

## ***Shenoute's Place in the History of Monasticism***

A LITTLE MORE than 1,500 years ago, inside the massive church whose ruined hulk has come to be known as the White Monastery (Arabic *Dayr al-Abyad*), on an occasion near the middle of the [fifth century](#) when the monastery's longtime leader Shenoute was about one hundred years old, and when the White Monastery church was just newly built and being used for worship for the first time, at least by the aged leader himself, Shenoute spoke the following words.[\[1\]](#)

This great house of such magnitude! And by the providence of God! Not only was it four months that we spent working on it, or all of five, but also with the help of all these things that we gave as wages and expended on it—everything we had! In fact, they did not diminish, but rather the Blessed, the Son of the Blessed (cf. Mark 14:61), God the Almighty, blessed them and added even more to them.

Shenoute thought it miraculous that the monks had been able to afford the expense of building a magnificent new church—and other buildings besides: new monastic dwellings, and also a *nipsterion*.[\[2\]](#) Not only were the monks not left materially exhausted by the expense of these major building projects, but according to Shenoute they had been able to be more generous in their service to the poor in that year than ever before.[\[3\]](#) And the miracle of divine providence continued two years later, when an incursion of barbarians far to the north displaced a large number of people, and some 20,000 souls took refuge in the monastery for a period of three months.

During that time doctors had to treat some of the refugees for wounds, and nearly one hundred of the refugees died. But about half that number of women were pregnant when they arrived and gave birth while staying at the monastery. Some people complained about the accommodations and the food. But Shenoute was overawed by the fact that the monks were at all able to accommodate and show hospitality to so many people.

He marveled especially at the seemingly inexhaustible capacity of the monastery's well, which he described as "little" and said would not have sufficed to provide water for everyone without God's blessing.[4]

This well has been excavated in recent years, northwest of the church, and while I cannot say anything about its current capacity to provide water, I can say that it is a marvelous bit of architecture.[5] We do not know yet how much of the surviving structure dates from Shenoute's lifetime, but [Peter](#) Grossmann seems to be convinced that at least the basic plan of the installation might go back to Shenoute himself—whether before or after the monastery's service as a refugee camp will most likely never be possible to say.

In fact, quite a bit more of the material remains of Shenoute's monastery are visible now as compared with what could be seen just a few decades ago. For one of the most exciting recent developments in the investigation of monasticism in the Sohag region in general, and of Shenoute's monastic congregations in particular, is the archaeological excavation that was begun twenty years ago by the Egyptian Supreme Council of Antiquities and is now being continued by an international team under the umbrella of the Consortium for Research and Conservation at the Monasteries of the Sohag Region, which was formed by Elizabeth S. Bolman and others in the year 2000.[6]

A first season of excavation under the field direction of Darlene [Brooks](#) Hedstrom and [Peter](#) Sheehan was undertaken just a few months before the symposium of which this volume is a record, and further work had already been planned. All of us involved in the consortium are committed to the steady continuation of this work in accordance with a plan for scientific investigation and heritage management that respects the extraordinary value of this region for the history of monasticism and for Coptic [Christian](#) spirituality from late antiquity up to the present day.

Continued cooperation both with the Egyptian antiquities organization

and with the Coptic Church will be essential for the scientific success of our work, and for appropriate long-term preservation and maintenance of the material remains of seventeen centuries of monasticism in this region in all its spiritual and cultural richness.

Another recent development in the investigation of monasticism in the Sohag region, also specifically to do with Shenoute, is work about which I myself am far more competent to write than I am about archeology and material culture. I am referring to recent progress in the recovery of the remains of Shenoute's literary legacy, by which I mean progress toward the goal of making it possible for anyone to read as much of Shenoute's writings as we can discover among the Coptic manuscripts that have survived until the present time.

Achieving this goal is mainly a matter of editing and translating Shenoute's writings, but also of interpreting them, for Shenoute is not always an author who is easy to understand. (Far from it.) However, editing, translating, and interpreting Shenoute's writings is in fact a much more complex and difficult undertaking than you might think, even if you are aware of the inherent difficulties of working with ancient manuscripts.

