Women in Anchoritic and Semi-Anchoritic Monasticism in Egypt: Rethinking the Landscape

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Outside of hagiography, the evidence for female anchorites in early Christian Egypt remains scarce. House ascetics in cities survive for us in documentary and other sources, but women monks in non-coenobitic, nonurban environments are more difficult to locate, to the point at which some scholars have begun to question their very existence. This essay seeks to change the parameters of the scholarly debate over the nature of non-coenobitic female monastic experience. It examines hagiography, monastic rules and letters, and documentary papyri to reassess the state of the field and to produce a fuller portrait of anchoritic and semi-anchoritic female asceticism. Non-coenobitic women’s monasticism existed, and it crossed boundaries of geography and social status, as well as the traditional categories of lavra, eremitic, coenobitic, and house asceticism. This interdisciplinary approach provides insights not only into women ascetics’ physical locations but also into their class, education, and levels of autonomy. An intervention into the historiography of women’s asceticism in late antique Egypt, this study ultimately questions the advisability of using traditional categorizations of “anchoritic,” “lavra,” and “coenobitic” to classify female monasticism, because they obscure the particularities and diversity of female ascetic history.

Most of our understanding of non-coenobitic women’s monasticism in Egypt has been informed either by Athanasius writing to or about virgins in Alexandria or by saints’ lives and the Apophthegmata Patrum. In hagiography, travel literature, and the Apophthegmata, women roam the Egyptian wilderness or live in desert caves. These texts, our most substantive sources for eremitic and semi-eremitic women, provide challenges of their own. Upon reading literature about the “desert mothers,” one would think that women solitaries spent most of their days praying and repenting inside their cells (cells made all the better if they had been former tombs\(^1\)), venturing out-of-doors to demonstrate their talents for cross-

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dressing, and showing-up their male counterparts. One anonymous monk who lived alone in a cave was famous for his discipline in constantly tending his manual work of plaiting rope and refusing to speak to visitors. His true gender as a woman was only discovered upon his death. Another female ascetic reportedly shamed a male monk she encountered while out traveling. When he changed his route to avoid encountering her and her companion, she scolded him, “if you had been a perfect monk, you would not have looked at us to see that we are women.” Without deeper scrutiny, these snapshots when put together form a montage in which women lived alone in the desert, traveled without male escort, and achieved spiritual heights by transcending their gender. While some scholars have examined the lives of women and apophthegms attributed to women as vehicles for expressions of various ideologies of gender, femininity, and the body in late antiquity, others have renounced them as little more than male stereotypes of women and therefore useless for a history of women.

This essay seeks to change the parameters of the scholarly debate over the nature of non-coenobitic female monastic experience. I will examine a variety of sources to reassess the state of the field and to produce a fuller portrait of anchoritic and semi-anchoritic female asceticism in Egypt. What does our evidence tell us not just about these women’s physical locations but also about their class, education, and autonomy? Non-coenobitic women’s

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4 This article examines women who exist in the overlapping categories of asceticism and monasticism of the early Christian era. By asceticism, I mean the discipline of the body and mind in pursuit of a “realized eschatology” to embody the “angelic life.” As Susan Ashbrook Harvey explains, “asceticism was the remaking of the human person in the image of its maker.” (See “Asceticism” in Late Antiquity: A Guide to the Postclassical World, eds. G. W. Bowersock, Peter Brown, and Oleg Grabar, Harvard University Press Reference Library [Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999], 317–318.) Monasticism, derived from the Greek term monachoi (the “single ones”), indicates people who have differentiated themselves, typically through a separation from the family or through asceticism. (See Conrad Leyser, “Monasticism,” in Late Antiquity, 583–584.) As William Harmless has observed, many early Christians identified as both monastics and ascetics: “Early monks typically joined ascetical disciplines—fasting, vigils, poverty, and lifelong celibacy—with a life of manual labor” (“Monasticism” in The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies, eds. Susan Ashbrook Harvey and David G. Hunter [New York: Oxford University Press, 2010], 493).
monasticism existed, and it crossed boundaries of geography and social status, as well as the traditional categories of lavra, eremitic, coenobitic, and house asceticism. This study serves as an intervention into the historiography of women’s asceticism in late antique Egypt and questions the advisability of using these categorizations to classify female monasticism precisely because of the diversity displayed in the sources.

