

SCETIS

A name that historically designated the area of monastic settlement extending about 19 miles (30 km) through the shallow valley known in the medieval period as Wad Habb, now called Wad al-Natrun, which runs southeast to northwest through the Western or Libyan Desert, about 40 miles (65 km) southwest of the Nile Delta.

In a very broad sense, “Scetis” or the “Desert of Scetis” also designated the ensemble of monastic colonies in the wilderness or on the edge of the desert southwest of the Delta, thus including NITRIA or the “Mountain of Nitria” (not to be confused with Wadi al-Natrun); KELLIA, in the desert south of Nitria; and Scetis in the narrower and more proper sense, still farther into the desert, south of Kellia. This article is concerned with Scetis in the more proper sense.

The district of Scetis, far enough from the inhabited regions of Egypt to satisfy the monastic search for solitude in the desert but not too far away to make transportation a serious problem, a district in which brackish water is available from the marshes and lakes along the north side of the valley and fresh water can be obtained from wells, lent itself well to the establishment of monastic cells, in isolation or in clusters.

Its development as a monastic colony began when MACARIUS THE EGYPTIAN moved into the valley about 330 and set up a cell near the site of the present DAYR AL- BARAMUS; soon, however, there were neighboring cells of monastic admirers who wished to learn from him.

Some of the first monks in Scetis had doubtlessly lived the monastic life in Nitria and elsewhere. Macarius himself had had contact with Nitria, although he had not lived there. He had visited Saint ANTONY, OF EGYPT but there is no evidence that he lived near Antony for any length of time. In any case, the monastic style of the settlement established around Macarius and of the other early monastic settlements in Scetis

was certainly not a tightly organized cenobitic one like that of the monasteries founded in Upper Egypt by PACHOMIUS.

It was the semianchoritic style characteristic of Nitria in its earliest period, with monks guided by an experienced father or elder but living essentially as solitaries. Although Rufinus, repeated by Socrates and Sozomen, wrote that Macarius of Egypt, like MACARIUS ALEXANDRINUS, was exiled briefly by the Arian [patriarch](#) Lucius about 374, that statement is of dubious accuracy, as far as the involvement of Macarius of Egypt is concerned. There is no reason to think that the growth of monastic life in the extreme isolation of Scetis was disrupted by events in the Arian controversy.

Probably by the time Macarius died (c. 390), and certainly by the end of the century, there were in Scetis four monastic settlements, each clearly defined by a nucleus with a central church to which the collection of scattered cells was related. These were the four settlements that became the monasteries of Baramus, of Saint Macarius (DAYR ANBA MAQAR), of DAYR ANBA BISHOI, and of Saint [John](#) the Short (JOHN COLOBOS), the first three of which still exist.

With details that can be gleaned from the *Lausiaca History* of PALLADIUS, from [John](#) CASSIAN'S *Institutes and Conferences*, and from the APOPHTHEGMATA PATRUM we can form a fairly good idea of how the monks of Scetis lived in the late fourth and early fifth centuries, and of how their settlements were organized.

From the literary evidence, it has been inferred that the growth of cenobitic houses originally meant as training establishments for new monks was giving Nitria a semicenobitic character by this time. Life in Kellia, in contrast, was still strongly anchoritic, while in Scetis the semicenobitic and the anchoritic forms of life were perhaps less sharply distinguished (Evelyn-White, Vol. 2, p. 169).

From a reading of the texts in the light of what French and Swiss archaeologists have more recently found at the site of Kellia (see the two reports by A. Guillaumont and R. Kasser in Wilson, pp. 203-208, 209-219), one suspects that the evolution of life and organization in [Kellia](#) at this time was similar to that in Scetis.

The monks lived in cells that often were a considerable distance apart. In his cell a monk performed all his labors with his own hands, prepared and ate his meals, tried to pray constantly, and recited the formal prayers enjoined upon him at fixed times on ordinary days.

His solitude did not prevent him from receiving visits and extending generous hospitality according to his frugal means. The larger clusters of cells centered on the church of one of the four settlements formed what may properly be called a *laura*.

