




Summer 9-1-2011

Review of Ewa Wipszycka, Moines et communautés monastiques en Égypte (IVe-VIIe siècles)

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Recommended Citation

Schroeder, C. T. (2011). Review of Ewa Wipszycka, Moines et communautés monastiques en Égypte (IVe-VIIe siècles). *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, 19(2), <https://scholarlycommons.pacific.edu/cop-facarticles/98>

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Book Reviews

Ewa Wipszycka

*Moines et communautés monastiques en Égypte
(IVe–VIIIe siècles)*

The Journal of Juristic Papyrology Supplements XI

Warsaw: Warsaw University and Raphael Taubenschlag

Foundation, 2009

Pp. xx + 687. \$120.00.

No scholar of early Christian monasticism or late antique Egypt should be without this book. The culmination of Ewa Wipszycka's life's research, it provides indispensable analyses of most aspects of Egyptian monasticism prior to the Arab conquest. Wipszycka has edited and reworked her previous publications, adding new material and reorganizing prior work, to produce a new, stand-alone monograph. Only a couple of earlier essays appear unrevised.

The first two chapters on literature and documentary evidence (papyri, ostraca, and inscriptions) introduce the book's textual sources and their limitations. The book then proceeds topically, with chapters on geography, Antony, terminology, monastic leadership, social history, monastic populations, clergy in monasteries, economics, women, and dangers inherent to monastic life. This last chapter addresses common hardships as well as specific historical events, such as incursions by the "Blemmyes," "barbarians," and others. The back matter contains indices for sources, historical names, ethnic or tribal groups, place names, and modern scholars.

Wipszycka's greatest contributions are in the fields of papyrology and archaeology. Her expertise in documentary sources has led to rich examinations of monastic vocabulary. Chapter Two, on documentary sources, provides an excellent introduction to collections that might be unfamiliar to researchers who typically rely on historical and literary sources. The chapters on geography and monastic populations utilize research from recent archaeological surveys and provide information about famous sites, such as Nitria and Scetis, as well as communities less well known to North American scholars, such as the monastery of Naqlun. She also provides details on the monastic settlements in the Theban region. Maps and photographs illustrate the book throughout. Wipszycka's somewhat positivist methodologies and career-long skepticism of literature as a source for history are on display as well. Due to the volume's size, I will probe in depth only the chapters on Antony and women's asceticism.

The author begins Chapter Four on Antony and his *vita* by addressing Athanasius's reliability as a historical source, opening with two framing questions: "(a) Quelle est la valeur de la *Vie d'Antoine* en tant que source, si l'on veut connaître le monachisme égyptien tel qu'il était dans la réalité, dans le monde réel, et non pas dans le monde de la narration? (b) Quels étaient les critères d'après lesquels Athanase a fait sa sélection parmi les faits qu'il connaissait? Pourquoi a-t-il omis certains épisodes de la vie du saint et pourquoi en a-t-il inventé d'autres?" (227). Such attention to historical "facts" serves Wipszycka well in identifying key "events" in monastic literature (such as conversion stories of famous monks to asceticism) as literary *topoi* with tenuous holds on historical reality. However, scholars interested in these documents as literature and theology, and particularly in their religious, political, and ideological issues, will need to go elsewhere for analysis. Instead, Wipszycka spends time determining where Antony's hermitage existed and how Athanasius fictionalized the account of correspondence between Antony and Constantine (*V. Anton.* 81). Another section strives to determine the historicity of the account of Antony's ministry to persecuted Christians in mines outside of Alexandria (*V. Anton.* 46); she concludes that Athanasius has embellished the story. She also investigates the question of when monks began to be regarded as a group of people apart from the general population. Such a distinction, she argues, is a later projection back onto the sources. This chapter also addresses the debate over the authorship of letters attributed to Antony, evaluating Samuel Rubenson's arguments that the famous monk likely wrote the letters, and that they evince an Origenist theology (*Letters of St. Antony* [1995]). Wipszycka finds merit in Rubenson's hypothesis but not in his proof. This section systematically attempts to demonstrate that the other sources about Antony testify to his ignorance of Greek language and philosophy (235–37). In contrast to her fierce critique of literary sources as history elsewhere in the book, here Wipszycka relies almost exclusively on hagiography or other literary texts (*Lausiatic History*, *Life of Hilarion*, and the *Life of Antony*). Moreover, the other sources were written after Athanasius's *V. Anton.* and could be modeling their representation of Antony on the *vita*, a prospect Wipszycka admits but does not find compelling enough to dismiss them as evidence.

