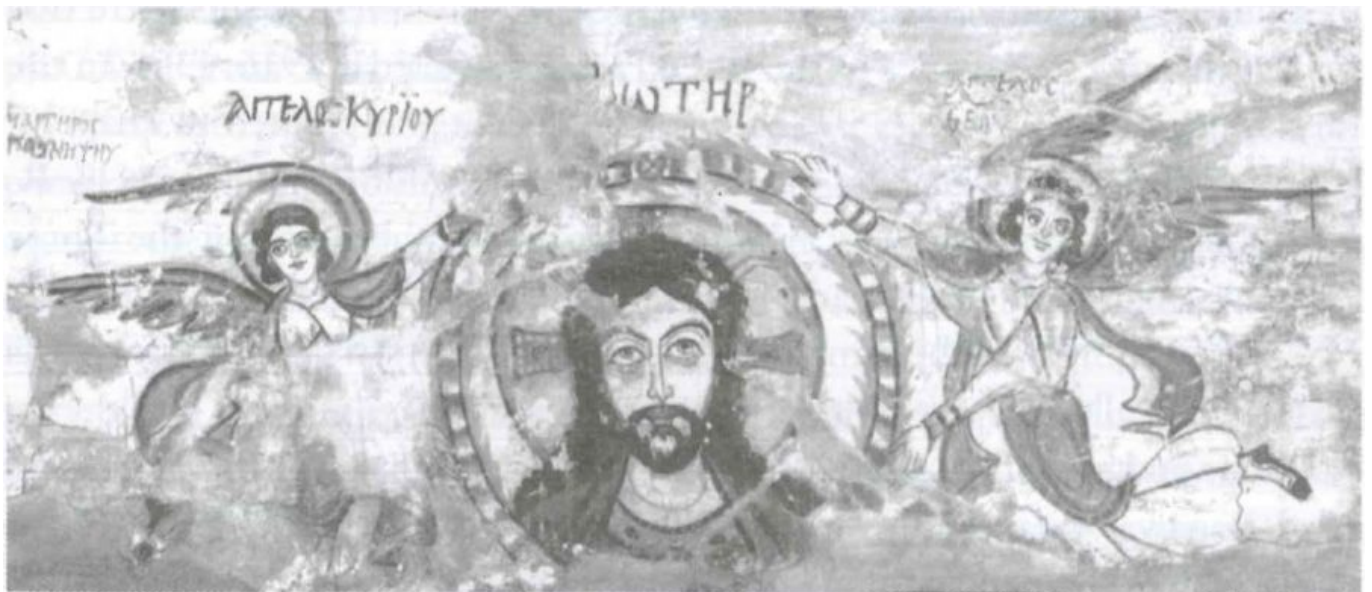


Fig. 22.3. Bust of Christ in a clipeus, supported by angels, from Bawit, now in the Coptic Museum, Cairo (Gabra 2006).



Fig. 22.4. Roman sarcophagus, third quarter of the third century, with an *imago clipeata* of the deceased, now in the Pushkin Museum, Moscow (<http://ancien-trome.ru/art/artworken/img.htm?id=3757>).

## Men in the Fiery Furnace

A third theme that can be found frequently in both a monastic and a funerary context is that of the three Hebrews in the fiery furnace, the biblical story taken from . In Bawit it was represented in *salle* 30 (Maspero 1932—43:pl. XLV), but reference to the story can also be found in the form of graffiti, such as the ones in *chappelle* XIX, on the western wall, where two graffiti just give the names of the three Hebrews (Cledat 1916:112). In the monastery of Apa Jeremias in Saqqara, the subject was painted in chapel F (Quibell 1908: pl. LVII).

The painting that was found in Wadi Sarga by R. Campbell Thompson in 1913/14 and that shows the scene of the Three Hebrews may have been made for a monastic dwelling as well.<sup>[4]</sup> In early Christian Roman art the same theme occurs frequently in a funerary context, specifically in catacomb paintings and sarcophagi reliefs.<sup>[5]</sup> The theme can be found not only in the Mediterranean area, but also in the necropolis of al-Bagawat (mausoleum of the Exodus) (Cipriano 2008: 145—46).

