

SAINT JOHN OF [LYCOPOLIS](#)

So called from the name of the town of ASYUT in Upper Egypt on the West bank of the Nile, where he was probably born in the first or second decade of the fourth century, and not far from which he died at the end of 394 or beginning of 395. This was a little before or after the death of Emperor Theodosius I (d. 395), with whom his name was often associated. He was an ascetic and recluse of renown, whose fame as a prophet and also a healer spread well beyond the Thebaid, reaching its peak in his closing years.

His role as a strict recluse in a cave that he himself adapted, did not prevent his communicating through a little window with visitors—all male—whom he received on Saturdays and Sundays. Information about him comes chiefly from the evidence of two famous visitors who came to see him a few months before he died.

The first, a spokesman for “seven foreign brethren” who had come from Jerusalem, is the anonymous author of the HISTORIA MONACHORUM IN AEGYPTO. John takes up the first and longest chapter (65 paragraphs) of this well-known Greek work, which at the beginning of the [fifth century](#) was translated into Latin with some personal additions by Rufinus of Aquileia. It was, however, censured by Jerome in his Epistle 133 ad Ctesiphontem, for the placing of John—*quem et catholicum et sanctum fuisse non dubium est*—at the beginning of the collection, to gain easier acceptance for the “heretics” who followed.

The second author, who journeyed eighteen days from the Kellia, was the Galatian PALLADIUS, a future bishop of Helenopolis, as foretold by John. Twenty-five years later Palladius recorded in chapter 35 of the *Historia lausiaca* an [interview](#) he had with John, assisted by a local interpreter named Theodorus. Chapter 35 became one of the largest texts in that work.

Rather than contrasting their accounts, it is better to establish any links there may have been between them, while respecting their specific characters.

In the *Historia Monachorum in Aegypto* John is aged ninety, forty years of which he has spent as a recluse. There is nothing on his earlier life, as priority is given to his spiritual conversation with the Seven for three days in succession. The very day they left him, John announced to them that “the letter relating to Theodosius’ victory over the tyrant Eugenius” had just arrived. This was at the time of the important battle of the River Frigidus on 5-6 September 394.

In the *Historia lausiaca*, John is seventy-eight years old, forty- eight years of which have been spent as a recluse and eighteen with the “gift of prophecy.” In his youth he had learned the trade of a carpenter while his brother was a dyer. From ages twenty-five to thirty he was trained in “various monasteries.”

He read men’s hearts, knew hidden things, present and to come, predicted natural events such as Nile floods and harvests, as well as personal occurrences. The two predictions most often recalled are the intimations of victory he arranged to have passed on to Theodosius when that emperor had consulted him on the matter of the usurpers Maximus (388) and [Eugenius](#) respectively.

Maximus and [Eugenius](#) are mentioned in the Latin supplement added to Eusebius’ *Historia ecclesiastica* by Rufinus of Aquileia, for whom the gift granted to John is merited through the piety of Theodosius.

John CASSIAN recorded (*Institutiones coenobiticae* 4. 23 and *Collationes* 24. 26) that the “abbot” John owed to his virtue of obedience both his “prophetic charisma” and the trust he enjoyed “even among the kings of this world,” despite the “extreme obscurity” of his origins. Cassian, according to the confidences recorded in *Historia Monachorum in*

Aegypto (2. 21), recalls that John was not immune from the nocturnal wiles of the devil (*Institutiones coenobiticae* 1. 21) but makes him furthermore a paragon of obedience when he was a novice. He attributes to him, among other exploits, the watering of a dried-up stick for a whole year in a spirit of submission to the Lord (*Institutiones coenobiticae* 4. 24-26).

Through Rufinus, Augustine learns of the double “prophetic reply” to Theodosius (*De Civitate Dei* 5. 26) and is emphatic about the gift of discerning spirits, which he attributes to John. Augustine regrets being unable to ask this man about certain problems, since he had shown himself “in a dream” to the wife of a *tribunus* (*De cura gerenda pro mortuis* 17, 21).

Eucherius of Lyons is scarcely more explicit (*De laude heremi* 27), while in his *Chronicon*, Prosper of Aquitaine records the prediction of the victory on the Frigidus on the exact date.

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), and of John’s role at the time of the above-mentioned victory known both to George the Monk (*Chronicon, Tenbrev*, p. 589) and to George Cedrenus (*Historiarum Compendium* 1, *Corpus scriptorium historiae Byzantinae*, p. 568).

John exercised the gift of healing by the use of holy oil. Perhaps the secret of his gifts resides in John’s remark to the Seven (*Historia Monachorum in Aegypto* 1. 28): “He who has been judged worthy of some partial knowledge of God . . . also attains knowledge of all the rest; he sees the divine mysteries for God himself shows them to him; he foresees things to come, he has revelatory visions like those of the saints, he accomplishes miracles, he becomes the friend of God and obtains from God whatever he asks him for.”

