

John of Lykopolis

As Sebastien Lenain de Tillemont observed over three centuries ago, among all the solitary saints in Egypt “there is after St. Antony no one whose renown is greater than that of St. John of Lykopolis” (Tillemont 1732, vol. 10:9). Tillemont also observed that, besides the principal accounts of John of Lykopolis found in the *Historia Monachorum (HM)* and in Palladius’s *Historia Lausiaca (HL)*, information regarding him or knowledge of him was to be found in the works of Sulpicius Severus, Augustine of Hippo, Jerome, John Cassian, and the *Apophthegmata*. On the basis of these sources he attempted to give an integrated account of the life of John. Since the time of Tillemont, much progress has been made in sorting out these various sources and their interconnection with one another.

The Sources

The longest, most detailed account of John is to be found in the *HM*, where it occupies the first place and constitutes about one-fifth of the entire work. The *HM* is the account of a journey to Egypt undertaken by a group of seven monks from the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem. The anonymous author, who was one of this group, explains that he has written the account at the insistence of the community on the Mount of Olives.^[1] The Greek text of this work was for a long time confused with the text of the *HL* by Palladius in both the manuscript tradition and printed editions.

It was the great merit of Cuthbert Butler to have shown that the Greek text of the *HM* was the original and not the Latin translation by Rufinus, which had been identified by Jerome as an original work of Rufinus, an identification that misled even Tillemont.^[2] Tillemont, although assuming that the Latin text was an original work by Rufinus and using a Greek text of the *HL* interpolated with the Greek text of the *HM*, arrived at the conclusion that the party of seven was not the same as the party of

Evagrius which, according to Palladius, visited John two months after Palladius himself (HL 35,11). Doresse, on the other hand, assumes that these two groups were the same (see Doresse 2000, 139). Tillemonts arguments are more convincing (Tillemont 1732, vol. 10: 719 n. 4; see also Butler 1898-1904).

Although Tillemont thought the Latin text of the *HM* to be an original work of Rufinus,[\[3\]](#) he was aware that Greek texts corresponding to it could not be part of the *HL* (Tillemont 1732, vol. 10:719 n. 4). The only contact between these groups was literary and later, due to the fact that Palladius, as will be explained below, knew the Greek text of *HM.K* brief notice about Evagrius is found in the chapter on Nitria of the *HM*, which could hardly have been written by someone who had traveled all the way to Lykopolis with him. It states rather, “We also visited Evagrius, a wise and learned man who was skilled in the discernment of thoughts, an ability he had acquired by experience” (Russell 1981: 107). Evagrius had in fact written several works on the discernment of thoughts (*logismoi*).

The *HM* is structured as a travelogue or account of a journey to investigate first-hand the wonders of Egyptian monasticism by visiting and interviewing well-known monks. Egyptian monasticism had long since acquired fame well beyond the borders of Egypt through literary accounts such as the *Life of Antony* and the accounts of travelers such as Melania, Rufinus, and Egeria. There is no reason to doubt that the *HM* describes a real journey that began with a visit to John at Lykopolis and proceeded down the [Nile](#) to Scetis, Nitria, and the Delta.[\[4\]](#)

From a literary point of view the account of the visit to John is well structured, with an inclusion formed at the beginning and end by a reference to John’s predictions regarding the emperor Theodosius. It begins with several stories illustrating his gift of clairvoyance, his refusal to meet women, and cures that he worked indirectly (1–12). The narrator explains that John had spent forty years “in the cave, neither going out himself nor allowing a woman to come into his sight. ... As a matter of

fact not even male visitors ever entered into his cave. He merely gave his blessing through the window and in this way greeted those who came and spoke with each of them about his personal affairs” (*HM* 1,4).

There follows the account of the visit proper, beginning with John’s rebuke of the brother who tried to conceal the fact that he was a deacon and then a lengthy discourse by John on the spiritual life. This discourse is followed in turn by several stories told by John of various monks to illustrate problems of the spiritual life. The Latin translation by Rufinus is substantially the same, although Rufinus at times offers a paraphrastic and expanded version (see Russell 1981:141-55).