Its popularity as a funerary theme can be explained by the fact that the Three Hebrews are mentioned in the *Commendatio animae*, the prayer for the salvation of the soul of the deceased that was in use from the third century on. Here, the deliverance of the soul is compared to a number of biblical stories in which faith or the mercy of God save the just in danger (Brown Tkacz 1991: 488).

Not only do we have iconographical parallels for the theme in funerary contexts, there is also an apothegm that refers to the Three Hebrews and compares the cell of the monks directly to the furnace:

An elder said: “A monk’s cell is the furnace of Babylon, in which the three children found the Son of God, and the pillar of cloud, from which God spoke with Moses.” (*Apophthegmata Patruin*, Anonymous series, Wortley 2013:147 [N.206/7.46])



From this short aphorism, we learn that the cell is considered the place where the monk communicates with God and, implicitly, a place of salvation.

## **Decorative Patterns; Floral and Animal Decoration**

Apart from iconic and narrative themes, we find a number of elements in the geometrical, floral, and animal decoration of rooms in Bawit that have clear correspondences with paintings from late Roman tombs. The painting of the hunting boy from *chapelle* XVIII (Cledat 1916: pls. LXIV, LXV) shows a geometrical framework that consists of octagons and cross shapes, filled in with a meander pattern.

This pattern may have been used in several situations, ranging from floor mosaics to ceiling decoration in private houses, but two close parallels happen to be from Roman tombs, one in a third- or fourth-century tomb in Abila (Jordan) (Ling 1991: fig. 208), the other one in cubiculum N in the catacomb of the Via Latina (Ferrua 1960: pl. CXI; Ferrua 1991: fig. 124).

There are more elements in the decorative painting from Bawit for which parallels can be found in a funerary context. The grapevines that come out of ajar on the south wall in *chapelle* XIX (Cledat 1916: pls. LXXXII, LXXXIII) could of course be interpreted as purely decorative, but in late Roman funerary art they are used frequently, in both non-Christian and Christian symbolism, to refer to the cult of Dionysos-[Bacchus](#) or the blood of Christ, respectively (Thomas 1990: col. 494—95).

The same can be said of the peacocks, painted flanking a cross on the west wall of the same room (Cledat 1904—1906: pl. XXIX) (fig. 22.5), a motif that occurs frequently in tomb decoration, in the Mediterranean area and also in Egypt, as a symbol of eternal life and a reference to Paradise (Kramer 1990: col. 409—11) (fig. 22.6).[\[6\]](#)

