Crossroads in the Desert

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The greater part of what follows is based on the evidence of the *Apophthegmata Patrum*¹ best known in the Greek versions which, to a large extent,

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¹ The three major collections of *Apophthegmata Patrum* are indicated in the following ways:

1. e.g., “Poimen 24” or “Hyperechios” indicate the so-called *Alphabetikon*, probably the oldest and certainly the best known collection in which about a thousand items (948 + 53 in Jean-Claude Guy, 1984) are arranged in more or less *alphabetical* order by reference to the approximately one hundred and twenty fathers who allegedly uttered the sayings or are mentioned in them. One manuscript of this tradition was edited by J-B. Cotelier in 1647 and reprinted in *PG* 65:71–440. This text has been translated by Lucien Regnault (1981) and by Benedicta Ward (1984).

2. e.g., “Nau 000” indicates the series of so-called “anonymous” sayings, (*Anonymes*). The introduction to the *Alphabetikon* asserts that, appended to the alphabetic collection (i.e. after the names beginning with omega) there is a further collection whose characteristic is that its contents are all *anonymous* items. This Anonymous Collection is now generally thought to be represented by the (incomplete) collection of about six hundred and sixty items found in the venerable Codex Parisinus Coislinianus 126 (c. 1000 CE). The first 400 items of this Greek text were published by Frédéric Nau (1907–1913) at the beginning of the last century in *Revue d’orient chrétien*. Since then it has been customary for the items to be denominated by his name followed by the number he assigned to them. A complete French translation of the *Anonymes* (765 items) was made (using Codex Sinaiticus 448 [J] to supplement Coislinianus 126) by Lucien Regnault (1985). (A good edition of the Greek text is badly needed.) Clearly this is not the original appendix to which the Introduction to the *Alphabetikon* refers, for interspersed among the truly anonymous items are others which are named, of which not a few are also found in the *Alphabetikon*; hence this version of c. 1000 is an expanded version of *Anonymes* and should probably be referred to as *Anonymes plus*.

3. Numbers such as “11.27” & “14.101” refer to what is known as the *Systematikon* [*Sys.*]. The characteristic of this third collection (which includes a considerable amount of material found in one or both of the two collections already mentioned) is that here the items are *systematically* arranged, meaning that they are distributed under various heads (usually twenty-one in all) each pertaining to some aspect of monastic virtue, e.g., section four is on temperance; section twelve on prayer, while section seventeen deals with charity—a distribution which is already evident in some manuscripts of the *Anonymes* (Nau) collection. The classification is however by no means rigid; items occur in one section which might very well have been placed under another head, or under several heads. As with the *Anonymes*, in the case of the *Systematikon* there is clear evidence of development, indicated here by a sixth-century Latin translation of the text as they knew it by Pelagius and John (edited by Rosweyde [1615–1623] and reprinted in *PL* 73:851–1022; there is an English translation by
probably reflect an oral tradition in Coptic. Almost as soon as the Greek versions appeared, translations into the various languages of the Levant began to circulate and to inform the emerging monasticism of each country. It should also be noted that in Late Antiquity the word “monastery” was used to denote a wide variety of establishments, ranging from the one-man hermitage to the large Pachomian koinobion whose inmates were numbered in the hundreds. The more usual pattern appears to have been a group of “cells” set at some distance from each other, whose inhabitants (one or more per cell) would meet together at weekends for common worship, meal and consultation. The best-known examples of this kind of monastic community were at Nitria, Kel- lia and (above all) Skete in Northwestern Egypt. “The most celebrated fathers of monasticism, the ultimate in excellence, were to be found in the desert of Scete”, wrote Ioannes Cassianus (Conferences 1.1).

It was in Egypt, very early in the 4th century, that Christian monachism made its first appearance. So successful was its appeal that, within a few decades, Athanasios could say that the desert had become a city (Vita Antonii 8.2, 14.7, 41.4, 44.2–4). In the following century monasteries were found all over the Christian East and were beginning to appear in the West too. Writing towards the middle of the 5th century, Theodoretos of Kyrros says, “Now, as I said, numerous are the males and females wrestling in the cause of piety, not only in our own country, but also throughout Syria, in Palestine and Cilicia, also in Mesopotamia. They say that in Egypt there are certain institutions (φροντιστήρια) with more that five thousand men toiling in them, all the time praising the Lord” (Historia religiosa 30.6).

All those monasteries, great and small, in whatever land they were located, had two characteristics directly relevant to the present study. First, they were mostly in remote locations. This was not universally the case, for urban monas- teries made a surprisingly early appearance, first at Constantinople, but these were exceptional. The vast majority of monasteries were removed, often far removed, from populated areas. This was for the simple reason that those

Benedicta Ward [2003]). Although “Pelagius and John” draws heavily on the two collections already mentioned, it still contains significantly fewer items than the surviving Greek manuscripts of the Systematikon (the earliest of which is dated 970 CE) which contain about twelve hundred items. There is now an excellent critical edition and translation of the Greek text by Jean-Claude Guy and Bernard Flusin (1993–2005). Theirs was preceded by the translation of Dom Lucien Regnault (1992), which includes some items from the various “oriental versions” (Coptic, Syriac, Armenian, Georgian, Ethiopic etc.) not found in any of the foregoing collections.