On Saturday the monks went to the center of their particular *laura*, in order to be present for Vespers, the Night Office, and the eucharistic offering in the church, and to take a Sunday meal in common. To this central place they also took the products of their week's work, and from it carried supplies back to their cells on Sunday.

In Scetis there was no common written rule to be followed by all. The norms of life were those of the Gospels, supplemented by custom and by the wisdom of any experienced monastic father to whom a newly arrived monk apprenticed himself. Such a father might live with one or two monastic apprentices who were his close disciples in a single cell comprising several small rooms, while other disciples lived in smaller individual cells nearby.

Each of the four monasteries or *lauras* that existed by the end of the fourth century had a central church as its focal point. Each was presided over by a priest-monk who was in charge of the church and who also exercised certain powers and had certain duties as the religious superior,

the father of the monastery. Each monastery had a council, at least some of whose members were clerical monks. The maintenance of general order and discipline was the responsibility of the father of the monastery, acting with the council. The father of the monastery of Saint Macarius was also the “father of Scetis.”

Of all the monks in Scetis he was the one highest in dignity, the monastic superior who represented all Scetis in relations with the patriarchate and with the civil authorities. The position of the superior of Dayr Anba Maqar as “father of Scetis” lasted for a very long time, although the title was changed eventually to “HEGUMENOS of Scetis”; a *hegumenos* of Scetis still called upon the Coptic [patriarch](#) annually to report on the conditions of the monasteries in the eleventh century.

When the Origenist controversy became acute in Egypt in the last years of the fourth century, for reasons of ecclesiastical politics as well as of theological principle, the partisans of ORIGEN were found almost exclusively among educated men whose intellectual culture was Hellenistic.

To most of the [Egyptian monks](#) the only issue in the controversy that mattered was that some of the more speculative Hellenists insisted on the spirituality and immateriality of God. This offended and pained the more literal, relatively uneducated, monastic majority, who were accused of an unacceptable ANTHROPOMORPHISM for their attachment to concepts of God with human shape, form, and emotions.

There were noteworthy Hellenists among the monks of Nitria and of Kellia, but not among those of Scetis. Of the four presbyters presiding over the four monastic settlements of Scetis, PAPHNUTIUS alone, and with reluctance, accepted the condemnation of anthropomorphism by [Patriarch](#) THEOPHILUS (385-412) in his paschal letter of 399; the whole controversy probably caused little trouble in Scetis. When Theophilus turned against the Origenists, the monks of Scetis and their leaders found

themselves automatically on the politically safe side of the controversy, whereas Nitria and [Kellia](#) lost some of their leading figures in the turmoil.

Scetis was raided by barbarians, with destruction of buildings and temporary dispersal of the monks, in 407, 434, and 444. When Egypt was divided ecclesiastically into Melchite and Monophysite parties in the aftermath of the Council of Chalcedon, the majority of the monks in Scetis sided with the Monophysite party, which quickly prevailed there. They managed to win the goodwill of Emperor Zeno, whose endowment of their monastic establishments assured their economic well-being for generations to come.

During the reign of [Patriarch](#) TIMOTHY III (517-535), monastic adherents of the “Aphthartodocetist” Christology of Julian of Halicarnassus began to gain power in the monasteries of Scetis. Those who held to the opposing doctrine of SEVERUS OF ANTIOCH were eventually dispossessed. There is good reason to see these dispossessed followers of Severus as the founders of four new monasteries, three of which are known to have been dedicated to the Virgin Mother of God, which came into being around this time as counterparts of the four existing monasteries.

This division of the four communities probably took place after 535, the year in which the Monophysite church in Egypt was divided into a Severan or Theodosian faction led by [Patriarch](#) THEODOSIUS I (535-567, by right) and a [Julianist](#) or Gaianite faction led by GAIANUS, antipatriarch for a few months in 535.