The date of the visit by the seven to John must have been fairly late in 394. According to *HM* 1,64, John told his visitors just before they left that “today the victory proclamation of the pious Emperor Theodosius has arrived in Alexandria announcing the destruction of the tyrant Eugenius.” This refers to the battle of the River Frigidus on 5-6 September 394 ([Devos](#) 1991). John also predicted a natural death for Theodosius, which occurred in 395. The epilogue mentions that the party was in the Delta at the time of Epiphany. The chapter on John also concludes with the notice that the group learned of the death of John while they were visiting “other fathers.” Thus the visit must have begun in the latter part of 394 and concluded in 395. The work itself would have been written perhaps later in 395 or 396. The Latin translation by Rufinus must have been made in 404, for it refers to his translation of Eusebius’ *Ecclesiastical History*, which was made in 401-403 (see Butler 1898, vol. 1:13; Tillemont 1732, vol. 12: 656; de Vogue 1996, vol. 1:301,317).

The *Lausiaca History*

In the work known since the seventeenth century as the *Lausiaca History* by Palladius (Katos 2011: 99), chapter 35 is dedicated to “a certain John” in Lykopolis. Palladius first offers details regarding John’s pre-monastic life, that he had learned the art of carpentry and that his brother had

learned that of a dyer. At the age of about twenty-five John renounced the world, spent five years in different monasteries, and then withdrew to the mountain of Lyko, where he built three domed cells and walled himself inside. After spending thirty years in this way, he was given the gift of clairvoyance. He predicted various things regarding Emperor Theodosius, in particular that he would return from Gaul after having vanquished Maximus. Then Palladius relates that, because Evagrius wanted to know about John, he (Palladius) undertook the arduous journey of eighteen days to visit him.

After waiting until Saturday, he finds John seated at his window. Upon questioning by John (through an interpreter named Theodore), Palladius admits to being from the “circle” of Evagrius (HL 35,5). This implies John already knew about Evagrius. Then suddenly the governor, Alypius, arrives and John devotes his entire attention to him for a long time. Because of this, Palladius suffers negative thoughts, and after the departure of Alypius, John reprimands him for his impatience. There follow predictions on the part of John, including that Palladius will become a bishop. This introduces an exchange in which Palladius plays on the word ‘bishop’ and claims that he is already a bishop in the kitchen. John predicts his sufferings as bishop.

After the interview with John, Palladius returns to the desert (of Nitria) and recounts all “to the blessed fathers” (HL 35,10). Then he mentions that because of poor health he had to leave the desert, and that he went first to Palestine and from there to Bithynia, where he was consecrated bishop. After that, an allusion is made to the whole affair of the deposition of John Chrysostom and Palladius’ own exile spent in Upper Egypt.[\[5\]](#)

According to his own indications, Palladius wrote his account around the year 419-20, that is, twenty-five years after the events it purports to relate (Katos 2011: 99). Palladius’s visit to John would have had to be in the late summer of 394, if his mention of another visit by “the blessed

fathers” took place two months later and before the death of John.

Palladius’s account of his visit to John has been subjected to a devastating analysis by P. Peeters, who notes that, according to Palladius, the goal of his expedition to Lykopolis was to report to Evagrius his observations concerning John.^[6] But, in the presence of the saint, he speaks only of himself, and then uses the occasion to recount his own story to the reader, forgetting completely to give the final judgment of Evagrius, and so the story of his journey is left without a conclusion.

Peeters suggests that the reference to the second group of visitors to visit John two months later is in fact inspired by the account in the first chapter of the *HM*. Likewise, behind the exchange between Palladius and John over his connection with Evagrius (not spontaneously admitted by Palladius), Peeters sees the story of the deacon in the *HM* who did not admit his identity. Peeters concludes that Palladius made use of the *HM*, written twenty-five years earlier, to construct his own narrative and that the idea that he had visited John of Lykopolis before the group of the seven is a fabrication.^[7]

If Peeters is correct in suspecting the historical veracity of Palladius’s whole account of his visit to John, then the prior knowledge of John about Evagrius may be doubted. On the other hand, several references to the “seer of the Thebaide” in Evagrius’s *Antirrhethikos*^[8] show that John’s fame had reached the monastic settlements of Lower Egypt and may reflect a visit to John.