For as it happens, Shenoute's writings have survived for us almost solely in manuscripts that were once a substantial part of the library, or libraries, of his own monastery. However, those parchment books in which Shenoute's words had been copied by generations of monastic scribes are now mostly lost. Only parts of about one hundred such 'Shenoute codices' are known to survive. In a few cases, what we have is just a single leaf from one of those books, more often it is something a little more satisfactory, like 10 to 15 percent of the original number of pages. Only twice do we have a Shenoute codex from which more than half the pages survive, and even the better preserved of those two manuscripts is missing 12 percent of its leaves.

Furthermore, the surviving fragments—and in the case of the White Monastery library we can speak really only of fragments, even though those fragments exist in large quantities—the many surviving fragments of the once extremely rich and varied White Monastery library are now scattered far and wide, through several dozen museums and libraries: from the Coptic Museum in Old Cairo and the Institut français d'archéologie orientale du Caire to the Bibliothèque nationale de France in Paris, and beyond, in Europe, in North America, and elsewhere.

To the extent that progress has been made during the past two centuries in reconstructing Shenoute's [corpus](#) of writings from the dismembered and dispersed remains of his monastery's library, it has come through the painstaking piecing together of fragments in and among all these collections of Coptic manuscripts.[\[7\]](#)

The work of reconstruction is not entirely finished, but it is now well advanced, and an international project to edit and translate the surviving [corpus](#) of Shenoute's works was organized in 2000.[\[8\]](#) There are many interesting perspectives that Shenoute's large [corpus](#) of sermons, tracts, and letters open for us. And despite the many new discoveries that have been made in recent years on the basis of the codicological reconstruction of his corpus, I am confident that much remains still to be discovered. For Shenoute was a truly extraordinary personality, and he left behind an extraordinary literary achievement—extraordinary not just within Coptic literature, where his achievement is completely without parallel, but even within the monastic literature of late antiquity in general, be it Greek, Latin, Syriac, or in whatever other language.

Let me try to highlight just some of the ways in which our knowledge of Shenoute is changing, or has already changed, as a result of fundamental improvement in our access to his literary corpus. It used to be said that the only firm date in Shenoute's biography is the year 431, when he attended the Council of Ephesus with Cyril, [patriarch](#) of Alexandria. Firm and precise dates like 431 are still mostly lacking in Shenoute's

biography, but in contrast to the situation a century ago, when Johannes Leipoldt wrote the first monograph on Shenoute and could fill only a few pages with a sketch of his biography,[\[9\]](#) today we can begin to imagine using a biographical framework for presenting the totality of Shenoute's activity. At present, when I imagine outlining such a scientific 'Life of Shenoute,' I work with a body of eight provisional main chapters.[\[10\]](#)

The first of these main chapters would be about Shenoute's rise to prominence in his monastery and his selection to become its third leader, or 'Father.'[\[11\]](#) My second chapter would be about Shenoute's style of leadership, particularly as it developed during the first three years of his tenure as the 'Father of These Congregations' in the course of his dealings with the members of the women's monastery to the south.[\[12\]](#) Chapter three, covering the two decades or so around the year 400, would be about Shenoute's antipagan activities: his attacks on temples and private shrines, and especially his conflict with the wealthy ex-governor of Thebais (Upper Egypt), Flavius Aelius Gessius.[\[13\]](#)

A fourth chapter might be [constructed](#) around Cyril of Alexandria's failed effort to make Shenoute into a bishop, Shenoute's subsequent trip with Cyril to the Council of Ephesus in 431, and his efforts on behalf of Alexandrian orthodoxy in Upper Egypt. The next chapter after that would have to treat the years surrounding the construction of the new church, and then the monastery's service as a refugee camp a few years later, events that probably date to the mid-to-late 440s.[\[14\]](#)

Somewhere there would have to be a chapter about life in the monastery under Shenoute's leadership, throughout his long tenure as Father.[\[15\]](#) And there would also have to be a chapter about a period of severe illness that Shenoute suffered, so severe that it kept him confined and away from almost all direct human contact for a year or more.[\[16\]](#) A final chapter would try to catch a few glimpses of Shenoute's last years: his reactions to the events that unfolded in Alexandria in the wake of the Council of Chalcedon in 451;[\[17\]](#) his decision to finish out his days on earth in a

small abode built for him by his monastic brothers somewhere inside the monastery; and something of his thoughts as he felt the end of his life drawing near.[\[18\]](#)

I have chosen to present this brief overview of Shenoute's biography in the form of a series of imaginary book chapters, in order to be able to underscore a certain point: Quite apart from the inherent interest of Shenoute's life story as such, it is a remarkable thing just that we are in a position to reconstruct his story to the degree that we now can. Even only a decade ago, most people who knew anything about Shenoute still believed that Johannes Leipoldt, writing in 1903, had said more or less the last word about the sparse facts of Shenoute's biography. We now know much more than Leipoldt did.

