

PAUL OF THEBES, SAINT

A hermit known from the *Life of Saint [Paul](#) the First Hermit*, a small work composed in Latin by Saint JEROME, probably in 375/376, according to current opinion. According to his biographer, Paul, a native of the Lower Thebaid, withdrew into the Arabian desert at the time of the persecution by Decius, about 250. He was then fifteen years old. He settled not far from the [Red Sea](#) at the place, according to tradition, where the monastery that bears his name stands today (DAYR ANBA BULA). There [Paul](#) is said to have spent almost ninety years in a cave that served as a hermitage, not seeing a single person and himself unknown to all. It was only a little before his death, about 340/341, that he was discovered by Saint ANTONY. Being miraculously informed of Paul's presence in a hermitage quite near his own, Antony went to visit him, just in time to provide for his burial.

The imaginative character of this story, in which life in the desert is highly idealized and adorned with marvelous features, such as two lions that come to help Antony dig Paul's grave, has long led to doubts of its historical value, if not of the historicity of [Paul](#) himself. In writing this work almost twenty years after Athanasius' *Life of Antony*, Jerome intended to present his hero as superior to Antony: as the true inaugurator of the anchorite life, which Antony subsequently adorned. Retiring into the desert much earlier, Paul lived there a longer time, even more solitary than Antony, who buried him, a rite normally performed by a disciple.

Jerome's work is the only historical document concerning Paul.

Mention of him in other ancient authors (John Cassian *Collationes* XVIII.6; Sulpicius Severus *Dialogi* I.17) is dependent on Jerome. *A Life of Abba Paul, the Holy Anchorite*, published by E. Amélineau, has been preserved in Coptic. Amélineau thought that this Coptic Life was an original text that Jerome had simply adapted into Latin. In reality, it is

clear that the Coptic text, the explicit of which bears the signature of Jerome, is a free translation of the Latin text. Nevertheless, the notes in two recensions, which the Arabic-Jacobite SYNAXARION devotes at 2 Amshir to [Paul](#) of Thebes, present a few peculiarities. Paul is said not to be of Theban origin but a native of Alexandria, and the circumstances of his conversion are slightly different; but in substance this text appears to be dependent on the Coptic version of Jerome's book.

The attempt made by H. Delehayé to give greater historical credit to Jerome's hero by identifying him with a [Paul](#) of Oxyrhynchus, known elsewhere, has scarcely withstood the criticisms of F. Cavallera. In addition to the Latin and Coptic texts, there are two Greek versions of the Life of Paul, edited by J. Bidez. F. Nau ("Le texte original") thought that the older of them could be an original text that Jerome had adapted into Latin. According to the same author ("Le chapitre"), it is appropriate to see the source of the [Life of Paul](#) in the Egyptian stories that, like the Life of ONOPHRIUS and other tales reported in the APOPHTHEGMATA PATRUM, relate the journey of a monk into the desert in order to discover the greatest anchorites.

A summary of Jerome's *Vita Pauli* follows. Jerome illustrates the sufferings that Christians had to endure. At that time [Paul](#) and his married sister, both of whom lived in the Thebaid, lost their parents. In order to obtain Paul's inheritance, his brother-in-law sought to betray him to the persecutors. [Paul](#) fled into the desert and took up his abode in a cave that was shaded by a palm tree and furnished with a spring. The palm afforded him food and clothing; the spring, freshwater.

[Paul](#) had reached the age of 113 years when it was revealed to Saint Antony, who was then 90 years old, that he ought to visit a monk more perfect than he, who lived in the inner desert. Accordingly, he set out on his journey, a centaur showing him the way. Another mythological beast, a satyr, brought him food and spoke with him. Finally, following a she-wolf that disappeared into a cave, he arrived at Paul's abode and was

welcomed by him. They conversed and were miraculously fed by a raven.

After spending the night in vigil, [Paul](#) informed Antony that he was about to die and that Antony should bury him. Antony was to fetch the cloak that Athanasius had given him to wrap Paul's body. So Antony returned for the cloak, and once more undertook the arduous journey to Paul's cave. Even before reaching his destination, he had a [vision](#) of Paul's [ascension](#) to heaven, and arrived to find his body in the attitude of prayer. Two lions arrived to help dig the grave, and Antony buried Paul. Taking Paul's tunic, he returned to his hermitage.

Jerome ends his story with an Encomium on [Paul](#) and with exhortations to his readers to follow his example.

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