The Latin Sources

In the works of John Cassian, written about the same time as Palladius’s *Lausiatic History*, we also find traditions concerning John of Lykopolis, which, however, Cassian may have heard much earlier during his lengthy stay in Egypt in the desert of Scetis. In the *Institutes* 4.23, John is cited as an example of the most perfect obedience to his elder, which resulted in

his receiving the gift of prophecy so that “he was sought after even by the kings of this world,” Theodosius in particular. Among the incidents cited to demonstrate his obedience is the story of watering the dry stick for a whole year at the command of his elder.

In Cassian’s version of the story, the fruit is only the virtue of obedience, not a miraculous flowering as in other versions. At the end of the *Conferences* (24,16–17) Cassian again cites John as an example of those who have received a hundredfold, which includes being honored by mighty rulers. This is perhaps testimony to the fame of John in Lower Egypt in the years between 395 and 400, when Cassian left Egypt, but it may also have been derived from the *HM*. It does not really add to our knowledge of John himself.

The same must be said for another version of the story about the dry stick related by the traveler Postumian in the *Dialogues* of Sulpicius Severus (*Dial.* 1,19). In this version “a certain man,” seeking admission to a monastery of severe observance, is commanded by the Abbot to water a stick of storax daily for three years, which meant carrying water from the Nile, a distance of two miles. At the end of the third year, “the twig began to show signs of life.” Sulpicius died in about 420.

The date of his *Dialogues* is uncertain, but obviously earlier. Later on, this story was also attributed to St. John Colobos, the founder of a monastery in Scetis. After examining the various versions and other evidence of confusion between John of Lykopolis and John Colobos, Doresse came to the conclusion that the story of the dry stick belonged to the beginning of the career of the recluse and should be situated in the Wadi Natrun, where he would have gone, like so many others, for his monastic initiation before returning to his native Thebaide (Doresse 2000:153–56).

Augustine had also heard of John of Lykopolis and mentions him in two works: *De Civitate Dei* 5,26, where he cites the prediction of victory for Theodosius, and *De cura gerenda pro mortuis* 17,21, where he regrets

being unable to ask John about certain problems, since he (John) had shown himself “in a dream” to the wife of a tribune. In both cases his source appears to be Rufinus’s translation of the *HM*.^[9]

In the *Apophthegmata* only two sayings are attributed to John of Lykopolis and both have a literary origin in the instruction he gives in the *HM* (Devos 1991).

Coptic Sources

The surviving Coptic literary material relating to John of Lykopolis, found in several Sahidic codices from the White Monastery, is testimony not to the historical figure but to the development of his fame after his death (see Till 1935: 138–54; Peeters 1936; Devos 1969a; Devos 1970; Devos 1976; Devos 1995: 76–86). The point of departure is a translation of some of the material found in the *HL*, which is then developed and extended so as to make John a contemporary of the emperor Marcian and opponent of the Council of Chalcedon more than fifty years after his death. One story, not found in the Greco-Latin material, concerning John’s intervention on behalf of Lykopolis when it was under threat by Theodosius, may be historical (Devos 1991: 1365). The later attribution of writings to John of Lykopolis has been shown to be erroneous (Doresse 2000:155; Guy 1974).

Documentary Sources

Some documentary sources exist that may throw light on the activity of the historical John. Constantine Zuckerman has argued that both Greek and Coptic papyri preserved separately in the John Rylands Library belong to the same archive of an Apa John and has carefully reconstructed the path by which they arrived in Manchester from the monastery of Dayr al-‘Izam.^[10] Doresse had earlier identified this site as the most likely location of the monastery founded by John of Lykopolis (Doresse 2000:417–23). The existence of this monastery would also

explain how it was possible for John to have lived as a recluse for so long; his disciples from the monastery would have provided the necessary support structure.

