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Monastic Delta Designs: An Archaeological Assessment of the Late Antique Dwellings and Settlements in Coptic Egypt

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The oral traditions of the Desert Fathers of Egypt constructed a sacred landscape of isolation and solitary dwellings. The desert, whether real or imagined, was a stage for great battles between the angelic soldiers of Christ and the demons of temptation. Historical interpretation has ascribed these areas as the fringes of society, a place removed from the world. However, the complexity of the monastic built environments and the extensive modifications made to host pilgrims and visitors, demonstrates that the monasteries became new urban centers of the late antique world. The archaeological evidence of the early communities and their subsequent generations demonstrates that monastic settlements in the western Delta had a particularly unique design.

Three famous Christian monastic sites were central for maintaining the monastic memory of the early Desert Fathers: Kellia, Pherme and Scetis. All three sites were occupied until the seventh and eighth centuries; however, Scetis alone was occupied into the later medieval period (the twelfth and thirteenth centuries). The architectural history of the sites in Scetis suggest continued influence from earlier forms of monastic dwellings, thereby reflecting a particularly Delta form of monastic residence. The layouts and execution of the monastic dwellings and their iconographic programs in this famous center differ significantly from monastic communities found elsewhere in Egypt.

Literary Traditions of Delta Settlements

The oral tradition of the Desert Fathers eventually was collected as the alphabetical and thematic collections of the *Apophthegmata Patrum*. These accounts relate the importance of creating a world of independent ascetic Christians. In addition, monastic biographies and additional sayings were compiled to commemorate feast days of saints. These texts point to specific modes of historical memory regarding monastic construction and general attitudes toward built monastic forms that help us assess the value of literary sources for describing monastic architectural designs.

For example, a story is told of how Macarius directed some new ascetics to build their residences: "I gave them a pickaxe and a spade and a bag with bread and salt. I showed them the rock of an abandoned quarry and said to them, 'Cut yourselves a place here and bring some wood for yourselves from the *wadi*, make a roof, and thus you can live here.'¹ The use of quarries and natural caves in the desert were commonly employed for use as domestic space for monastics. Although it is more commonly thought that tombs were converted for monastic use, monastics in the delta were not able to use tombs, since there were no available cliffs delimiting the landscape. Very quickly the quarry community expanded: "So he had them make caves in the rock and cover them with palm branches and trunks and stalks from the wadi, and they lived in them. And some of the brothers he placed beside him as an order of disciples."²

Although Bishop Athanasius gives Antony the credit for making the desert a city, the fathers of the Delta are the ones who deserve recognition for populating the deserts with entirely new cities. Antony's cave and subsequent monastery by the Red Sea covers a small area, whereas the settlement of Wadi Natrun, with its four contemporary monasteries and the remains of the now abandoned settlements, covers an area of 50 km². Likewise, the settlements of Kellia and Pherme, spanning over 60 km² in area, illustrate a greater sense of urban construction than that by the Red Sea. In the *Life of Saint Macarius of Scetis* the demons also recognize the problem of the growing attraction to monastic living when one states: "Shall we allow this man to stay here and allow the desert places on account of him to become a port and harbor for everyone in danger, and especially to become a city like heaven for those who hope for eternal life? If we allow him to remain here, multitudes will gather around him and the desert places will not be under our power."³

Macarius of Egypt, also known as Macarius the Great and a contemporary of Amoun of Nitria, was the first to build his monastic residence in an area later known as Scetis, modern Wadi an-Natrun, now home to four active monasteries: Deir al-Baramous, Deir es-Syriani,

¹ St. Macarius the Spiritbearer, *Coptic Texts Relating to Saint Macarius the Great*, trans. T. Vivian, Crestwood, NY 2004, p. 8.

² *Ibidem*, p. 20.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 18.

Deir Anba Bishoi and Deir Abu Macarius.⁴ The evolution of his quarry and cave community to the much larger communities is not well attested in the textual references. In order to examine the evolution of monasticism after Macarius we can consider the settlement of John the Little, who built a similar community to the north, near Deir Anba Bishoi.

Wadi Natrun-The Monastery of John the Little

John the Little's (339–409) call to relocate to the area of Scetis,⁵ as presented by Zacharias of Sakhâ (c. eighth century), maps out the spiritual nature of the region's geography: "As its name indicates, hearts and thought are weighed by true discernment; the place where spiritual salt seasons souls with perfect peace; the place of the wisdom, knowledge and theological understanding of the orthodox doctrines of the Trinitarian and apostolic faith; the place of full instruction in angelic piety."⁶

The site that John the Little eventually occupied was associated with the site of his devotion to the instructions given by his teacher. Amoi directed John to water a piece of wood every day until it blossomed.⁷ Eventually, John's faithfulness was blessed, as the staff became a tree, later known as the Tree of Obedience. John subsequently moved to this location after the death of his father, building a cave to dwell in beside the tree. Below this space he also had an underground cave that he used for more austere asceticism (not eating, drinking, or leaving the space for a week).⁸ Rumor of his asceticism quickly attracted several other brothers who established their residences around the great ascetic.