We owe our newly gained knowledge of Shenoute's life not to the discovery of any entirely new sources, but rather to the continuing careful and critical study of sources that have been more or less available for study for several centuries. I mean the manuscripts—or rather, [manuscript](#) fragments—of Shenoute's own writings, which have come down to us almost exclusively among the tattered and scattered remains of his own monastery's library. Of course, there is a work of Coptic literature that has become well known, both among scholars and lay people, as *The Life of Shenoute by Besa*, Shenoute's disciple, and his successor as Father of These Congregations.

Because this *Life of Shenoute* was supposedly written by Besa, anyone who reads this work might well expect to learn from it at least the basic facts of Shenoute's biography. But let us look closely at the title of the so-called *Life of Shenoute* in the one Coptic [manuscript](#) that has preserved it for us in its entirety, namely the Bohairic text (from Wadi al-Natrun, but now in the Vatican Library), which is what most people mean when they refer to *Besa's Life of Shenoute*.[\[19\]](#) There the title is: "A few of the miracles and marvels which God effected through our holy father the prophet Apa Shenoute, the priest and archimandrite, which the holy Apa

Besa, his disciple, witnessed.”

Not only does this title make no claim to introduce a narration of Shenoute's biography, but it must be obvious to anyone who reads the work that it also does not in fact narrate his biography. The scholars who gave the title *Life of Shenoute* to this work did so knowing that the designation “Life” in the title of a work like this describes a certain kind, or genre, of ancient literature that in fact cannot necessarily be relied on as a source of historically accurate information. It is also unlikely that Besa was the author of the *Life of Shenoute* as we know it, although it is possible that some of the traditional stories about Shenoute go back to things that Besa said during the years after Shenoute's death, when Besa surely spoke publicly about Shenoute on a regular basis.

However, the *Life of Shenoute* as we know it is a much later work of Coptic literature, belonging to a well-known genre that conforms to certain conventions and serves a particular purpose. The purpose of such a “Life” is to honor, or even to glorify, its subject by every means possible. In the case of a holy man like St. Shenoute, it is especially miracles that he was believed to have worked or to have witnessed that serve to honor and glorify his saintliness, thereby glorifying God and edifying those who read the work or listen to it being read.

And so it is no surprise that most of this *Life* is a series of stories narrating miraculous events involving Shenoute, without any attempt even to place the stories in a chronological framework, except that the stories begin with a few miracles from Shenoute's youth, and the work as a whole ends with his death. But between his birth and his death, the exact chronology of events is not important in this *Life*. All that is important is that Shenoute was saintly through and through, as his miraculous *Life* demonstrates in one story after another, page after page.

An important contribution to the study of the so-called *Life of Shenoute by Besa* has been made recently by Nina Lubomierski (2007), and so the

only other thing that I want to say about that tradition on this occasion is that I myself remain convinced that the claim that Shenoute lived to be 118 years old[20]—a claim that many people find hard to believe—is at least approximately correct. Here I do not want to go into the complicated details of working out the chronology of Shenoute's biography.[21]

However, I do want to emphasize that my conviction about Shenoute's very advanced age at death is based mainly on information that we learn from his own writings, and on one detail in a work by Besa (not in the so-called *Life of Shenoute*, but in a separately transmitted sermon, which Karl Heinz Kuhn included in his edition of Besa's works under the title "On a Famine)."[22] I have spent my own fair share of time trying to analyze the relevant information, and my conclusion remains that Shenoute was born about the year 347 (perhaps on 25 June 347) and died on 1 July 465. This means that in the year 373, when Archbishop Athanasius died, Shenoute was a young man of about twenty-five years.

Scholars have long accepted that Shenoute became the head of his monastery during the few years when Timothy I was patriarch of Alexandria, and I myself think there is good reason to accept Leipoldt's suggestion that it happened around the year 385, just at the time when Timothy died and Theophilus succeeded him.[23] In that case, Shenoute was about thirty-five years old when he became the leading 'Father of These Congregations.' And then he served in that capacity for eighty years.

