

SAINT ANTONY OF EGYPT

(feast day, 22 Tubah), third- fourth-century hermit. The principal source of our knowledge of the life of the man whom an ancient tradition calls “the Father of the Monks” is the biography written shortly after Antony’s death (356) by Saint ATHANASIUS, patriarch of Alexandria. Its [authenticity](#) as a work of Athanasius was contested first by Weingarten (1877) and again by Draguet (1980), the editor of the Syriac version, but it seems firmly established. It was attested in ancient times, in the first Greek life of Saint PACHOMIUS (Halkin, 1932, p. 66) and in Latin by Rufinus (*Historia ecclesiastica* I, 8) and by Saint Jerome (*De viris illustribus* 87). In addition to the Greek text, there are two ancient Latin versions, the second being the work of Evagrius of Antioch, and versions in various Oriental languages. There is also a Coptic version, in the Sahidic dialect, which was published by G. Garitte (1949).

Several modern critics have called the work’s historical value into question, in consequence of the writings of R. Reitzenstein (1914), who showed that Athanasius took as his literary models the lives of the [pagan](#) philosophers, in contrast to which he wished to portray the Christian sage. The influence of these models is beyond dispute, but it does not impair the value of the testimony of Athanasius, who knew Antony personally and affirms in his Prologue that he used not only his own memories but also the information given him by someone who was for some time a disciple of Antony. (On this point, the published Greek text must be corrected in accordance with the Coptic and Syriac versions.) This was probably SERAPION OF TMUIS, who was at the same time a disciple of Antony and a friend of Athanasius.

In addition to the biography written by Athanasius, there are some other sources that reveal certain aspects of Antony’s life and personality. The alphabetical collection of the APOPHTHEGMATA PATRUM has collected under his name thirty-eight apothegms, which Dorries (1966) thought give a better knowledge of Antony’s true personality than the book by

Athanasius. PALLADIUS (1904, pp. 63-74) reported the recollections of a priest of NITRIA, Cronius, who in his youth lived near Antony and his disciples. The Arabic-Jacobite SYNAXARION adds some new information to that given in the sources cited above.

Antony was born of Christian parents in the village of Qiman (modern-day Qiman al-'Arus, in the region of al-Wastah) about 251. After experiencing the [death](#) of his parents when he was some twenty years old and being mindful of the words of Jesus on renunciation (Mt. 19:21) read in the church, he gave away his goods, entrusted his young sister to a community of virgins, and lived as a hermit outside the village, following the example of other ascetics at this time. Then he moved away, reaching the mountainous region where the tombs were, and shut himself up in one of them, where he lived as a recluse for about ten years, heroically enduring, according to his biographer, the most violent assaults of the demons. Harassed by visitors, he went off to the other bank of the Nile and installed himself in the ruins of a Roman fort.

Disciples then came to live around him, thus forming the first community of the monastery of Pispir, situated in proximity to the river. Some twenty years later, he desired to live in greater solitude, and so, under the guidance of bedouins, he penetrated into the Eastern Desert and established himself in a [hermitage](#) situated about 20 miles (30 km) from the Red Sea at the foot of Mount Qulzum, near the place where today stands the monastery of Saint Antony (DAYR ANBA ANTUNIYUS). It was there that he lived for about forty years, until his death, maintaining himself with the work of his hands and the produce of his garden or with what his disciples brought him.

Quite frequently, according to the account of Cronius reported by Palladius, he went to visit the disciples in the monastery on the banks of the Nile. His great renown drew people from all over Egypt to visit this place, where they could meet him in person. On two occasions he went to Alexandria to support Athanasius in his [struggle](#) against the Arians; it was

in the course of one of these journeys, in 338, that he stopped at Nitria and counseled AMUN to undertake the founding of the monastic settlement of KELLIA.

Writings

In his lifetime, Antony won an immense reputation, which spread beyond Egypt. Athanasius (chap. 81, col. 956) asserts that he kept up a correspondence with the emperors Constantine, Constantius, and Constans. If this correspondence really existed, nothing of it remains. There has come down to us, in an Arabic version, a corpus of twenty letters bearing his name (Latin translation by Abraham Ecchellensis in PG 40, cols. 963-1066; the Arabic text published in Cairo, 1899). Only the first seven should be retained under the name of Antony. The others, as F. Klejna (1938) has shown, correspond for the most part to the letters otherwise known in Greek and in Syriac under the name of AMMONAS, a disciple of Antony.