The Monastery of John the Little was apparently one of the original four monasteries of Wadi Natrun, however, it was replaced by Deir as-Syriani after John's monastery was abandoned in the fourteenth century. The settlement that first developed was associated directly with the founding father John and those who were drawn to model themselves after his asceticism. The second stage of settlement was initiated after John's abandonment of Scetis during the raids of 408 when he found refuge in the Monastery of St. Antony at Klysmâ. Although he did not return to Scetis, other monastics occupied the area originally associated with the monk so that there was a *topos* of John the Little where monks built more substantial structures in the ninth century.

Sub-surface survey provides clear evidence that later structures were built around the central mound identified as the Monastery of John the Little. The Monastery of John Kame was

⁴ For the tradition of Macarius as the founder of the area see *Lausiatic History* 17; Sozomen, *EH* 3.14; and Cassian, *Conf.*, 15.3.1.

⁵ H. Evelyn White, *The Monasteries of Wadi an-Natrun*, vol. 2, New York, 1932, p. 107-111.

⁶ Zacharias of Sakhâ, 'An Enconium on the Life of John the Little', trans. M. Mikhail and T. Vivian, *Coptic Church Review*, 18.1 & 2 (1997), p. 21.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 25.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 30.

built beside the monastery of John the Little and became part of a larger community that included the Monastery of the Armenians, The Monastery of the Abyssinians, the Monastery of Anoub, and the Monastery of the Virgin of John the Little. All of the clusters are found within the area more widely known as the settlements of John the Little.

Yale University's Egyptian Delta Monastery Archaeology Project began work in Scetis in 2006 with the objective to map the extent of settlements and to carry out systematic excavations at the site to provide a sample of the various examples of monastic architecture on site. An American mission, called the Scriptorium Center for Christian Antiquities, conducted earlier work on site from 1995–1999. Both projects have worked on monastic residences and two examples will illustrate the type of architecture at Scetis. Active agricultural fields surround the site as currently mapped. The surface remains easily convey the presence of architectural evidence of substantial preservation.

The architectural features visible from the surface include a large enclosed area with a small church and an Ayyubid-Mamluk *manshubiya* (or monastic dwelling); several low-lying *manshubiyyat* surrounding this enclosed structure; and three more substantial structures that are perhaps heavily modified *manshubiyyat*. Several finds, including coins and ceramics, from the excavation of the church indicate that this area of the settlement was in use in the later medieval period. The literary tradition points to an abandonment of the monastery in the fourteenth century.

A schematic plan of *Manshubiya* AB 1 from 1996 indicates that the dwelling consisted of a core dwelling from which linear additions radiated to the north, east and south.⁹ The core dwelling has the best state of preservation with walls to a height of 1.8 m. These walls were protected by the later additions that abutted the original walls of the dwelling. The irregularity of the rooms' shapes in the core dwelling is visibly different from the linear plan of the second phase of construction.

A central courtyard opens to the east of the first dwelling. The area included one well, two fire pits, and a large deposit of discarded pottery with one measuring 56 cm in height. The courtyard does not demonstrate any evidence of being roofed, which would allow the occupants to have large fire pits open for cooking. The dwelling also had a second cooking facility complete with three fire pits and an oven.

A prayer area and subsidiary rooms extend to the north from the courtyard as one addition in the second phase of the dwelling. Room 5, with a western bench facing east, was used as a place of prayer and spiritual work. The rooms to the north were also equipped with western benches, or *mastabas*, however the relatively lower state of preservation of the walls has removed any trace of inscriptions or figural wall paintings. Painted fragments from this room, like room 5, include images of monks; Christ flanked by two saints; and an

⁹ Bastiaan Van Elderen, 'Preliminary Report-Wadi Natrun Excavations: 1995 Season', submitted to the Supreme Council of Antiquities, 27 March 1995; April 1996; March 1999. I wish to thank Bastiaan Van Elderen for granting permission and access to these reports.

inscription that identifies one face as that of Poemen (a well known father of Scetis). The recovery of over forty complete amphorae from the late Byzantine and early Islamic periods demonstrates that the *manshubiya* was occupied during the seventh-ninth centuries. The orthography of the few Coptic inscriptions reveals that the inscriptions are in Boharic, which was not in use until the ninth century.

In 2007, the Egyptian Delta Monastic Archaeology Project, began an investigation of an area (340 m²) on the southwest section of a small mound with visible walls. The mound is located directly west of a monastic midden excavated in 2006 and was selected because of its smaller size with the hopes that we could complete excavation of the complex in three years. Due to its relatively smaller size of the mound, in comparison to others at the site, we excavated approximately one-third of the mound in the 2007 season and plan to finish excavating the remaining rooms in 2008 and 2009. With the results of our 2007 we have enough information to begin formulating hypotheses that address key research questions that we have raised about the settlement and history of the settlement.

A preliminary surface mapping of the visible architecture of the *kom* suggests that the structure has at least 25 rooms enclosing an open-air courtyard at its center. The main or central entrance(s) have not yet been identified, however, one entrance to a phase of the building was found along the southern wall of the building along the southeastern section of the building. It was later closed in what may have been the final use of the rooms on the east side as cooking area.