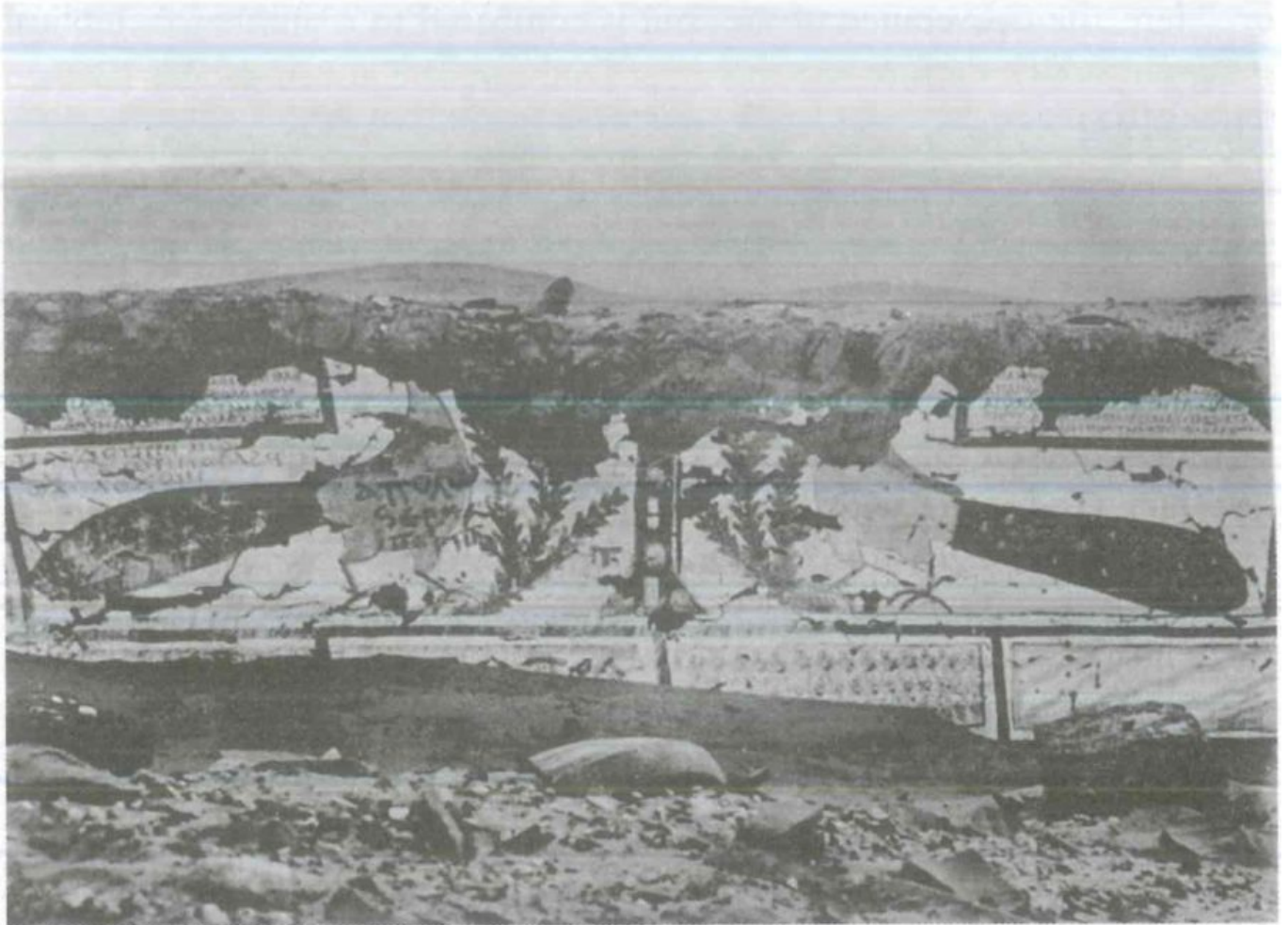


Fig. 22.5. Bawit, two peacocks flanking a cross, western wall of chapelle XIX (Cledat 1904-1906).



Fig. 22.6. Theodosia between Saints Colluthos and Maria, watercolor after the painting in her tomb in Antinoe (Zibawi 2003).

Other animals that occur in paintings in Bawit are gazelles and birds of prey (eagles). In *chapelle XXVII*, for instance, we find an eagle with triple *bulla* around the neck (Cledat 1904-1906: pl. XCIII). Gazelles are found in a number of paintings, especially in *chapelle XVII* where they accompany standing figures of monks and the personification of Ekklesia.

A close [parallel](#) for representations of these animals in the context of a tomb chamber is the recently discovered tomb with chapel near Dayr [Anba Shenoute](#) near Sohag. In the underground vault, the decoration consists of crosses flanked by gazelles and eagle-like birds, framed by decorative borders with meander patterns (Bolman, Davis, and Pyke 2010). Not only the shape of the architecture, but also the decoration, shows that the rooms in Bawit have in many cases a close similarity to tombs.

## The Monk's Dwelling as a Tomb

On balance, after analyzing the iconography of a number of paintings from rooms in Bawit, we can come to the conclusion that there are close parallels to themes that occur frequently in late Roman funerary art, ranging from reliefs on sarcophagi to paintings in Christian catacombs. Elisabetta Lucchesi-Palli, after analyzing the iconography of the hunting scenes and decorative and floral patterns in Bawit, came to the conclusion that the painters who decorated these rooms must have had an elaborate knowledge of Roman paintings and mosaics, especially from the Syro-Palestine region (Lucchesi-Palli 1988 and 1990).

If we go one step further in our analysis we can say that they were also well informed about funerary iconography. None of the themes discussed above have a purely funerary character—hunting scenes, grapevines, and peacocks occur in house decoration as well—but it is their occurrence in combination with each other that reinforces the similarity with tomb decoration.