I. THE SCHOLARLY LANDSCAPE OF “DESSERT” ASCETICISM

Recently the very existence of female “desert hermits” in Egypt has been questioned. In his examination of the named Ammas in the *Apophthegmata* (Sarah, Syncletica, and Theodora), William Harmless has concluded that only Sarah might have been a “desert” anchorite, and that even her status is questionable. Syncletica, who is quoted in the *Apophthegmata*, is described in her *vita* as only beginning her life of renunciation in a tomb; much of her life was spent as a house ascetic.\(^5\) Theodora lived near Alexandria, and she just as likely dwelled in a town or an ascetic community in the region as in the desert by herself.\(^6\) Harmless has deftly demonstrated that the image of “desert mothers” as propagated by some readings of the *Apophthegmata* and similar literature cannot be substantiated from evidence about named female ascetics in these documents. (Harmless operates under the premise that the named women are more likely to have been “real” historical figures than the anonymous ones.) He concludes, however, that the evidence for women’s asceticism in Egypt in all of its forms is “underreported,” not that female desert hermits did not exist.\(^7\)

Harmless sits somewhere in the middle of a historiographical spectrum on the historicity of “desert mothers.” Papyrologist Ewa Wipszycka has largely dismissed as hagiographical myth the phenomenon of women monastics who dwelled neither in urban homes nor in coenobitic residences but in the desert, apart from major population centers. Female solitary in saints’ lives and the *Apophthegmata* were really urban house ascetics, whose locations


\(^7\) Harmless, *Desert Christians*, 445.
were obscured or changed in the literature, or they were simply products of masculine fantasies. Wipszicka regards documentary sources (papyri and ostraca, which record letters, wills, and contracts between real individuals, as well as inscriptions) as more reliable evidence—evidence that supports her contention that female anchorites were house virgins, and that other ascetic women lived in monasteries. She thus challenges Susanna Elm’s contention that women indeed took up residence in the Egyptian wilderness and traveled the desert as anchorites or semi-anchorites. Elm’s examination of papyri concurs with Wipszycka’s analysis of the same material; those documents reference house ascetics or women in monasteries. The examples of desert ascetics Elm relies upon most are Synclética, Sarah, the anonymous cross-dressing rope-plaiter, and the traveling woman mentioned above. In other words, the bulk of Elm’s evidence derives from hagiography and the *Apophthegmata*. According to the skeptical view, however, these literary sources provide no means of accessing the experience of female monastics. Instead, hagiography and the *Apophthegmata* cut-and-paste female figures into male landscapes, or replicate male stereotypes of women. The known hazards and burdens of anchoritic asceticism undercut the latent claims to verisimilitude inherent in the literary portraits of “desert mothers.” Women would have faced prohibitive challenges in performing all the manual labor required in a functional lavra, and there existed the danger of sexual assault or other violence for desert hermits or wandering monks. Such challenges, argues Wipszycka, prevented late antique women from becoming desert anchorites.

We must also remember that the very notion of “desert” in which the “desert fathers” (the men to whom the women are often compared) lived requires rethinking. As James Goehring’s work has demonstrated, the “desert” has been a literary construct since the early days of Christianity. Already

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Athanasius himself simultaneously posited and deconstructed the city/wilderness binary when he wrote of the desert becoming a city in the *Life of Antony*. Even our male “desert” ascetics lived in or near populated areas: among other anchorites, in towns or resettled tombs and temples, on the edges of villages, or in some combination of these circumstances.

The debate over the existence of “desert mothers” at times pits documentary evidence against hagiography. In contrast, this study seeks to bridge some of these disciplinary divides in an approach which takes seriously hagiography’s insistence on the historical fact of female solitaries but does not mistake the literary manipulation of ideologies of gender for transparent evidence of the social reality of women. My sources consist of additional evidence from documentary sources, unstudied material from the Monastery of Shenoute (also known as the White Monastery), and recent scholarship on Egyptian monasticism.13