The Greek and Coptic papyri brought together by Zuckerman, datable paleographically to the end of the fourth century, fit together quite well with what is reported in the *HM*. The Apa John of the papyri is presented with requests for prayers, and is asked to resolve troubles and to intervene with the authorities. One letter tells of a *dux* who was delighted to receive John's blessing. As Zuckerman notes, "His renown went much farther than the monastic milieu. Simple people, who claim no previous acquaintance with him, entreat his protection and expect his intervention to carry weight with the highest authorities of the province."[\[11\]](#) Of particular interest is the bilingual composition of the archive, which shows that John's petitioners were both Greek- and Copticspeaking. One letter from John (evidently never sent) is written in Greek, but contains Apa John's personal greeting at the end in Coptic.

The Historical John of Lykopolis

The fame illustrated by these documentary sources might explain why the party of seven from the Mount of Olives would have begun their visits to the Egyptian monks with John of Lykopolis. However, although the account of the *HM* mentions John's fame for clairvoyance and his healings, the main attention is focused on John as a spiritual teacher. This fits well also with the citations in Evagrius's *Antirrhethikos*. John tells his visitors that their laborious pilgrimage is a good undertaking, but more important is imitating the virtues of the monks they visit.

He emphasizes the importance of purity of mind and resisting inappropriate thoughts. They must not let themselves be disturbed by passions or by honor, glory, or self-love. "Otherwise," he says, "the entire undertaking becomes pointless when, in conversing with the Lord, one is seduced by opposing thoughts" (*HM* 1,25). Without genuine renunciation

of the world, one is absorbed with preoccupations and must struggle with the passions, which interfere with the vision of God (*HM* 1,26). Slow and steady spiritual progress should be sought. The discourse concludes in the Greek version with a statement that is particularly significant:

The will, then, of those who seek God must be free from all other concerns. For Scripture says, “Be still and know that I am God” (Psalm 46:10). Therefore, he who has been granted a partial knowledge of God—for it is not possible for the whole of such knowledge to be received by anyone—also attains to the knowledge of all other things. He sees mysteries, for God shows him them; he foresees what belongs to the future; he contemplates revelations like the saints did; he performs mighty works; he becomes a friend of God, and obtains from God everything he asks.[\[12\]](#)

The concept of “friend of God” is especially important, for this is the basis for John’s gift of clairvoyance and his ability to read hearts. John commends those who engage in active works of charity as being “exceedingly good.” But such a person is still occupied with earthly things. “Better and greater than he is contemplative, who has risen from active works to the spiritual sphere and has left it to others to be anxious about earthly things.... He stands unimpeded in the presence of God, without any anxiety holding him back. For such a man spends his life with God; he is occupied with God, and praises him with ceaseless hymnody”(*HM* 21,62-63). Here we have the same terminology and the same concept of the spiritual life that is found also in the writings of Evagrius of Pontus and many others of the same period.

It is legitimate to ask to what extent this well-crafted discourse by John reflects his own teaching or the ideas of the narrator, who might have found them elsewhere. There is no way of answering this question with certainty. However, it is possible to investigate the use of the same terminology in the *HM*. The key term *apatheia* is found in the chapter on John and in chapter 8 on Apollo. Noting that the “saint taught us much

else about asceticism," the author says that John taught that one should "try through asceticism to free the appetites from passion" (*HM* 1,29). In chapter 8, Apollo teaches: "Let it be a sign to you of progress in the virtues," he said, "when you have acquired mastery over the passions and the appetites" (*HM* 8,15). The terminology is remarkably close. Apollo also teaches the necessity of striving against evil thoughts (*logismoi*).

Summary and Conclusion

The various sources for the figure of John of Lykopolis mention three aspects of his activity: his role as clairvoyant, counselor, and intercessor (whether with the authorities of this world or the next); his role as miracle worker and healer; and his role as spiritual teacher. Doresse has analyzed his role as clairvoyant-oracle by noting that the references in the *Historia Monachorum* to his prophecies regarding Theodosius, Eugenius, and Theodosius's natural death were probably redacted under the influence of the real events (Doresse 2000: 149).

The original responses to questions were probably more vague.^[13] Such is the case with the story of the prediction of victory for a general over the Ethiopians: "If you march against them, you will take them by surprise and defeat them and subdue them, and you will find favor with the emperors" (*HM* 1,2). The author is content to state that that is what happened without adding further details (Doresse 2000:145).