Hjalmar Torp came to the conclusion that the construction of these rooms, in their architectural resemblance to tombs, was to be explained by their function as commemorative chapels.

This aspect may certainly not have been absent, but primarily these so-called chapels bear a resemblance to tombs, and this cannot be a coincidence. From a number of texts, especially the *Apophthegmata Patrum*, we know that the monk considered his cell a tomb, either in a metaphorical sense or literally.

From countless cases in Egypt, we know that rock-cut tombs were transformed into cells or small monasteries (the west banks of Thebes and Aswan are just two examples) or that monastic settlements were built on necropolises, as in the case of Apa Jeremias's monastery near Saqqara. On one hand, this had the practical advantage of having ready-to-use

accommodation or building material to be reused at hand, while on the other, there was the ideological reason of seeking confrontation with the pagan spirits as part of a life of *askesis*.<sup>[7]</sup>

But even more important was the ideal of the monk becoming ‘dead to the world,’ reaching a state of *apatheia* in which the monk would be indifferent to scorn or praise, as Macarius advised a young brother in one of the apothegms (Macarius 23, Ward 1975: 132). We find the same advice in different wordings, such as in an apothegm of Moses:

A brother questioned Abba Moses saying, “I see something in front of me and I am not able to grasp it.” The old man said to him, “If you do not become dead like those who are in the tomb, you are not able to grasp it.” (Moses 11, Ward 1975:140—41)

As a consequence, the tomb is considered a place of salvation of the soul:

A brother said to Abba Poemen, “What should I do?” The old man said to him, “When Abraham entered the promised land he bought a sepulcher for himself and by means of this tomb he inherited the land.” The brother said to him, “What is the tomb?” The old man said, “The place of tears and compunction.” (Poemen 50, Ward 1975:173)

The cell as a tomb can be seen as a metaphor, but in some cases, we can see how certain monks took it literally. In one of the anonymous apothegms a Father from Sinai goes to Egypt with his pupil and comes to the town of Kuno. In the morning, they see the people of the town go to the cemetery to lament their dead till the third hour. The Father then proposes that his pupil erect tombs for the two of them after coming back to their cells to lament their own souls (Anonymous series, N. 592, 1, Wortley 2013: 401).

## **The Aspect of the Oratorium**

The themes depicted on the walls of the rooms in Bawit strongly suggest a metaphorical character as a tomb for the monk(s) living on the upper floor of the same building. But, on the other hand, there is the aspect of a prayer room, as we have seen, clearly indicated by the presence of the miniature apses in the eastern walls. Judging from the number of these rooms in the complex, it seems unlikely that they were used for funerary [ritual](#) only, as Torp suggested, but rather for the daily liturgy of the hours.

In that case, the monks would be standing next to each other in files, facing east. In a number of rooms there are rows of persons depicted on the western wall, as is the case of, for instance, *chappelles* XVII, XVIII, XXVI, and XXVIII (Cledat 1904—1906: 79,92—94,133,157—58). These persons can be saints, but often we find representations of monks and saints standing side by side. Some of these monks are standing with their hands raised, in a gesture of prayer, as in *chapelle* XXVI (Cledat 1904—1906:pl. LXXXVII).

We do not know whether these monks were portrayed during their lifetime, but it is perhaps more likely that what we have here are commemorative representations, again comparable to funerary paintings such as the painting of Theodosia from Antinoe, standing with raised arms between Saints Colluthos and Maria (fig. 22.6). We find similar representations in Roman catacombs, where families are reunited after death by their representations in the tomb.[\[8\]](#)

In several rooms, names of monks and saints have been added on the western (and other) walls, apparently in addition to the paintings. Thus the representations of the monks and saints on the western walls of the *oratoria* and the names added later may have been intended as their literal *re-presentations*, images that substitute the real presence of persons, joining the living monks in their daily prayers.[\[9\]](#)

In this way, the living monks would be reunited with their spiritual

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ancestors in their praise of God. A [parallel](#) for such an iconographical composition outside of Bawit can be found in the church of the Holy Virgin in Dayr al-Suryan. On two half-columns in the *khurus*, facing east, are the representations of two monks.

