

Intellectual Life in Middle Egypt: The Case of the Monastery of Bawit (Sixth-Eighth Centuries)

THE MONASTERY OF BAWIT is located on the west bank of the Nile, on the edge of the desert. The site was excavated at the beginning of the twentieth century by a team from the Institut français d'archéologie orientale, led by the archaeologists Jean Clédat, Emile Chassinat, and Jean Maspero. A few campaigns were undertaken by the Supreme Council of Antiquities (SCA) in the 1970s and new excavations were undertaken in 2002 by a team from the IFAO and the Musée du Louvre, under the direction first of Dominique Benazeth and later Gisele Hadji-Minaglou.

The archaeological work and the discoveries in architecture, sculpture, and painting that were made on the site are fundamental to our knowledge of Coptic monasticism and art history. As for the texts, nearly fifteen hundred inscriptions were published by Clédat and Maspero. Ostraca and papyri were also found at the time, but only a few of these were published, most of them recently. On the other hand, Bawit has been plundered since the end of the nineteenth century and hundreds of ostraca and papyri have been sold on the antiquities market and come into collections worldwide (Clackson 2000: 9–14; Delattre 2007: 117–24).

During the past twenty years, research on the formulae of the Bawit documents and the application of the principles of museum archaeology have allowed us to reconstruct to some extent the archives of the monastery. But what we have are mainly economic and administrative documents; as a result, the intellectual life of the monastery remains largely unknown. No library has yet been discovered in Bawit, nor is any book inventory preserved.

The contrast with other monasteries is striking. In Middle Egypt, the excavations of the Monastery of Wadi Sarga produced twenty-eight literary (biblical, theological, medical, and mathematical) fragments. In

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the Monastery of Dayr al-Bala'iza, sixty-two fragments were found (biblical, liturgical, and hagiographical texts; prayers; apothegms; martyrdoms; homilies; and even historical works and magical charms).

In the Theban area, numerous [sources](#) show us the literary and educational environment: a few literary fragments, many letters asking for books, and even a few book catalogs, such as the one found in the Monastery of St. Elias, which mentions more than seventy books (Coquin 1975a). Despite the rarity of literary texts from Bawit, a few elements put together can give us a first glimpse into intellectual life in the monastery.

Literary Quotations and Echoes

As we do not have literary fragments or any trace of the library, the literary environment is difficult to define. Only a few quotations or echoes can be found in the documentation. Some literary compositions and biblical passages are written on the walls of the monastery, in the common areas such as the large reception room, as well as in individual cells. The genealogy of Christ (from Luke 3:23–38) is written in room 21 (Maspero 1932–43:130–31) and the Lord's Prayer in Greek is painted in chapel LII (Cledat 1999: 135).

A psalmic composition is written in chapel XXXIII (Cledat 1999: 18; Delattre 2008: 75–76) and three unidentified narratives were found in room 5; one of them relates a miracle and maybe an apparition (Maspero 1932–43: 58–59). A copy of the letter of [Jesus](#) to Abgar is painted in a court (Coquin 1993a; Cledat 1999: 98–100). Finally, in the paintings of chapel XII, the biblical prophets hold a scroll in their hands, each with a quotation from his book (Cledat 1904–1906: 54–61).

No such literary quotation or echo is to be found in the [papyrus](#) and ostraca, except for one ostrakon that preserves a short psalmic quotation (Calament 2008: 27–28), probably a pen trial.

Education in the Monastery

In Pachomian monasteries, the monks were supposed to learn to read (Rousseau 1985: 81). In the Theban hermitages, we have evidence that literate monks did educate their disciples (Boud'hors and Heurtel 2010: 15). Information about education in Bawit is scarce. Some documents mention *kathegethai*, 'professors' or 'schoolmasters' (P.Clackson 36; Maspero 1932–43: 126; Delattre 2008: 77–78). We have some exercises on ostrakon and papyrus (as O.Bawit 93), but most of them deal with learning or practicing administrative formulae, such as P.Mon. [Apollo I 58–59](#) and P.Bawit. Clackson 76.

We find some steps of elementary teaching in the inscriptions. Firstly, alphabets were written on walls (Cledat 1904–1906: 142; Maspero 1932–43: 56 and 127); they can be interpreted as either exercises or models. Secondly, some lists of words starting with the same letter were also painted or scratched (words beginning with beta or gamma in Cledat 1904–1906: 8 and 110). On the mountain in front of the site, in a room cut in the rock, some school inscriptions were painted on the walls, for example, a list of two-syllable words beginning with delta and what looks like an exercise in conjugation (Cledat 1999:190–91). Finally, some monks or visitors left letters or words on walls, which can also be interpreted as practice exercises (Maspero 1932–43:51 and 126).