Our excavation examined thirteen rooms and we exposed an original floor of one phase of the structure only in Room 2. The main rooms that were used for meetings and mediation are located in the center of the southern area. Rooms 3 and 4 were covered with all paintings depicting crosses, monks, geometric patterns and inscriptions. The walls show sign of modifications with niches and entrances plastered over and then pierced by later entrances. Based upon our investigation, there are four phases of construction that significantly altered the structure of the building. Currently the earliest phase of occupation of the building was in the ninth or tenth century and the latest use of the building dates to the tenth and eleventh centuries in the area that contained an outdoor oven.¹⁰

A third *manshubiya* has been mapped only by aid of visible walls and not by excavation. This method demonstrates already that there is a pattern of layout and design common between the two recently studied *manshubiyat*. Neither of the two recently examined buildings demonstrate the evolutionary change from a irregular dwelling, as seen in the 1996 *manshubiya*, to a more rectilinear structure. This might suggest that there are earlier and smaller residences that were later incorporated into a standardized building and modification plan at the monastic community.

¹⁰ G. Pyke, 'Pottery Report, 2007', internal report for EDMAP 2007.

Kellia and Pherme

In contrast to the new excavation work at Wadi Natrun, the excavated monastic community at Kellia and at the smaller satellite site of Pherme is well known to scholars of monasticism. The literature relating to Kellia is extensive and for this purposes of this study, I will highlight the similarities of the story of settlement location and the archaeological parallels.

The foundation story of Kellia is preserved in the *Apophthegmata Patrum* in which Amoun decided to leave Nitria because it had become too crowded. His desire to find a new monastic residence was in response to increased tension among the brothers who wanted to live in peace.¹¹ He set out after eating and walked about 12 miles and reached a spot that was only a day's walk away and this was the beginning of the site of Kellia. The identification of the site was confirmed in the 1960's by excavations, located near the current Nubariyyah Canal in the west Delta, through the combined efforts of the Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale du Caire, the Mission Suisse d'Archéologie Copte de l'Université de Genève and the Egyptian Antiquities Organization (now the Supreme Council of Antiquities).¹² The identification of Kellia, and its subsequent excavation, is one of the greatest archaeological discoveries in the history of Late Antique Egypt and monasticism.¹³

A survey of the area identified over 1500 *manshubiyyat*. These structures are clustered into seventeen discernable areas of which five exhibited a higher percentage of occupation than the others. Most structures exhibit several phases of additions and modifications. An overview of the general phases of expansion will clarify the importance for redefining asceticism and the definition of solitude when one considers that at times the monks were living closer than 5 meters from each other's dwellings.

The initial structures at Kellia were designed for one or two monks in the fifth century. Both Quḅûr Hegeila (QH) and Quḅûr Eremia (QE), the two most southern locations in Kellia, contain structures that prove that monastics relocated to the region in the early fifth century. The central dwelling was located within a large courtyard or later joined to another residence with walls to form a single, modified unit. An examination of settlement plan of Pherme evokes a similar layout of dwellings to that found at John the Little in Wadi Natrun. Our survey work at Pherme in 2006 illustrates that the *manshubiyyat* were planned initially as smaller structures, some of which still survive today, and then others were modified as the needs of the community changed.

¹¹ Antony 34. *HL* 18 identifies the residence of Macarius of Alexandria as the Cells.

¹² A. Guillaumont, 'Le Site des Kellia menacé de destruction', in: *Prospection et sauvegarde des antiquités de l'Égypte*, le Caire 1981, p. 195–198.

¹³ For a bibliography for previous work see the two most recent volumes to be published on the sites of Kellia and Pherme: N. H. Henein and M. Wuttmann, *Kellia: L'ermitage copte QR 195*. 2 vols. Cairo 2000 and *EK 8184, Tome IV. Explorations aux Qouçour Hégeila et 'Éreima lors des campagnes 1987, 1988 et 1989*, ed. P. Bridel, Louvain 2003.

The general plan of a *manshubiya* included a large enclosure with a small house attached to the northwest wall. The dwelling was multi-roomed with a courtyard, a main entrance, and rooms for one or two occupants, one of which was comparatively larger than the others. These rooms were also frequently attached directly to the cooking facilities. The place set aside for prayer was often within the residence of the elder and was designed with ceramic vessels horizontally placed in the wall for acoustics.

Conclusions

This paper demonstrates that there is a relative Delta model of *manshubiyyat* that has, until now, been called the *Kellion* style. However, it may be more appropriate to consider this a regional style of architecture that reflects the borrowed tradition of settlement design consistent between Kellia, Pherme and Scetis. The consistency with which monks traveled between the communities and the commonality of the physical landscape may explain the type of architecture selected and its use within the flat desert areas of the Delta. The Delta design of the monastic *manshubiya* is attested at a small site at the base of the Delta at the Monastery of Nahya and interestingly at the site of Mankaband in Asyut. It is tempting to consider that the Delta monks at Wadi Natrun and Pherme were the inspiration for this architectural style.