Something else that scholars have long accepted, up until recently, is that Shenoute directly succeeded Pcol (Coptic *pcol*), who had founded the monastery in about the middle of the fourth century. I do not know of anything in the *Life of Shenoute*, or in any similar source, that so much as hints at the existence of a second Father who was in charge of the monastery between Pcol and Shenoute. However, Shenoute's own writings—in fact the earliest of all his writings—leave no doubt that he



did not become Father of the monastery immediately after Pcol.

Rather, another man (whose name we do not know for certain, but there is slight evidence that he might have been called Ebonh, Coptic *ebonh*)[\[24\]](#) was in charge of the monastery after Pcol died, sometime during the 370s, and then Shenoute succeeded him, thus becoming the monastery's third Father, rather than its second.[\[25\]](#) Furthermore, in these earliest of Shenoute's writings, he tells us quite a lot about a crisis of spiritual leadership that occurred during Ebonh's tenure as Father of the monastery. It was this crisis of leadership that disgraced Ebonh and brought Shenoute to prominence, singling him out as a likely successor to be the monastery's next Father.[\[26\]](#)

Shenoute's earliest writings, which inform us about the events that I have just summarized briefly, are two long open letters to his monastic brothers, written while the crisis was unfolding. Shenoute later regarded these writings as being of such fundamental importance for understanding the ever-present dangers facing the monks, and especially their leaders, as well as for understanding Shenoute's own role as the monks' leading Father, that he made them required reading for every member of the three monastic congregations under his control, four times each year, as we read here in Shenoute's own words:

Let this book . . . remain with the Father . . . of These Congregations at all times, so that he might rely on it and not forget or neglect to read its words these four times, as is appointed for us. Let the brethren in the village send it to him each time they finish reading it, and also let him send it to them each time, so that he might understand that it is good to read all its words, not omitting any of them. . . . Only these four times each year, even if someone hates hearing them, because also he hates his own soul, they will be compelled to read them all.[\[27\]](#)

The surviving evidence (by which I mean the manuscripts) suggests that this practice continued for as long as Shenoute's monastery remained a vital institution, that is, well into the medieval period.[28]

We can say that Shenoute literally 'canonized' his own writings. For throughout his life he periodically compiled his letters and other communications to the men and women under his guidance, and these compilations resulted in a set of nine thick books of 'canons.' [29] This is the title that we find repeated at the end of each of these volumes (to the extent that they survive; for example, at the end of one [manuscript](#) codex *pmehsnau nkanon* means "The Second Canon," and a notation immediately following this title means that the volume contains five works, called *epistole*, "letters"), and 'canon' seems also to have been Shenoute's own way of referring to these volumes, although in exactly what sense, or senses, is a question that still requires further investigation.[30] The nine volumes of Shenoute's Canons are also now our main source of information about Shenoute's biography.

For it appears that Shenoute organized them chronologically.[31] Certainly, volumes 1 and 2 contain works from just before and just after he became Father of These Congregations, while volume 7 contains the works that have to do with the construction of the new church and the monastery's service as a refugee camp, and volume 9 reflects the period near the end of Shenoute's life. Volume 8 contains letters written during the period of Shenoute's severe illness, and volume 6 might belong to the period just before that. Throughout all nine volumes, we gain detailed insights into the organizational structure and everyday life of the monastery.[32]

For various reasons, this biographical interest being not least among them, it was decided to begin the Shenoute editing project with the nine volumes of Shenoute's *Canons*. I hope that it will not be too very much longer before the first volume of our edition appears, but it will not be an edition of any of the volumes of the *Canons*. Rather, it will be an edition

of a single [manuscript](#) in Shenoute's corpus, a parchment codex from the White Monastery library that is known as the 'Florilegium Sinuthianum,' or 'the Shenoute florilegium,' also known as White Monastery Codex XL.[\[33\]](#)

The reason for beginning our edition of Shenoute's works with Codex XL is that this unique [manuscript](#) contains a series of excerpts from all nine volumes of Shenoute's *Canons*. A 'florilegium' is just such a collection of excerpts, extracted from the works of one or more authors and presented, like a bouquet of flowers, to be enjoyed as an ensemble, a representative sample of the literary garden from which they have been plucked.