II. WOMEN AS DESERT ASCETICS IN LATE ANTIQUITY

The skeptical view of the literary sources is persuasive, but a passage from Shenoute, leader of a large coenobitic monastery, should give us pause before dismissing the phenomenon of eremitic women in the “desert” entirely. In his third volume of texts for monks (the *Canons*, which contain letters, sermons, as well as rules), Shenoute delineates the responsibilities of desert hermits who are affiliated with the residential coenobium, and who in his description include women. This passage appears immediately after a section in which Shenoute defines the geographical boundaries of his domain as stretching from the valley just north of Atripe (south of the main monastery, and the village where the women’s community resided) up north to the valley just south of original dwelling of Apa Pshoi, the founder of the so-called “Red Monastery” (a few kilometers north of the White Monastery):

Everyone who will dwell in our domain shall be bound by the canons that are established for all the brethren who gather together.

Four sabbaths each year—these are what our fathers established for us: Everyone who is in the desert around us shall gather themselves together with the brethren, so that they come together, barring illness. But for everyone who dwells in the desert who does not wish to walk according to the ordinances that our fathers established for us, if he is in our congregations, we will cast him out from them, whether he is male or she is female. And if he is in the desert around us, we will gather so that we will go out to the place that he is in, so that we will cast him out from our domain. But if he disputes with us argumentatively, we will cast down the place where he lives so that we necessarily cast him out there. But we shall guard ourselves so that we do not beat him on a pretext. And we shall cast down the place where he lives so that we destroy it down to its foundations, so that no one can reside in it ever again.

Thus, Shenoute here documents a population of hermits, who probably live in the caves and tombs in the desert cliffs to the west of the main monastery’s residence. He requires these monks to attend the community’s great collective gathering four times a year, and to “conduct themselves” according to the monastery’s rules. Anyone who does not, “whether he is male or she is female” (emphasis added), will be expelled from the community. Shenoute states that the monastery’s authorities will go so far as to venture out to the desert monk’s dwelling, remove the monk, and if necessary destroy the cell. Thus Shenoute alludes to male and female hermits who live in the outlying desert near the physical buildings of the coenobium but not in the monastery’s residences. This fleeting scratch of a scribal pen seems emblematic of the study of women’s monasticism in general; we are reduced to mining the narrowest interstitial spaces in a bedrock of male sources.

Shenoute’s reference to desert female ascetics who were of—but not in—a coenobitic monastery hints at the presence of women who did live in the desert but who did not neatly fall into these categories—neither coenobitic


15This reference has passed under the radar of much scholarship, even on Shenoute, perhaps due to the fragmented nature of the corpus. See Bentley Layton, “Rules, Patterns, and the Exercise of Power in Shenoute’s Monastery,” Journal of Early Christian Studies 15 (2007), 47, where female hermits are mentioned but not documented. See also the description of Shenoute’s federation, which includes the three coenobia but no hermits, in Coptic Christology in Practice: Incarnation and Divine Participation in Late Antique and Medieval Egypt, Stephen J. Davis, Oxford Early Christian Studies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 59.
(because they did not live in the residences and participate in most of the community activities), nor anchoritic (for they bore some responsibility to the nearby coenobium), nor house ascetics (for they did not live in houses). Shenoute’s history of efforts to centralize his authority over the women’s community in his federation, as documented by Rebecca Krawiec in her book, Shenoute and the Women of the White Monastery, also raises the question of whether these hermits (male or female) regarded themselves as in Shenoute’s “domain” (and under his authority) in the manner Shenoute outlines here; perhaps they regarded themselves as loosely affiliated with the community. More likely, they were senior monks who left the coenobium proper after a period “in residence” paying their dues as junior monks.

These monks, male and female, were clearly connected to Shenoute’s monastery by more than geography. Shenoute considers them bound by the same rules as the resident monks. He requires them to demonstrate their allegiance to the community by attending the great assembly of monks four times a year. He also treats the cells as monastic property and asserts the rights of a property owner to demolish his property.

How much direct supervision these monks received remains unknown. Perhaps men and women who dutifully ventured into the assembly on the required dates enjoyed a certain degree of autonomy during the rest of the year. For women, any degree of mobility or freedom would contrast with life in the coenobitic residential cells. In Shenoute’s and Pachomius’s federations, women were under constant surveillance, their movements were strictly regulated, and their communications with the outside world narrowed.16 As members of (but not in) the community, the women hermits would have had access to books, food, supplies, and even medical care from the main monasteries.