One painting cannot be identified with certainty, but may represent St. Macarius, while the other one, standing again in a gesture of prayer, is identified as St. Apollo of Bawit (Innemie, Van Rompay, and Sobczynski 1999: 175–76; Innemie and [Van Rompay](#) 2002:248, fig. 5). It seems they were intended as representatives or personifications of Egyptian monasticism, literally and metaphorically backing the monks standing in the *khurus* during prayers and liturgies.

## Conclusions

The last word about the function of the rooms called *chappelles* by Cleat has not been said, and it will take more fieldwork to come to well-founded conclusions. Hjalmar Torp seems right when he draws a [parallel](#) with tomb architecture, but his supposition that the ground-floor rooms were only commemorative chapels seems less convincing.

On the basis of the material available so far, we can say that these rooms most probably were the place for daily prayers and, in addition to this, had clear references to funerary architecture and its iconography. This fits the ideal of the monk to be ‘dead to the world’ and the metaphor of the cell as a tomb. The cell of the monk, and especially its prayer room, has a number of connotations, but generally it is considered the place where the monk finds salvation.

Living monks and their deceased predecessors were reunited here in praise of God. The ‘absent’ monks (deceased, or alive but physically not present) were represented by their image or a graffito of their name on the wall. The cell combines the aspects of living quarters with those of a tomb and/or funerary chapel.

The monk thus lives and prays in a cell that is at the same time a tomb, reminding him of the fact that he is dead to the world. The funerary character of the decoration underlines the view that the monk is dead to the world and illustrates his communion with his deceased 'spiritual ancestors.'

The so-called *chapelles* in Bawit were parts of the living quarters of the monks and were used for devotional purposes, most likely the liturgy of the hours and possibly also commemorative gatherings, and in their decoration they refer to church interiors (apse decoration, narrative cycles) as well as to tombs.

The funerary themes depicted show the painters' familiarity with late Roman traditions and iconography, a phenomenon that is also apparent in the church decoration of the Red and White Monasteries near Sohag.

**Karel Innemee**

[1] The sarcophagus is now in the Musee 'Arles et de la Provence antiques. For a photograph, see: [http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/4/4e/Arles\\_sarcophagus\\_hunting\\_scene.jpg](http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/4/4e/Arles_sarcophagus_hunting_scene.jpg).

[2] The sarcophagus is in the Piazza del Duomo: Database of Ancient Art, [http:// ancientrome.ru/art/attworken/img.htm?id=4414](http://ancientrome.ru/art/attworken/img.htm?id=4414)

[3] A fine example is a third-century sarcophagus in the Pushkin Museum, Moscow: Database of Ancient Art, <http://ancientrome.ru/art/artworken/img.htm?id=3757>

[4] The painting is no longer in context, but was brought to the British Museum: British Museum, [http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/research\\_projects/all\\_current\\_projects/wadi\\_sarga.aspx](http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/research_projects/all_current_projects/wadi_sarga.aspx).



[5] Of the many examples we can mention: Catacomb of Priscilla, Capella Graeca (Crippa and Zibawi 1998: fig. 73); Catacomb of Priscilla (Crippa and Zibawi 1998: fig. 90); Catacomb of the Via Latina (Ferrua 1991: fig. 144); sarcophagus of Marcia Romana Celsa, Arles (Crippa and Zibawi 1998: fig. 122).

[6] A good example of a pair of peacocks, this time flanking a bowl of fruit, can be found in cubiculum E of the catacomb at the Via Latina (Ferrua 1991: fig. 77). From Egypt, the best-known example is the painting from the tomb of Theodosia in Antinoe, where the deceased is represented between two saints, with two peacocks in the pendentives over the painting (Zibawi 2003: fig. 9)

[7] As in the case of Macarius, who spent the night in a pagan temple and used mummies as pillows, provoking a spiritual fight with evil spirits (Macarius 13, Ward 1975:130).

[8] An example is the so-called cubiculum of the Five Saints in the San Callisto catacomb, where five members of a family are represented with raised arms, in a gesture of prayer (Crippa and Zibawi 1998: pl. 9).

[9] The veneration of funerary portraits and of icons of saints are closely related in late antiquity. On this topic, see Belting 1994: 78-98.

Tags: [Heritage](#), [Places](#)