John's role as a miracle worker is actually played down by the *HM*, which states that "the blessed John did not perform cures publicly." He gave out oil to be used in effecting cures and offered prayers for those who requested his intercession.

His most important role, at least from the point of view of the anonymous author of the *HM*, was that of spiritual teacher. Although the author is giving a plausible account of a journey, he is also seeking to edify and instruct, as he himself indicates in the prologue. He uses language and

ideas found [elsewhere](#) in early Egyptian monasticism, but that does not mean that he is wrong in attributing them to John. Since John's discourse conforms to the common teaching, it is entirely plausible.

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[1] For the Greek text, see Festugiere 1961 and Festugiere 1964, vol. 4, pt. 1. On the basis of a notice by Sozomen, *Historia Ecclesiastica* VI, 29,2, it has been suggested that the author was named Timotheus. See Butler 1898—1904, vol. 1: 276—77; Chitty 1977:51,62 n. 42.

[2] Jerome's misleading identification is found in Letter 133 to Ctesiphon, §3 (CSEL 56:246); see Butler 1898-1904, vol. 1:11 n. 1. For his demonstration of the Greek text as original, see pages 12-51. Butler's identification was, in fact, a by-product of his investigation of the Greek text of the *HL*. Jerome had in fact exempted John of Lykopolis from his censure, although many others in the book are dismissed as Origenists.

[3] The Latin text of Rufinus is found in *PL* 21: 387-462 and Schulz-Fluegel 1990. See de Vogue 1996, vol. 1, pt. 3: 317—42.

[4] Russell 1981: 4-5; Butler had come to the same conclusion in 1898. See Butler 1898, vol. 1: 198-203. See also Doresse 2000: 143. Rufinus mentions John of Lykopolis also in his continuation of Eusebius's *Ecclesiastical History* II, 19 and 32, which he translated and wrote in 401-403. His source appears to have been the *HM*, which he translated shortly thereafter in 404. See de Vogiiie 1996, vol. 1: 301. The notices regarding Theodosius consulting John and John's predictions appear to reflect *HM* 1,1—2, and 1,4.

[5] Palladius had already written a work in defense of John Chrysostom and his own role in the whole affair in late 407 or early 408: *Dialogue on*

the [Life of John Chrysostom](#). See Katos 2011:26—27.

[6] Peeters 1936. Doresse, while not denying a personal visit on the part of Palladius, notes that details may have been borrowed from the account in the *HM* as well as from traditions that he may have heard during his long exile in Antinoe. Doresse was well aware of Peeters' critique of Palladius's chapter on John and appears to agree in general. See Doresse 2000:140—41.

[7] Peeters offers multiple reasons for this conclusion. The critique of Palladius's reliability voiced by Peeters has been strongly underlined by Telfer 1937, who shows that the Coptic author knew both the *HL* and the *HM*, correcting the former with the latter.

[8] Evagrius of Pontus, *Antirrhethikos*: Fornication 36, Anger 6, Acedia 16, Vanity 19. Cassian's notices concerning John show the same. See below. However, see [Devos](#) 1991:1364, who assumes that the references to John in the *Antirrhethikos* are due to his visit to John.

[9] Mention is made of John also by Eucherius of Lyons (*De laude heremi* 27), and Prosper of Aquitaine records the prediction of the victory on the Frigidus on the exact date in his *Chronicon*. Among the Greeks, the [Historia Ecclesiastica](#) of Sozomen (6.28,1; 7.22,6—8) gives more information than that of Theodoret (5.24,1—2). See [Devos](#) 1991.

[10] Zuckerman 1995. Choat has expressed reservations regarding this thesis. See Choat 2007 and Wipszycka 2009: 83—85.

[11] Zuckerman 1995: 190. Zuckerman says that John stands at the beginning of the phenomenon of the imperial court's consultation of famous ascetics, but, according to the *Life of Antony* by Athanasius, it is necessary to date the beginning at least fifty years earlier (1995: 194).

[12] The English translation is from Russell 1981: 56, §§27-28.

[13] Doresse 2000:144: “L’art de rendre de tels oracles reside, en pared cas, plus dans [ce](#) qui n’est pas dit que dans ce qui s’y trouve precise.”

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