Shenoute lived in a cave for a few years before assuming leadership of the monastery; he remained in the desert even while its leader. Shenoute writes that he withdrew to the desert as a young monk in an act of defiance, to challenge the authority and leadership of his superior at the time (his predecessor). By leaving the monastic residence, he registered his disapproval and physically and symbolically distanced himself from the

leadership. Accordingly, his personal history lends support to speculation that the monastic hierarchy may not have supervised these desert hermits as closely as the monks living in the residential coenobia.

Unfortunately, parallels in other sources to the desert hermits of Shenoute’s monastery, which might flesh out the details of their circumstances, are sparse. Neither the rules from the Pachomian koinonia nor those from the monastery of Naqlun in the Fayoum region mention female hermits affiliated with their coenobia.

Female monastics living as solitaries or in communities of unknown size probably resided in the region around ancient Thebes. Western Thebes in particular spanned an area of pharaonic tombs and mortuary temples that were often resettled by Christian monastics. Villages also dotted the landscape, with monastic settlements near these more populated areas as well as further into the desert. Terry Wilfong has proposed that women ascetics mentioned in Theban documentary sources (women whose residences are not explicitly identified in the sources) may be independent ascetics or hitherto unidentified communities of women affiliated with known male monasteries in the region. The size, location, and autonomy of these communities remain uncertain, but some of the women are engaging in commercial transactions of their own accord, indicating a degree of independence greater than the Pachomian and Shenoutean federations allowed. Tombstones, graffiti, and other documentation from western Thebes, in particular, may

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19Regarding the communities of women, in surveying both archaeological remains (which do not provide clear evidence for specific women’s communities or cells) and documentary sources (which provide more persuasive evidence), Wilfong writes: “in spite of this uncertainty [in archaeological evidence], there are fairly clear indications in the sources that there were women’s monastic organizations of some sort in the western Theban area.” None of these communities are named (as in the case of the men’s settlements known as the Monastery of Epiphanius and the Monastery of Apa Phoibammon in the surviving sources, but the sources indicate such communities existed, possibly affiliated with known named or as yet unidentified men’s communities. See Terry G. Wilfong, Women of Jeme: Lives in a Coptic Town in Late Antique Egypt, New Texts from Ancient Cultures (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 107–108.
indicate the existence of female “solitary anchorites.” Disappointingly, the graffiti and epitaphs rarely tell us about the lives these women led or the settings in which they practiced their asceticism (whether houses, monasteries, or tombs). For example, a partial graffito in a tomb at the Monastery of Epiphanius was scrawled by a certain “Anna.” It mentions the monastic habit (σχῆμα) and therefore may indicate that Anna was an ascetic, but the writing offers no information about the context of her possible asceticism. Other inscriptions rarely provide more detail. South of Thebes, a grave inscription at Edfu reading, “in memory of virgin Sophia,” only records the barest outline of Sophia’s footprint during her life. With no mention of a topos or monastérion, it is possible that Sophia practiced as a solitary or lived in a looser lavra, but we cannot discern much with certainty.

Elm has suggested that Amma Sarah of the Apophthegmata may have led an eremitic life, but in a different part of Egypt. She may have been an anchorite who lived near other male anchorites, who could have provided important physical and practical support. Whether or not Sarah herself ever existed, the representation of “Amma Sarah” in the Apophthegmata Patrum may have reflected a real historical phenomenon, as Shenoute’s reference to women monks in the desert attests. “Amma Sarah” might well be a literary invention, but her character could have been based on historical, semi-eremitic female monks. The women living in the desert outside of Shenoute’s monastery’s coenobium require us to rethink the range of

20 Wilfong, Women of Jeme, 108.
possibilities for female asceticism documented in minimalistic or hagiographical material.

