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Early Women's Asceticism and Monasticism in Egypt

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Different forms of women's monasticism

- 1- Home asceticism (virgins living in their houses)
- 2- Recluses & Hermits (Female asceticism according to apothegms and hagiography)
- 3- Female living in independent monasteries
- 4- Double monasteries (female monasteries attached to male monasteries)

Sources

- Canons and Papyri
- The Lausiac History of Palladius
- *Apophthegmata Patrum*
- *The Rules of Saint Pachomius and Saint Shenute*
- Hagiography (Saints Lives)
- The Arabic *Synaxarium* (Assembled by Anba Butrus al-Jamil, Bishop of Malij, (Delta, Egypt in the fourteenth century)
- The archaeological remains (Wall paintings & inscriptions)

Extracts from the *Lausiaca History of Palladius* (early fifth century)

Chapter 60: (The Virgin and Colluthus the martyr) *“There was another neighbor of mine whose face I never beheld, for she never went out, so they say, from the time when she left the world. She had completed sixty years in ascetic practices along with her mother and at last she was on the point of passing to the next world. And the martyr of that place, Colluthus by name, stood over her and said:”This day you will make the journey to the Master and see all the saints, come, then, and eat with us in the chapel.” She arose then at dawn, dressed, and took in her basket bread, olives, and chopped vegetables. After all these years she went out and she entered the chapel and prayed. Then she watched the whole day for an opportunity when no one was within, and taking her seat, she addressed the martyr:”Bless my food, O holy Colluthus, and help me on my journey with your prayers. She ate and prayed again, and she went back home about sunset. She gave her mother a composition of Clement the Stromatist on the prophet Amos and said: “Give it to the banished bishop* and tell him to pray for me, for I am on my journey.” And she died that night, without fever or delirium, but laid out for burial.” (*the editor of the text suggests it is Palladius himself)*

Chapter 29: *“An ascetic named Elias gathered together some virgins who until then had lived separately, and founded a monastery for them in the town of Atripe”*

Chapter 59: (Amma Talis and Taor)*“In the town of Antinoë (Antinoopolis) are twelve monasteries of women. Here I met Amma Talis, a woman eighty years old in the ascetic life, as her neighbors affirmed. Sixty young women lived with her. They loved her so much that no lock was placed in the hall of the monastery, as in others, but they were held in check by their love for her. The old woman had such a high degree of self-control that when I had entered and taken a seat, she came and sat with me and placed her hands on my shoulders in a burst of frankness. In this monastery was a maiden, a disciple of hers named Taor, who has spent thirty years there. She was never willing to take a new garment, hood, or shoes, but said: “I have no need for them unless I must go out.”*

Chapter 32: *“There are other monasteries, too, housing from two to three hundred persons each. I visited one of these when I went to Panopolis, a place of about three hundred monks. In this monastery I saw fifteen tailors, seven workers in metal, four carpenters, twelve camel drivers, and fifteen fullers. They work at every sort of handicraft and from their surplus they provide for the monasteries of women and the prison”.*

Chapter 33: *“In addition to these there was also a monastery of some four hundred women. They had the same sort of management and the same way of life, except for the cloak. The women lived on one side of the river opposite the men. When a virgin died, the others laid her out for burial, and they carried her body and placed it on the bank of the river. The brethren would cross on a ferry-boat and carrying palm leaves and olive branches bring the body over and bury it in the common cemetery. No one goes over to the women’s monastery except the priest and deacon, and they go only on Sunday.”*