The Shenoute florilegium is a beautifully copied manuscript, in my opinion one of the finest examples of the 'Coptic uncial' script that we have. The [manuscript](#) is also carefully conceived and laid out, with each excerpt marked out by a heading in red ink, and each 'canonical section'—that is, each group of excerpts coming from a single volume of the *Canons*—marked off by a heading giving the volume number. Interestingly, these rubrics are partly in Greek, even in this manuscript that might have been copied as late as the tenth century, possibly even a few centuries later.

For example, by far the most frequent heading that marks the beginning of a new excerpt is the laconic phrase *tou autou*, which is Greek for 'by the same (man),' thus indicating that each new excerpt comes from the same author who also wrote the previous excerpts. Presumably, all these statements form a chain that reaches back to the very first page of the book, which unfortunately is missing from among the surviving fragments of this manuscript. But there is no good reason to doubt that on the lost first page of this florilegium there stood the name 'Shenoute,' probably in its Greek form *sinouthios*, which is a form of his name that Shenoute himself seems to have preferred for his literary purposes.

This supposition about the florilegium's missing first page would seem to

be confirmed by the heading to the section much later in the book that consists of excerpts from volume 9 of Shenoute's *Canons*. This was the last such heading to be deciphered, because it occurs at the end of a leaf that had been torn in two, with the tear passing down the middle of the heading in the second column.[\[34\]](#) The text says: "Likewise canon 9 of holy Apa Shenoute, prophet and archimandrite. 9."

As it happens, the first surviving page of codex XL is page 41, which—with its tantalizing reference to the letters of St. Antony[\[35\]](#)—comes from the section of the florilegium that concerns volume 3 of Shenoute's *Canons*. Therefore we are missing the entirety of the sections concerning volumes 1 and 2. However, we have the fragmentary remains of a number of copies of both these volumes. Volume 2 consists mostly of a group of letters that Shenoute wrote three years after he became Father of the monastery.

From these letters we learn about his difficulties with exercising leadership over the female members of the monastic community.[\[36\]](#) Here is another historical aspect of Shenoute's career about which we learn nothing from the so-called *Life of Shenoute*. From Shenoute's own writings we learn that he was in charge of not just 'a monastery,' but of a group of three monasteries—whence comes Bentley Layton's recent proposal (2002) that we speak of a kind of monastic 'federation' that included both the main monastery, founded by Pcol, and the 'small monastery' founded by [Pshoi](#) three kilometers to the northwest of Pcol's foundation (the church of which is now known as the Red Monastery (Arabic *Dayr al-Ahmar*), as well as a monastery for women "in the village to the south," as Shenoute describes it.

Shenoute also tells us that Pcol had nothing at all to do with this women's congregation in the village, but that Ebonh had been in the habit of preparing the eucharist for them. Presumably, the village where this women's monastery was located is Atripe (now often called Athribis), and it is tempting to imagine that the women's monastery there was some

kind of a private house that had been transformed into a refuge for 'virgins of God,' a kind of urban female asceticism (or monasticism) that we know of in a number of cities elsewhere in Egypt and the Roman Empire.

In his effort to take over from Ebonh the responsibility for the female monks in Atripe, Shenoute at first visited them personally. But his visit resulted only in misunderstanding about his intentions toward the women, and further visits only made the problem worse. And so he abandoned the practice of making personal visits to the women, and for the rest of his life he communicated with them only by means of letters, which he dictated and then sent by the hand of a trusted elder male monk, who also brought back the women's replies or other communications.

Interestingly enough, Shenoute also communicated in this way—by means of letters—with the male members of his monastic federation, that is, the monks in the main monastery (which today we call the White Monastery by generalizing the medieval Arabic name for the church building to refer to the entire surrounding monastic community) and in the smaller men's monastery (which we call the Red Monastery by a similar process of generalization). Why Shenoute did so is hinted at in the *Life of Shenoute*, and it is becoming ever clearer the more deeply we study his own writings: Shenoute himself did not live among his brothers in the monastery, but rather he lived as a hermit somewhere in the surrounding desert.

There in some cave or long-since-abandoned tomb (as we may imagine) he had his secretary—his *notarios*—always close by. And probably the trusted monks who carried information back and forth from Shenoute's hermitage to the three federated monasteries came and went more or less daily.