Another example of a woman in an ambiguous “desert” ascetic context comes from northern Egypt. Tombstones for women have been found at the male monastery of Jeremiah at Saqqara. 24 Unfortunately, most of the epitaphs tell us virtually nothing about the status of the dead women, even whether they were monastics. For example, on one stone discovered as recently as 2003, the precise spot where the woman’s title, family lineage, or profession should appear is damaged. We have, “Re[member] Mary, the [. . . ], that G[od may give her r]est.” Perhaps it reads Mary the monachē, or Mary the sinner. The presence of female tombstones has led to speculation as to whether there was a women’s monastery nearby, which shared the cemetery with the male monastery. One of the tombstones does belong to an “Ama Sousanna,” mother of a “great monastery.” The small number of female tombstones, however, and the corresponding lack of any other evidence of a female monastery—much less a “great monastery”—undercuts this hypothesis. The other possibility that has been proposed is that Christian women who died, perhaps even after the male monastery had closed or had witnessed its population dwindle, were buried there because of the perceived sanctity of the site. 25 Wipszycka has instead suggested that Sousanna was the director of a known women’s community in Hermopolis, which took as its patron Jeremiah, as well. Hermopolis, however, is in Middle Egypt, quite some distance from Saqqara in Lower Egypt. This distance does not preclude the possibility that the director of the Hermopolite women’s monastery was buried at the Monastery of Jeremiah, but it certainly makes it less likely. While a specific affiliation of Sousanna seems difficult to pinpoint, the theory that some of these women might have been monks who had visited the monastery at the end of their lives, or were somehow near the monastery at the end of their lives, has potential, because women ascetics did visit men’s monasteries in Lower Egypt in late antiquity. 26 Additionally, though, Shenoute’s reference to hermits in the desert and the Theban documentary evidence invite us to consider the possibility that some were holy women who lived in the desert near the Monastery of

26 The most famous, of course, are elite, literate women such as Egeria, Paula, Melania the Younger, and Melania the Elder, who traveled the entire Mediterranean region as well as Egypt. (On these ascetic women pilgrims, see Georgia Frank, The Memory of the Eyes: Pilgrims to Living Saints in Christian Late Antiquity, The Transformation of the Classical Heritage 30 [Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000], 6–7.) An ascetic woman of more modest means could certainly have traveled up and down the Nile.
Jeremiah, resided in or near in neighboring villages, or had visited the monastery or corresponded with the male monks and felt some kinship with the community. The brief mention in Shenoute’s rule about the responsibilities of women hermits to the coenobium to which they pledged allegiance may be one of the earliest non-hagiographical witnesses to eremitic or semi-eremitic women in Egypt. And it opens the door to the possibility that these women existed elsewhere, perhaps near monasteries further north. Shenoute’s Canons, combined with the documentary evidence, require us to expand our understandings of the possibilities of women’s “desert” asceticism and solitary asceticism. “Desert” asceticism was not limited to a (likely) mythical desert solitary, or a well-regulated coenobium outside of a village. The evidence invites us instead to explore a spectrum of “desert” women’s monasticism, including hermits affiliated with coenobitic communities, women living alone or in groups, and house ascetics in smaller villages instead of large cities.

III. THE ECONOMICS AND AUTONOMY OF WOMEN MONASTICS

Papyri and ostraca also document ascetic women who seem to be living on their own in urban or unidentified locations. The most studied example comes from Oxyrhynchus around 400 CE. It records a lease between two monachai apotaktikai who lease their cellar to a Jewish man. These women seem to live a number of paradoxes. Identified as committed renunciants by the term apotaktikai, they are nonetheless living in a highly populated area earning money from the lease of a part of their home. The financial remuneration is less surprising, however, than the revelation that the terms of the lease may put them in close proximity to a man.27 Other women who live in obvious urban contexts engage in a number of legal and economic transactions. Some sources document monozousa’s and monachē’s who sell and lease homes or inherit goods in Hermopolis, Jeme (Thebes), Oxyrhynchus, and unknown locations.28 On a list of deliveries to ascetics as well as lay people,