Of the new monasteries, presumably founded by the dispossessed Theodosians, little is known of the history of the counterpart of Dayr Anba Maqar other than that it was known as the Cell of the Forty-nine after the relics of the FORTY-NINE MARTYRS OF SCETIS were removed to it in the reign of [Patriarch](#) BENJAMIN I (622-661).

The counterpart monasteries of the Virgin of Baramus and of the Virgin of

[JOHN](#) COLOBOS are known to have survived at least until the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, respectively. Anba Bishoi's counterpart monastery, originally called the monastery of the Virgin of Anba Bishoi but known later as DAYR AL-SURYAN, still exists. There were Gaianites at Scetis as late as 710, but it is not likely that the four original monasteries remained in their hands very long after the monastic communities were divided.

If Dayr Anba Maqar was once the residence of the Coptic patriarch (a fact first stated in texts of a much later period), and if this was the case shortly after the middle of the sixth century (Evelyn-White, Vol. 2, pp. 236-40), it would be difficult to reconcile this with Dayr Anba Maqar's being in the control of the Gaianite party at that time. In any case, Scetis was again raided by [barbarians](#) toward the end of the sixth century, and for many years afterward few monks resided anywhere in Scetis.

As Egypt adjusted to the ARAB CONQUEST OF EGYPT, completed in 641, monastic life in Scetis rose again. The monasteries were little affected by the change from rule by the Chalcedonian Byzantines to rule by the Muslim Arabs, but they shared in the general rise of the non-Chalcedonian Coptic church to unfettered predominance in the Christian society of Egypt, which the political change had made possible. The monasteries also, from time to time, were in conflict with Muslim authorities over taxes to be paid by non-Muslim subjects, despite the exemption that could in principle be claimed by Christian monastic establishments.

The first of these conflicts, lasting from 705 to 717, entailed physical violence to the monks and was aimed at the reduction of their numbers, if not their total extinction. Bishops and patriarchs were frequently chosen from the desert monasteries, a fact that brought to their gates many men whose vocation was motivated not so much by genuine monastic ideals as by interest in an ecclesiastical career, a condition noticed during a visit to Scetis made in 829/830 by the Jacobite [patriarch](#) of Antioch, DIONYSIUS

I. He also observed that manual labor and psalmody, but not study, were still in evidence.

After further destruction of churches and cells by foreigners about 817, a general reconstruction began from which some [architectural](#) and decorative elements survive today. At the same time, a new monastery, that of [JOHN](#) KAMA, was organized, and the monastery of the Virgin of Anba Bishoi had become a Syrian monastery.

Experience had at last led the monks to fortify the walls surrounding the nuclei of their monasteries, a measure that provided them with far better protection from marauders than had the fortified towers on which they had previously relied.

In the centuries that followed, monks began to abandon the scattered, isolated cells and to live within the compounds of the fortified nuclei, where the large medieval refectories show that the life was becoming somewhat more cenobitic. When the process was complete, perhaps by the fourteenth century, the monasteries had completely lost the appearance of primitive lauras, but that does not necessarily mean that the monastic life within their walls had become strongly cenobitic.

Meanwhile, outside the fortified nuclei, by the seventh century the primitive clusters of detached cells in which monks lived either alone or with one or two close disciples tended to give way to a larger, more complex type of cell called a dwelling, which, to judge both from the texts and from examples uncovered in the French and Swiss excavations of Kellia, was a compact assemblage of individual living units with some common rooms, all arranged around a courtyard and surrounded by an unfortified wall. In the medieval period, most of these dwellings seem to have been dependent upon either the monastery of Anba Maqar or that of [John](#) Colobos.

Numerically, the monastic establishment of the Wadi Habib, as Scetis was

called in medieval times, held up well until the end of the fourteenth century. By far the most important monastery was Dayr Anba Maqar, whose patriarchal ceremonies, visits, and vicissitudes are almost the only monastic events in the Wadi Habib that were chronicled in medieval narrative sources.

Of the 712 monks in the Wadi Habib counted by the historiographer MAWHUB IBN MANSUR when he was there in 1088, 400 were of Dayr Anba Maqar and 165 of the Monastery of [John](#) Colobos; in interpreting such statistics, however, one must reckon with the fact that those were the two monasteries to which the cells and dwellings still existing outside the fortified walls of the regular monasteries were then attached.