Under normal circumstances, Shenoute and the other hermits living in

the desert near the White Monastery federation entered the main monastery only four times each year, at fixed times appointed for a kind of general assembly such as we know of also in the Pachomian monasteries. It was during these periods of assembly that volume 1 of Shenoute's *Canons* was to be read or heard by every member of the three congregations, and it seems likely that these periods of assembly also provided most of the occasions on which Shenoute delivered sermons, whether to the assembled male monks, or to a congregation of people from outside the monastery who came specifically to see and hear him on these special occasions.

His sermons were written down by stenographers and then recopied—like his letters—into papyrus codices that were then recopied again and again, in a process that eventually produced the medieval parchment manuscripts from which we can now learn something about Shenoute's life and thought.

In this context, let me return to the *Life of Shenoute* tradition and say something about its claim that Shenoute was only nine years old when he became a monk. I must confess that I am skeptical about this claim. In fact, I am strongly inclined not to believe it, even though I cannot disprove it. Consider this: Shenoute knew Greek, and apparently he knew it pretty well, both to read it and to speak it, as well as to write it. However, if he entered the monastery when he was only nine years old, then where, when, and how did he learn Greek? The question must be posed, for, so far as we can tell, Shenoute's knowledge of Greek was at least partly secular, which is to say that probably he went to school in the big city of Panopolis (Coptic *Smin*, which is now Akhmim). I think it unlikely that he would have received such an education in the monastery of Pcol.

There is other evidence in Shenoute's writings that he had experienced the world outside the monastery as a young man and not just as a boy, thus making it unlikely that he became a monk at the age of nine. If that

were the case, surely his experience of the world effectively ended then and there when he abandoned the *kosmos* in favor of the cell. But I think it likely that Shenoute was well educated in the normal way that anyone who was educated was educated in a late antique city like Panopolis, that is, in the Hellenistic-Greek school system, and so he must have had his education before he ever became a monk.[\[37\]](#)

Furthermore, I suspect that his education and training was significantly better than that of the other monks in Pcol's monastery, such that soon Shenoute's job there came to be to function as the Father's *notarios*, that is, his secretary. I am beginning to think that he must have been Ebonh's secretary, and possibly he served in that capacity already under Pcol. I wish I could prove this hypothesis, because it helps to explain a number of things about Shenoute's career that are otherwise very puzzling, such as how he was able to 'publish' his first two lengthy open letters, at a time when he was—as I used to imagine—just an 'ordinary' monk.[\[38\]](#)

Another thing that a good education and secretarial training help to explain in Shenoute is his remarkable literary consciousness, by which I mean his sense of himself as an author, as he went about producing what was and remained an extraordinary [corpus](#) of Coptic literature, the like of which did not exist before (except, in some ways, for the Coptic translation of the Bible). To the extent that Shenoute supervised the compilation not only of his *Canons*, but also of his sermons and other writings, which we have partly in an organized set of eight volumes of 'Discourses' (or 'Logoi'), he must have been conscious of creating a [corpus](#) of works that one could set on a bookshelf alongside the works of great [Christian](#) authors from all around the Roman Empire.

Shenoute was undoubtedly a charismatic genius of great personal authority and power. Clearly he had insight into people's hearts and minds, such that he seemed to his contemporaries to be a prophet. And he was so familiar with the Bible, and so deeply influenced by it (both in Coptic and in Greek), that he must have felt himself really to be a

prophet, a latter-day Isaiah or Jeremiah, called by God to show His people the narrow path to salvation. That is why Shenoute not only quoted frequently from the Bible throughout his letters and sermons, but also sometimes wrote in the same style as the Bible,[\[39\]](#) as if he was using his own voice to reiterate and rephrase here and now (in late antique Upper Egypt) the same message that “that prophetic voice at that time back then” had proclaimed to ancient Israel, in the time of the Old Testament prophets.