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28P.Princ. II 84, P.Prog. 142; P.Lond. III 994 & 1020; PSI VI 698; CPR IV 152. For CPR IV 152 as evidence for property-owning monastic women who gain income from leasing their building(s), see also Wilfong, Women of Jeme, 107. On PSI VI 698, see also Elm, “Virgins of God,” 234–235. See also the list of papyri concerning female ascetics in Wipszycka, Moines et communautés monastiques, 609–611 (“L’ascétisme féminin,” 395–396). Some, but not all, of the papyri and
we have a receipt for grain delivered to two monks who are sisters. 29 (Other buyers on this list include apa’s, as well.) A fragmentary list of expenses from the Fayoum includes items given to an “Ama Theodora.” 30 An amma appears in a receipt for wine, on a longer receipt list, which includes at least two abba’s. 31 Although the papyrus affilliates a church (“ekkl[ēsias]”), monastery (“monastēr[ion]”), coenobium (“koinōbiou”) with some of the male individuals, the amma has no such affiliation. As with the inscriptions and graffiti mentioned above (and in contrast to *P. Oxy.* XLIV 3202, the monachai apotaktikai papyrus), the receipts tell us nothing about the ascetics’ residences. A number of women’s monasteries seem to have existed in the Theban area, and one collection of letters survives from a community at the temple of Seti I in Abydos. 32 However, none of the documents examined here mention a topos to which the female monk belongs (the standard naming formulary in documents concerning coenobitic monks).

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31 PSI 8 953 col II, line 8 in *Papiri greci e latini* (Società Italiana par la ricerca dei papiri greci e latini in Egitto) 8 (1927): 136. Mentioned briefly in Elm, “Virgins of God,” 246n64.

Some of these women may have lived as ascetics on their own, in groups large or small, or (as mentioned earlier regarding Thebes) as affiliates to a men’s topos. (The women at times seem to function, however, as independent economic agents.) Although it is impossible to extrapolate the women’s precise economic circumstances from the types of goods listed, they are basic necessities, which a woman of modest means could purchase. These women need not be wealthy. Moreover, the evidence documents monastic women in diverse regions of Egypt engaging in these kinds of transactions.

Although these texts usually present few insights into the details of these women’s lives, one papyrus reveals that some monastic women remained enmeshed in familial rivalries and legal disputes. A monachē named Tsone even sued her own mother. Tsone’s father gave her mother four solidi upon their divorce, to pay for the child’s upbringing. (Although tsone means “the sister” in Coptic, this text is written in Greek and uses the Greek tsōnē as a name.33) Tsone claimed the money is now due her, because her mother threw her out of the house when she was a child, and her father raised her.34 Though the document delineates her parentage, it does not describe Tsone herself as being from either her father’s household or from a topos or monastērion. She is characterized simply as Aurelia Tsone, a monk (monachē) from Syene, south and across the Nile from Elephantine.35 Her lawsuit over a fairly small sum reveals that familial bonds and monetary interests endured for some women well after their commitment to monasticism.

The “house asceticism” of the female anchorites described here bears little resemblance to the iconic image of Athanasius’s house virgin in Alexandria, who dedicates her life and chastity to God while residing at home with her biological or legal family (and therefore with male or female relatives in a position of legal and economic authority over her).36 These women from documentary sources live throughout Egypt, and the absence of male relatives in the documents indicates that some are acting independently from male relatives or guardians in legal and economic matters.37 One possible

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33 On tsōnē and tsōne as names, see Friedrich Preisigke, Namensbuch enthaltend alle griechischen, lateinischen, ägyptischen, hebräischen, arabischen und sonstigen semitischen und nichtsemitischen Menschenamen, soweit sie in griechischen Urkunden (Papyri, Ostraka, Inschriften, Mumienschildern, u. s. w.) Ägyptens sich vorfinden (Heidelberg, 1922), 449.
35 Literally “Aurelia Tsone, daughter of Menas whose mother is Tapia, a monk (monachē) anchored (ormōmēnē) from Syene” (Bell, 189).
37 On women’s legal and financial authority in Egypt, see Roger S. Bagnall, Egypt in Late Antiquity (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), esp. p. 98. As Bagnall notes, documentary evidence about women that does not mention husbands, fathers, and so forth, indicates women acting without the presence of husbands, fathers, and so on.
exception is found in a papyrus from Panopolis, in which a woman named Didyme and her sibling (likely her brother) are named in a receipt for taxes paid by their father in the form of clothing. The woman, Didyme, is a dedicated virgin (\textit{aeiparthenos}); the document dates to the year 371 CE. Didyme acts as an agent and heir in the transaction, albeit accompanied by male relatives.\textsuperscript{38} The contents of the document suggest that Didyme’s socio-economic status ranks far lower than the Alexandrian house virgins of Athanasius’s circle; Didyme may represent female house asceticism among a lower economic class of Christians.