These seven letters were already known, under Antony's name, by Saint JEROME (*De viris illustribus* 88, PL 23, col. 731). A Latin translation was made in the fifteenth century from a Greek text now lost (PG 40, cols. 977-1000). A Georgian version, made directly from a Greek text, was published by G. Garitte (1955). There is a fragment in Coptic, edited by E. O. Winstedt and republished by Garitte (1955), giving one complete letter, the end of another, and the beginning of a third. Quotations in Coptic (also published by Garitte) are found in the fifth century in the works of SHENUTE and his disciple BESA.

The [authenticity](#) of the letters is questionable. There are several testimonies to the epistolary activity of Antony. In addition to the correspondence exchanged with the emperors of which Athanasius speaks, there is mention in the first Greek Life of Saint Pachomius (Halkin, 1932, p. 78) of a letter that Antony addressed to Athanasius through the medium of two Pachomian monks who had come to see him

on their way to Alexandria. Another document, the *Letter of Ammon* (Halkin, 1932, pp. 116-17), gives the text of a letter written by Antony to Theodore, the successor of Pachomius, a letter written in Egyptian (i.e., in Coptic).

Antony, in fact, was ignorant of Greek (Palladius, 1904, pp. 68-69), and this is probably what Athanasius means when he says that he was unlettered (*Life*, chap. 1, col. 841). The style and composition of these letters are devoid of any art and bear witness to a real lack of culture. But more surprising in such an author are some opinions suggestive of Origenism and, hence, of the highest intellectualism. Thus, we read, for example, that all prelapsarian beings formed a single essence and that they became diversified, taking various names, according to the degree of their fall. Antony was perhaps in contact with the Origenist circles of Alexandria. Palladius (chap. 4) affirms that Antony, on the occasion of his journeys to the city, went several times to visit DIDYMUS THE BLIND in his cell.

But the text of the letters is still very poorly established, and there are great divergences between the various versions. It is not certain that the Coptic fragments themselves represent the original text. Arguments in favor of [authenticity](#) are, in addition to the ancient testimonies, the polemic against Arianism, of which we know Antony was an adversary, and the fact that one of these letters is addressed to monks in the region of Arsinoë, where we know from the *Life* (chap. 15, col. 865) that Antony had disciples whom he sometimes visited.

Other texts, certainly pseudepigraphic, have been handed down under Antony's name. At the head of the famous *Philocalia* (1957, pp. 3-27) there is under his name a paraenesis (exhortation) that is, in reality, a work of Stoic origin, strongly influenced by Epictetus (cf. Hausherr, 1933, pp. 212-16). In addition to the corpus of the twenty letters, the Arabic tradition has handed down a collection of diverse writings under this same name, the origin of which remains obscure. (A Latin translation is

given in PG 40, cols. 963-78, 1065-1102.) In one of them, entitled *Spiritualia documenta*, a long passage has been identified by W. P. Funk (1976, pp. 8-21), which recurs literally in *The Teachings of Silvanus* (Codex VII 97, 9-98, 22), one of the treatises discovered at Nag Hammadi (see NAG HAMMADI LIBRARY). It could be a case of direct borrowing or, as [Funk](#) thinks, the common use of an older document.

The influence of Antony on the history of monasticism was considerable—in Egypt itself at first, since it was exerted either directly or through MACARIUS THE EGYPTIAN and Amun at the very origins of the great monastic movement of Lower Egypt, but also throughout the Christian world, by reason of the very wide diffusion, through translations, of the *Life* written by Athanasius. It is enough to recall, by way of example, the story told by Saint Augustine of the sudden [conversion](#) to the monastic life of two imperial officers of Trier on reading the *Life of Saint Antony* found in a hermit's cabin and the role that this story, as well as Antony's example, played in the [conversion](#) of Augustine himself (*Confessions*, VIII, 6, 14-15 and 12, 29).

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