The time is not yet ripe to speak with very much assurance about Shenoute's thought and teaching, because too much of what he wrote still remains to be published, translated, and studied. But I do think it is already safe enough to say what the hard core of his message was, because he repeated it again and again: Repent your sins now, before you die, because there will be no mercy for sinners who die unrepentant! Clearly, Shenoute believed in eternity, and he must have had a very vivid imagination about what eternity means: either eternal bliss, or else eternal misery, the latter especially to be imagined as an amplification of painful things experienced physically in this world here and now. Furthermore, Shenoute was very strict in his view of God's mercy, which he understood to be boundless even for the worst sinner, if he truly repents during this life, but woe upon woe unto all eternity for the unrepentant.[\[40\]](#)

Despite his prominent leadership role—not just within the White Monastery federation, but also in the surrounding districts, where he was famous already during his lifetime as a holy man and champion of the poor, especially against wealthy and oppressive pagan landowners—Shenoute was nevertheless first and foremost a monk, who understood that in the end there was just “one little plot of earth” for which he alone was responsible—by which he meant his own body, with its virtues and its vices, its needs and desires, and its ability to control them or to let them control it.[\[41\]](#)



The monastic life was, in Shenoute's view, no guarantee of success in achieving eternal salvation. Contrary to a view that might have been typical of the early Pachomian monastic communities, and apparently also of Shenoute's predecessor as Father of his monastery, namely that the monasteries were little bits of Paradise on earth, with the monks already like [angels](#) sojourning only temporarily among mortals, Shenoute understood that no man or woman alive is completely impervious to the wiles of the devil, and even the most innocent can be misled unwittingly into sin.

There is an interesting passage in one of Shenoute's earliest works in which he reports that the Father of the monastery had tried to reassure him that his worries about the existence and spread of sin in the community were unnecessary, because the Father had provided the monastery with a perimeter wall to keep the devil out. To which Shenoute replied: "Did I say that the sins *came in from outside*?"[\[42\]](#)

In Shenoute's view, Satan and his demons and unclean spirits of every sort might be anywhere, constantly at the ready, armed with a wide array of weapons for tempting people to commit evil and to sin.[\[43\]](#) In a sense, however, the devil is an agent of God, Who could destroy him if He wanted to. Human beings have free will, and the role of the devil is to provide people with opportunities to exercise their free will and choose to do good, or at least not to sin. The monastery provides an environment in which certain temptations are limited, in comparison to the frequency of their occurrence in 'the world' outside the monastery, and the strictly regulated life of the monastery makes it relatively easy for a monk to know what he or she is expected to do in order to avoid or resist temptation and sin.

Furthermore, the community as such functions as a finely articulated support system in which each individual helps all the other individuals, each and every one, to tend properly his or her own "little plot of earth" in preparation for the judgment of God that will follow upon death.

Like all natural language, scholarly language too has an inherent tendency toward ambiguity, and the title of my presentation at the Sohag monasticism symposium was an example of it. If I take 'the history of monasticism' to refer to 'what really happened' across the years and centuries since the beginning of [Christian](#) monasticism, then it seems to me that Shenoute's lifetime marks out a kind of 'golden age' in the evolution of a monastic organization that was basically coenobitic, but incorporated elements of eremitic and semi-eremitic monasticism as well.

Shenoute's federation of three physically proximate monasteries was, apparently, 'successful' and widely influential in a variety of ways, both during Shenoute's lifetime and for at least several generations after him. Sadly, our information about the history of Shenoute's monastic federation dwindles to almost nothing under his immediate successors. The papyrus documentary evidence for Shenoute's monastery extends from the sixth century into the eighth, while the surviving dated manuscripts from the White Monastery library belong to the tenth, eleventh, and twelfth centuries. There used to be some inscriptions in the church from as late as the early part of the fourteenth century, after which the monastery seems to have declined and finally fallen to ruin. The influence of St. Shenoute himself, which began already during his lifetime and continues today, is a subject that deserves a study all its own.

However, if on the other hand I take 'the history of monasticism' in my title to refer rather to the scientific discipline that attempts to reconstruct and interpret (what we can know about) whatever it was that really happened, then I must emphasize, first of all, the difficult challenge that we face at present in recovering as much as we can from what survives of Shenoute's writings, and second, the great promise that Shenoute's writings hold for the future. For whatever role Shenoute and his monastic federation played in 'what really happened' in Upper Egypt, the role that his written legacy is beginning to play and, I am sure, will continue to play in the study of [Christian](#) monasticism as a whole—not only in Egypt!—is large, and it will grow, precisely because Shenoute's literary

legacy is so very rich.