Documentary sources can on occasion provide a glimpse of the ways in which non-coenobitic women outside of Alexandria pursued their religious vocations. Some of them were educated and possessed their own small libraries, for example. In another lawsuit, a virgin (\textit{aeiparthenos}) disputed with heirs of an estate over some Christian books of which she had taken possession before the estate was distributed.\textsuperscript{39} Again, the record makes no mention of a \textit{topos} or ascetic superior; nor does it name any relatives.

Independent female ascetics also established their religious identities and independence through letter writing. They corresponded with men, including monks, about spiritual matters. Two letters from a \textit{monachē} named Maria (Mary) survive. The ostraca were found in the Theban region, but we do not know where Maria lived precisely. In the first—just a fragment—Maria the \textit{monachē} writes to her “beloved brother Isaac”; the contents (if there ever were any) have been lost, and the editors of the volume in which it appears have judged it to be a “practice ostrakon.”\textsuperscript{40} In the second letter, Maria writes to Apa Kyriakos “the anchorite,” asking for his blessing upon her, her “house” (Coptic \textit{paēt}), and a “little orphan” who has been left in her care. Since she mentions her house twice (and no other residents besides the orphan), she may be the property owner.\textsuperscript{41} Another ostracon found at the

\textsuperscript{38} P.\textsuperscript{Lips.} 60 in \textit{Griechische Urkunden der Papyrussammlung zu Leipzig} vol. 1, Ludwig Mitteis, (Leipzig: Teubner, 1906), 188; see also Elm, “Virgins of God,” 236; on the identity of Didyme’s sibling, see the introductory remarks in Mitteis, \textit{Griechische Urkunden}, 188, and P.\textsuperscript{Lips.} 59. On the term \textit{aeiparthenos} denoting an ascetic woman, see Elm, “Virgins of God,” 239–40 and Rowlandson, \textit{Women and Society}, 77. For another instance of the term, see also SB XVI 12620/\textit{P.Mich.Inv.} 431, a letter fragment that contains greetings sent to a woman named Nona (or Nonna) and her unnamed virgin daughter. No other information about this \textit{aeiparthenos} is provided, so this fourth-century document only provides evidence for asceticism in a most generic sense, and most likely house asceticism.


\textsuperscript{40} O.Brit.Mus.Copt. I. 53,6 in \textit{Coptic and Greek Texts of the Christian Period From Ostraka, Stelae, etc. in the British Museum}, ed. H. R. Hall (London: British Museum, 1905), 72. (See also Wilfong, 107).

Monastery of Epiphanius in Thebes preserves the request of two women, Tatre and Katharon, possibly monastics though not identified as such. They write to a certain Moses—likely a cleric or monk—requesting a portion of a “canon” be sent to them. Tatre writes the text herself, in her own hand, suggesting a certain level of education. They lay claim to no ascetic community or monastic superior. No town is mentioned, so we do not know whether Tatre and Katharon live in an urban or an outlying area.

All three women secure spiritual guidance for themselves from men they deem spiritually authoritative. Maria’s greeting reads, “Give it to my holy father and the true worshiper of God, Apa Kyriakos the anchorite, from Maria the monk (monachē), the sinner. Before the word of my insignificance, I embrace the footstool of the feet of your holy paternity.” Such a self-deprecating opening presents an extreme form of the typical epistolary convention of humility. Roger Bagnall and Raffaella Cribiore’s volume of women’s letters from Egypt contains nineteen letters to ascetics and monastics grouped in sections entitled “Letters to Clergy and Holy Men” and “Letters from the Monastery of Ephiphanius.” Among these, four other women letter-writers “embrace” or otherwise present themselves at the “feet” of their recipient, but they do not also refer to themselves as “sinners.” (Three of these letters come from the eight from the Monastery of Epiphanius, and one other letter aside from Maria’s comes from the more general group of eleven letters to clergy and holy men.) Other letter-writers fulfill the expectations of humility in their introductory formulae in other ways, such as describing themselves as the “humblest” or identifying the recipient as their “lord” or “father” (or both). Tatre and Katharan, however, lie on the opposite end of this spectrum. They diverge from convention and go so far as to address their recipient as “a brother” (not a father) and call him “the humblest.” Not until the end of the brief epistle, after asserting that she has written the letter herself (in her “own hand”) and requesting a prayer in addition to a copy of the “canon,” does Tatre express humility by identifying herself as a sinner: “Be so kind as to pray for me; I am a sinner.” The editor of the published text attributes Tatre’s precocious, even

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O.Mon.Epiph. 386, in Women’s Letters, 252. See also Wilfong, Women of Jeme, 76, 108. Wilfong agrees that the women are probably ascetics.