Among John's visitors, apart from the two already named, were the following: (1) those of unknown name: a *stratelates*, a *tribunos* (and his wife, see above), a *praipositos* and a *sugkletikos*, each with his wife (*Historia Monachorum in Aegypto* 1. 2, 4-9, 10, 12); (2) the *hegemon* of the region of Lycopolis, known by name only—Alupios (*Historia Lausiaca* 35. 5-6); (3) others known from elsewhere: (a) Eutropios, the "praepositus sacri cubiculi," the messenger of Theodosius to John before the battle of the Frigidus, a detail owed to Sozomen (*Historia Ecclesiastica* 7. 22, 7), which permits the understanding of two passages of the poet Claudian (*In Eutropium* 1.

311-12; *aegyptia . . . somnia protratosque . . . tyrannos*; *Libri II praef.*, 39; (b) Evagrius of Ponticus and Ammonius "Parotes," who probably also both came from the Kellia two months after Palladius. There is attestation to their conversation with John in at least four passages of the *Antirrhetikos* of Evagrius (2. 36; 5. 6; 6. 16; 7. 19); (c) the abbot Bessarion and his disciple Doulas (*Apophthegmata* 159—Bessarion 4); (d) Poemenia, a "servant of God" and relative of Theodosius, known both from the last paragraph of the Palladius reference and from the life (preserved in Syriac) of Peter the Iberian, in which it is said that she had the Church of the Ascension built on the Mount of Olives at Jerusalem.

With Poemenia it is possible to move from the Greco-Latin tradition about John to Coptic tradition, which, in fact, tells about the woman visitor to Lycopolis, who had the benefit of a cure and a prophecy from John, then left for Jerusalem.

There did exist at least four Sahidic codices from the White Monastery (DAYR ANBA SHINUDAH) with abundant material on John. Unfortunately, only thirty or so damaged leaves survive out of the several hundreds they contained. However, there are enough for us to be able to make out two types of hagiographic literature: a life or series of lives, beginning with a reproduction and translation of the references in *Historia Monachorum in Aegypto* and *Historia Lausiaca*, on to John's role

at the time of the COUNCIL OF CHALCEDON in 451 (codices A, B, D); an Encomium that begins with a proemium and also ending with the Council of Chalcedon (codex C). This Encomium can probably be found again in part in the references in the Coptic Synaxarion in its Coptic version for 21 Hatur and in its Ethiopic version for 21 Hedar (17 November).

In both types there are various accounts of the same stories, unknown in the Greco-Latin sources. For example one is the episode, which may be historical, of John's intervention on behalf of his native town when it was under threat of extermination by Theodosius as a reprisal for murders occurring after a sporting contest between rival factions. Historically the best is doubtless intermingled with the worst. It is probable that the renown that cast an aura around the "prophet" John even before his death was exploited by overzealous disciples of the [archimandrite SHENUTE](#) to glorify their master, as well as by partisans of the deposed patriarch, DIOSCORUS, in order to discredit the Council of Chalcedon.

Mockery has been made of chronology to the point of making John, who had been dead for more than half a century, into a [contemporary](#) of the emperor Marcianus (450-457) who is supposed to have consulted John to this end, as his distant predecessor had done on another matter. There is an echo of this consultation of the solitary of Asyut, mentioned by name in the Syriac [History of Dioscorus](#), *Bibliotheca Hagiographica Orientalis* 257, by the Pseudo-Theopistos. The Ethiopic SYNAXARION gives John's death age as 125. It could be said that the voluntary recluse was a victim of his own notoriety. From the standpoint of history, the loss of these Coptic documents is regrettable and deplorable.

The question of the writings claimed as John's need not detain us long. I. Hausherr, who has done more than anyone to reestablish the truth on the point of the writings claimed as John's, expressed himself thus: "How is it that none of the numerous documents about him breathes the slightest word about a literary activity?" also declaring that "The Seer of the Thebaid is a perfect [orthodox](#) saint and who had written nothing" (*Aux*

origines . . . , pp. 500, 508). And even less did he write in Greek than in any other language, since John needed an interpreter to converse with PALLADIUS. It was only wrongly and belatedly, and with never a mention of Lycopolis, that works attributed to his name are actually those of a namesake, John the Solitary, a Syriac author whose identity is at present the subject of considerable debate.

The essence of John's personality has been best defined by Hausherr. "No reputation as a *contemplative* ever excelled that of the "seer' and "prophet' of the Thebaid" (1938, p. 498). All his spirituality is contained in his instruction to the Seven with the striking portraits of the three monks facing Temptation in their three different ways (32-58). This entire instruction can be summed up as a pressing invitation to purity of intention.

No wonder, therefore, that the only two apothegms that concern him should be two extracts from this instruction: "The abbot John of the Thebaid said: "A monk must above all have humility. . . ." (cf. *Historia Monachorum in Aegypto* 1. 59); and "The abbot John, the one of the cave, said: "My children, pursue quietude, exercising yourselves always in contemplation so that in your prayers to God you may keep your minds pure. . . . The contemplative who has withdrawn from activity into knowledge is better and greater . . . free from every care, he stands near to God, and no conflicting thought drags him back. Such a man passes his life with God, his commerce is with God, as he celebrates God in endless hymns' (cf. *Historia Monachorum in Aegypto* 1. 62-63).

In conclusion, the *Historia Monachorum in Aegypto* (1. 13, 18) and the *Historia Lausiaca* (8, 10, 11) agree in giving the nonagenarian recluse a playful character and a smiling countenance.

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