In conclusion, I want to return briefly to the theme with which I began, namely the physical remains of Shenoute's monastery. The ground—the earth—is also a kind of text, written by the activities of human beings and nature. When humans shape the ground to their needs, piling it up into buildings and molding from it the artifacts of daily life, and especially when they turn it not into expressions of the most basic human needs, but into expressions of human spirituality and intellectuality, then they create 'texts' that approach the meaningful heights, or depths, to which language is sometimes capable of giving the most articulate expression. The White Monastery is such a text.

The remains of that institution that lie partly now exposed, but mostly still buried by centuries of drifting sand, can speak to us across the centuries going all the way back to the years when Shenoute himself composed his own texts for posterity—including, whether he could imagine it or not, people like us. Just as it is our task—no, rather our duty!—to reconstruct the manuscripts of Shenoute's works so that we may recover as much as possible of his words before any more is lost irretrievably—as so much has already been lost forever—so it is our duty to read the text written in the ground of Shenoute's monastery before it crumbles to dust, irretrievably, forever, as any little plot of earth eventually must. We owe it to Shenoute to do so.

**Stephen Emmel**

[1] See Emmel 1998: 82-83.

[2] Cf. Emmel 1998: 83-84; Grossmann *et al.* 2004: 372b ("a washing area"), 379b ("a washing place"), fig. A (near the "kitchen area"); [Brooks Hedstrom](#) 2005: 9-10 and 19 (= fig. 5).

[3] Pleyte and Boeser 1897: 320 col. 2 lines 9-31; Emmel 1998: 83 n. 13.

[4] See Emmel 1998, esp. 86-88; on the “amazing little well,” see Leipoldt 1906-1913, vol. 3: 70 lines 14-17.

[5] So far as I am able to judge; see Grossmann *et al.* 2004: 379, figs. A and E.

[6] Grossmann *et al.* 2004; [Brooks](#) Hedstrom 2005.

[7] Emmel 2004, which includes an extensive bibliography in vol. 2: 951-85.

[8] The editorial team comprises at present: Heike Behlmer, Anne Boud'hors, David Brakke, Andrew Crislip, Stephen Emmel (editor-in-chief), Jean-Louis Fort, Bentley Layton, Samuel Moawad, Zlatko Plese, Tonio Sebastian Richter, Tito Orlandi, Sofia Torallas Tovar, and Frederik Wisse.

[9] Leipoldt 1903: 39-47.

[10] In addition to the bibliographical references given in the following notes, see also many relevant chapters in the present volume. See now also Emmel 2007: 87-92; Schroeder 2007.

[11] Emmel 2004a; Schroeder 2006.

[12] Krawiec 1998; Krawiec 2002.

[13] Emmel 2002; Emmel (forthcoming).

[14] Emmel 1998; Grossmann 2002b; Schroeder 2004.

[15] Layton 2002; Layton 2007.

[16] Emmel 2004b, vol. 2: 555, 576-79, 593-94.

[17] Emmel 2004b, vol. 1: 8 with n. 9; Emmel 2002: 96-98.

[18] Emmel 2004b, vol. 2: 556, 570-71, 599.

[19] Leipoldt 1906-1913, vol. 1; English translation by Bell 1983.

[20] E.g., Bell 1983: 89.

[21] Emmel 2002: 95-99.

[22] Kuhn 1956, vol. 1: 41, English translation in vol. 2: 40.

[23] Emmel 2004b, vol. 1: 7-8.

[24] Emmel 2004b, vol. 2: 569.

[25] Emmel 2004b, vol. 2: 558-64.

[26] Emmel 2004a.

[27] Emmel 2004b, vol. 2: 562-63.

[28] Emmel 2004b, vol. 1: 13.

[29] Emmel 2004b, vol. 1: 111-234.

[30] Young 1969.

[31] Emmel 2004b, vol. 2: 553-56.

[32] Layton 2002; Layton 2007.

[33] Emmel 2004b, vol. 1: 111-25.

[34] Emmel 2004b, vol. 1: 114 (= pl. 3).

[35] Vivian 2005: 82-83.

[36] Krawiec 2002; Behlmer 2004.

[37] Cf. Timbie 2005: 65-66.

[38] Cf. Emmel 2004a: 173.

[39] Emmel 2004a: 165-67.

[40] Emmel 2006-2007.

[41] Chassinat 1911: 99b-100a; French translation by Cherix 1979: 27.

[42] Emmel 2004a: 167-69.

[43] Brakke 2006: 97-124.

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