Copts were not the only inhabitants of the monastic houses. At one time or another in the medieval period each of the other non-Chalcedonian Oriental churches was represented by a monastic community in the Wadi Habib. Dayr al-Suryan was occupied by Syrian monks until their gradual replacement by Copts in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

There was an Armenian community near the Monastery of [John](#) Colobos, but the dates of Armenian occupation are unknown. Unmentioned in the monastic listings of the fourteenth century (which are incomplete), that monastery was already in ruins when al-MAQRIZI wrote his *History of the Copts* about 1440. There were Ethiopian monks in the Monastery of [John](#) Colobos and cells attached to it when [Patriarch](#) BENJAMIN II visited the Wadi in 1330.

Pehoout, a large cell or dwelling with a church dedicated to Saint Elias, seems to have had Copts as its occupants in 1199, however, and if that is correct, it must have become Ethiopian after that date. Its occupants were Ethiopian in 1419, but when al-Maqrizi wrote about twenty years later, it was abandoned and in ruins, the Ethiopians having moved to the Monastery of the Virgin of [John](#) Colobos. There have often been Ethiopians in the Wadi throughout its history as a monastic colony, even

when they had no house to call their own.

By the time of al-Maqrizi's account, the entire monastic population of the Wadi had declined, and many of the monastic buildings had fallen into ruinous condition. There were only a few monks in the great Monastery of Anba Maqar when al-Maqrizi wrote, only three in the Monastery of [John Colobos](#), and in its counterpart Monastery of the Virgin of John Colobos, the Coptic community had been replaced by the Ethiopians who had abandoned Pehoot.

Other dwellings and cells, and the Monastery of [John Kama](#), were abandoned and in ruins. Among the reasons for this drastic decline, which set in after 1346, were surely the Black Death, which raged in Egypt in 1348 and 1349; the great famine of 1374, followed by a new pestilence; and the serious depreciation of the monasteries' endowments. By about 1493 the monastery of John Colobos was extinct. The Monastery of the Virgin of John Colobos, and all the communities of the outlying dwellings, ceased to exist in their turn.

Close examination of the evidence makes it difficult to decide whether it is the original Monastery of Baramus or its counterpart, the Monastery of the Virgin of Baramus, that has survived as the present Dayr al-Baramus. The only other monasteries to survive are the present Dayr Anba Maqar, Dayr Anba Bishoi, and Dayr al-Suryan.

By the end of the fifteenth century, candidates for the religious life arriving from Lebanon and Syria brought some new life to Dayr al-Suryan. Reconstruction of buildings in Dayr Anba Maqar indicates some vitality there around 1517, but the reports of visitors in the seventeenth century indicate that the monastery, which for more than a millennium had been the greatest and the most influential of them all, was more dilapidated than any of the other three surviving monasteries in the Wad.

In 1712 only four monks were reported there, and only four in Dayr Anba

Bishoi, while Dayr al-Suryan and Dayr al-Baramus each had twelve or fifteen. By the end of the eighteenth century numbers had risen slightly in all four of the monasteries, but during the nineteenth century they were still poor in human and economic resources. In more recent years these monasteries in the Wadi al-Natrun have experienced a strong monastic and cultural renewal. The study of monastic and patristic texts has led to new vitality of monastic ideals and observance, first in Dayr al-Suryan particularly, and then in the other monasteries.

Since 1969 Dayr Anba Maqar has experienced rapid expansion. In 1976 the number of monks attached to each of the four monasteries was reported thus: Dayr Anba Maqar, fifty-five; Dayr al-Baramus, thirty-five; Dayr Anba Bishoi, thirty-two; Dayr al-Suryan, forty (Meinardus, 1977, pp. 67-69). The majority of the monks live in the monastery to which they belong. Others reside in the dependent house that their monastery maintains in the cultivated land of the Delta, and still others work elsewhere for the church or live the strictly eremitical life.

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