O.CrumST 233, in which “This humblest Sarah” writes to a monk or priest named Ezekiel. Sarah is not an ascetic. These nineteen letters from women to monks and clergy appear in Women’s Letters, 198–214, 245–254.
presumptuous, act of calling her spiritual superior a “brother” and “the humblest” to a typical “women’s” mistake, since a writer is supposed to describe oneself as humble and unworthy of the recipient’s attention—not the other way around. It could also be read as an expression of spiritual and authorial authority, a rare moment of feminine assertion. In their divergent stylistic manners, the authors of these two letters share an important attribute: the volitional and self-determining agency in seeking spiritual guidance for their own religiously dedicated lives. Tatre and Katharon, especially, seem to take their spiritual education into their own hands, asking for a text that they can study and incorporate into their lives themselves. And through their “mistake” in epistolary formulary, they (intentionally or not) place their own religious authority on a footing equal to their male correspondent’s.

The women discussed in this essay all practice forms of asceticism in which they may have been living as solitaries or in a small group, but probably not as members of a coenobium. The urban monastics who owned their own homes were women of some means, but not on the scale of wealth exhibited by their more famous sisters Melania the Elder, Macrina, Olympias, or even most of Athanasius’s virgins in Alexandria. Some, like Tatre and Katharon, have no known location, and though these women likely live in the region of Thebes (where their letter, scrawled on an ostracon, was discovered), others may or may not reside in a city.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

These women lived lives unbound by our own categories of anchoritic, coenobitic, and lavra monasticism. Shenoute’s reference to male and female hermits introduces a new category of “desert mother” into our historiographical conversation. Moreover, Egyptian “house asceticism” (or urban anchoritism) was not limited to the elite who could afford to dedicate a virgin daughter to the church. Affiliating with a coenobitic monastery while living in the neighboring desert would have afforded women ascetics a degree of protection and security. Poor women who pursued the ascetic life would have had an option beyond living in the coenobium. Women of some means could have lived either in a monastery, the outlying desert, or their

45 An unlikely epithet for an addressee, but the gender forbids its being applied to the writers. Women seem apt to misuse such epithets” (O.Mon.Epiph. 386 in The Monastery of Epiphanius at Thebes, Part II, Crum and White, 93); translation and editorial comments in ibid., 255. (The translation used here, however, is Bagnall and Cribiore, Women’s Letters, 252.) Although Crum and White cite one more example of a woman “misusing” an epithet, Bagnall and Cribiore’s more recent collection of women’s letters does not bear out this earlier accusation of a tendency for women to pen mistakes in their epistolary formulae.
own homes. Women with property, living as house ascetics in or near villages, probably exercised a degree of independence not available to the hermits affiliated with Shenoute’s monastery and subject to his punishment.

Thus, synthesizing the evidence from Shenoute, literature, and documentary sources produces a diverse landscape of women’s non-coenobitic asceticism. The evidence for female monastic property owners does suggest that female “anchorites” in Egypt were often house ascetics—women living as monks in urban or village homes—as scholars skeptical of the literary sources have argued.46 However, as this article has demonstrated, the documentary evidence does not completely debunk claims that women lived in desert cells outside of coenobia—claims that typically have been based primarily on hagiography and the *Apopthegmata Patrum*. As William Harmless has asserted, the “traditional taxonomy [of monasticism] masks the extraordinary diversity of actual monastic practice.”47 In the case of women’s monasticism, it does even greater damage. It occludes from our vision those already marginalized—the women. The difficulty of “recovering” the history of women in pre-modern Christianity is well-traversed terrain.48 This essay has exposed both the challenges of such an endeavor when it comes to women monastics in Egypt and the imperative of reading the sources against the taxonomic grain to document the potential landscape of women’s monasticism. Bringing together hagiography, documentary sources, and monastic rules illuminates the otherwise obscure female ascetic experiences.

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