

## **NITRIA**

With SCETIS and the KELLIA, one of the principal monastic habitations, founded about 325-330 by AMUN. The site, long confused with the present Wadi al-Natrun, was finally identified by H. G. Evelyn-White. It is located in the western part of the Delta, about 10 miles (15 km) south of Damanhur, where the village of al-Barnuji stands today. The name of this village is none other than the name of Pernouj that the Coptic documents give to the site called by Greek and Latin authors Nitria or “the mountain of Nitria,” because of the presence in this region of lakes from which natron was extracted (as in the Wadi al-Natrun).

Monastic tradition interpreted this name in symbolic fashion: it denotes the place where the sins of men were washed, like soiled garments. In fact natron served, among other uses, for the washing of linen (cf. HISTORIA MONACHORUM IN AEGYPTO 21; the same interpretation in Saint Jerome *Letter* 22). The Coptic documents also employ the expression “the mountain of the natron” (petoou mpihocm, petoou mpihosm); in this expression as in the preceding one, the word “mountain” is explained either by some slight elevation of the terrain at this spot, or more probably by the use, frequent in monastic times, of this word to designate the site of a monastery.

Among the earliest disciples of Amun who lived at Nitria in the fourth century, we know especially Theodorus, Or, Pior, and above all PAMBO, the most celebrated of the monks of this desert. After the foundation of the Kellia, numerous monks from Nitria went to establish themselves in this new site, where they enjoyed a greater solitude than at Nitria. Thereafter the custom became established, fairly generally as it seems, for those who aspired to the monastic life to make first a more or less lengthy stay at Nitria, and then to go and live in greater solitude at the Kellia. Thus Evagrius, coming from Palestine, first spent two years at Nitria before going to settle finally at the Kellia.

The monks of Nitria in fact quickly became very numerous, and it was their large numbers that brought about the foundation of the Kellia, only a dozen years after Amun's arrival at Nitria. According to Saint Jerome, who stopped there about 386 on his way to [Palestine](#) with Paula, there were then 5,000 monks in this desert (*Letter 22*, to Eustochium). This very high figure is also the one given twice by PALLADIUS (*Historia lausiaca* 7 and 13), who lived there for a year in 390 before reaching the Kellia; but it is difficult to reconcile with what RUFINUS says in his adaptation of the HISTORIA MONACHORUM IN AEGYPTO (21). He too had gone to Nitria, about 374, at the time when the monks of this desert were undergoing the [Arian](#) persecution. He says, in fact, that the monks of Nitria lived in some fifty houses ("tabernacula"). His testimony and that of Palladius agree that some of these houses were occupied by a single monk, others by two or more monks.

The most complete description of Nitria at the end of the fourth century is given by Palladius. There were then among the monks of this desert eight priests, one of whom had preeminence over the others during his life. He it was who on Saturdays and Sundays celebrated the liturgy in the church. Adjoining the church there was a hostelry where passing guests were lodged. There were various shops, among them seven bakeries that supplied the bread not only for the monks of Nitria but also for those of the Kellia. The monks spent the week alone in their cells, working mainly on the weaving of linen, and assembled solely for the weekly liturgy.

The "mountain of Nitria" seems to have known its greatest prosperity at the end of the fourth century. The number of monks there diminished rather quickly, probably because it was more and more difficult to lead a solitary life in a region too close to the inhabited and cultivated lands. In 645 or 646 when the Patriarch BENJAMIN went from Alexandria to the Wadi al-Natrun to consecrate the new church of the DAYR ANBA MAQAR, he was accompanied by the [priest](#) Agatho, who has left a detailed account of the journey. Benjamin went directly to al-Muna, that is, the Kellia, "near the mountain of Pernouj," without stopping at "the mountain of

Pernouj” itself, Nitria, a probable indication that the site was no longer then inhabited by monks (cf. R.-G. Coquin, 1975, pp. 98-99).

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