Room 18 was perhaps used as a school since we find on the walls an inscription mentioning a professor, an alphabet, and some writing exercises (Maspero 1932-43:126-27).

The P.Cotsen Schoolbook

P.Cotsen 1 is a beautiful schoolbook acquired on the antiquities market and now kept in Princeton; the document was described in 2006 and full photographic documentation was published in 2011 (Bucking 2006 and 2011). The context of the book is clearly monastic and the texts present

some Middle Egyptian features. The colophon contains an invocation to “our father Apa Apollo,” in all likelihood the founder of Bawit. These elements indicate that most probably this book comes from Bawit.

The contents are largely inspired by the Greek educational system; at some point, some exercises were probably translated and more or less [adapted](#) from a Greek schoolbook. The book begins at page 31 (the first page preserved) with simple syllables (dap, dep, dep, dip . . .; dar, der, der, dir, etc.), then follow alphabetical lists of words of two syllables, and then of four. We next read the alphabet with the names of the letters, a list of nomina sacra, and a long enumeration of nonsensical words (used to develop the reading abilities of the learner). Other hosts follow: the virtues of the Holy Spirit, the cities of Judah (from the book of Joshua), the peoples and kings defeated by the Hebrews (also from Joshua), and the chiefs of Edom (from Genesis).

Then the book continues with biblical quotations, starting with the whole genealogy of Christ (from Luke), a text that is also to be found on a wall of the monastery (Maspero 1932-43:130-31). After that, we read [extracts](#) from the Epistle to the Romans, the Epistle to the Philippians, and Psalm 1.

The book was supposed to end there: a colophon is written on pages 155—56 after the psalmic quotation. But a new text starts from page 157, written by another hand. It was identified as a monastic narrative by Bucking, but it is a translation into Coptic of a homily of Basil of Caesarea on the duties of the monks (for the identification of Philippians 4:8, Psalms 1:3-6, and Basils homily, see Delattre 2012b: 394). After this text, we find an apothegm; the end of the book is not preserved.

P. Cotsen 1 allows us to reconstruct a progression in teaching and learning. Once he had mastered the basics (alphabet, syllables, etc.), the student had to read and learn some lists of words. Then, he could progress to some biblical passages from the New and the Old Testaments.

The schoolbook was later completed with a text of Basil, probably as a new step in the teaching program.

The schoolbook, probably from Bawit, gives us an idea of the literary context and the intellectual formation of the monks.

Science

We know that there was a hospital in Bawit, a common feature in monasteries. The library could have contained some medical books, as was the case at the St. [Elias](#) Monastery in the Theban area, according to the catalogue of the library there (Coquin 1975a). Otherwise, scientific activities are not attested in Egyptian monasteries. Nevertheless, an inscription from Bawit is of some interest in this respect.

The text is written on the north wall of chapel XIX. It is an unfinished table of twelve lines and five columns (Delattre 2010c), with the names of the months in the first column and numbers in the others. The second and fourth columns contain respectively the numbers 1 and 15, [meaning](#) the first and fifteenth day of the month. The numbers in the third and fifth columns increase by one unit until 27 December and decrease after this date.

It appears that the numbers are linked in some way to the position of the sun. A more precise analysis shows that the table records the lengths in feet of a shadow at noon on the first and fifteenth of each month. A comparison with other shadow tables shows that the Bawit one is much more precise and is probably the result, at some point, of an actual experiment. The practical function of the text is unknown, but it could have been just an intellectual exercise.

In Search of the Library

As noted earlier, so far, excavations have failed to find the remains of a library in the monastery. If literary texts were found during illegal

digging at the site, we are currently unable to assign them to Bawit, due to the lack not only of information but also of any comparison point.

An attempt could be made using the principles of museum archaeology, as has been done for the reconstruction of the economic and administrative archives of the monastery. If one text was sold with another known to come from Bawit, there is a good chance that the first one is also from the monastery. An analysis of the acquisition details could be helpful to determine which literary texts were sold with documentary texts from Bawit, and then to build a general idea of what could have been in the library of the monastery.

For example, Yale University acquired in 1964 a group of two hundred papyri. It is possible to say positively that at least twenty or so of these come from Bawit, and there is no obvious reason to reject such a provenance for any of them. There are a few literary texts in this group: for example, Psalms; Joel; Joshua; a [Christian](#) monastic narrative concerning Ammon (?), Poimen, and a woman whose name is not preserved; and scenes from a narrative of the Dormition of Mary (Inv. 1779,1782,1786,1788,1789). All these fragments could, therefore, be tentatively attributed to the monastery.

Once a possible corpus of literary texts from Bawit has been constituted, we would need to find some codicological or paleographical similarities among the selected fragments, to be used as possible criteria to help assign further literary fragments to the monastery. That is the challenge for the future.

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