Wipszycka's essay, "L'ascétisme féminin dans l'Égypte tardive," is printed nearly unchanged from the original publication. It nonetheless deserves attention here because of its contributions to the field and the fact that it first appeared in a collected volume of essays (not a widely read journal). Using literary sources and documentary evidence, the author outlines women's asceticism and monasticism and helpfully documents most of the relevant sources. The first section reviews evidence for "double monasteries" (including Farshut and the communities led by Pachomius, Shenoute, and Abraham of Farshut, among others). The next section addresses "independent" women's communities, mostly referenced in literature (e.g., *Lausiatic History* and *Historia monachorum*). The chapter could have benefited from research published since the original article appeared in 2001. As Rebecca Krawiec demonstrated in her 2002 book, *Shenoute and the Women of the White Monastery*, the women's community near Atripe was originally an independent monastery; only during Shenoute's tenure as monastic

leader of his community did it come under his authority, making Shenoute's federation a "double monastery" of sorts. Wipszycka's section on domestic asceticism primarily examines literary sources (a separate section on papyri, including their utility for understanding domestic asceticism, appears later). In her analysis of the *Apophthegmata patrum*, Wipszycka criticizes trends in Anglophone scholarship that she believes attribute too much credibility to these documents as historical sources. She contends that accounts of female ascetics in the *Apophthegmata* are male stereotypes of women. She concludes that we can neither learn about "les difficultés que les femmes rencontraient dans leur vie ascétique" nor discern the voices or experiences of historical women from the *Apophthegmata* or hagiography such as the *Life of Syncretica* (598, 601). She outright dismisses claims that these texts offer evidence for women who either lived "in the desert" or "became men"; the former she discounts due to the dangers and hardships inherent in such a lifestyle, and the latter she writes off as a fantastical literary *topos*. The last section examines papyri, which she pits against literary sources to propose that female monasticism was neither radical nor world-denying. The scholars Wipszycka engages are not as uncritical as they seem when subjected to her scrutiny, and the author fails to acknowledge the full value of literature as sources. Nonetheless, this article provides a vital resource for anyone interested in gender and monasticism. The essay ends with an appendix listing twenty relevant papyri. Given the importance of her list for future research, I provide a few corrections here: #7 (*P.Prag.* II 181) concerns a *partheneousē* not a *monazousē*; the citation in #4 (*P.Oxy.* XLIV 3203) has been corrected since the original article; #9 should read *P.Lond.* III 1020 (not 102); #12 should be cited as *P.Prag.* I 42 (not 41); #18 (SB I 5567) about "abessa Azaria" does not reference a woman with a monastic title but concerns a woman named Abes(sa), daughter of a certain Zacharias, who does not seem to be an ascetic. (For the last item, see the Coptic version of the document in *P.KRU* 24 and the reference in T. G. Wilfong, *Women of Jeme: Lives in a Coptic Town in Late Antique Egypt* [2002], 68. I thank Arietta Papaconstantinou for invaluable assistance in deciphering this text.)

The book contains a few disappointments (to be expected in a volume of this size and scope). The treatment of Shenoute is sparse, even accounting for the fact that access to his writings is difficult. Wipszycka has utilized some, but not all, of the recently published research. Second, one of the book's greatest features is its extensive illustrations, especially photographs of sites and maps of various monastic settlements. Some of the maps are fairly recent, while others derive from older scholarship. While having the maps together in a single volume is incredibly useful, particularly where the monasteries' histories themselves are documented, this benefit is undercut by the lack of a list of illustrations. Finally, a production error has led to eight pages of front matter (including the end of the list of abbreviations and the first two pages of the preface) to appear in the middle of the treatment of Kellia in Chapter Three.

Despite these criticisms, Wipszycka's volume is an essential reference for anyone working on late antique Egypt or early asceticism and monasticism. Moreover, her fierce defense of documentary and archaeological sources over hagiographical

and other literary texts provides an important perspective for those of us who frequently work on literary and theological motifs. Emerging scholars will do well to heed her warnings about the limitations of our sources. Her mastery of material culture and papyri is breathtaking and reminds literary scholars of what we often miss.

In many ways, this monograph serves permanently to dislodge Derwas Chitty's *The Desert a City* as an authoritative text. Its cost, length, and detail mean it is most suitable for an advanced audience; thus William Harmless's *Desert Christians: An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism* (2004) remains the English-language replacement for Chitty as a textbook. But anyone pursuing serious work on Egypt or monasticism must consult Wipszycka's volume.

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