The homilies that pass under the name of Macarius continue to perplex scholars as to their true author, place of origin and sources. Recent work has brought strong arguments for Asia Minor and perhaps Syria as the place and the last quarter of the fourth century as the time of composition.

Nevertheless the work bears some influence from Egypt. The Messalian movement to which the author almost certainly belonged, had adherents in Egypt and some comparison of their doctrine with that of the Egyptian monks can be made.

1 The extant works are known by three types: I. Vatican MS gr. 694 in great part unedited; see the paraphrase and analysis in H. Doerries, Symeon von Mesopotamien : Die Ueberlieferung der Messalianischen "Makarios"-Schriften, Leipzig, 1941. II. The Migne edition PG 34. III. The newly discovered MSS edited by E. Klostermann and H. Berthold, Neue Homilien des Makarius/Symeon. I aus Typus III, Berlin, 1961.

2 For a succinct account of the state of the question see E. Peterson, Macario il Grande art. Enciclopedia Cattolica, vol. vii.


4 This date is based on a comparison between the so-called Great Letter of Macarius (ed. Jaeger op. cit.) and the De Instituto Christiano written by Gregory of Nyssa after 390 (so Jaeger op. cit. p. 119). It has been shown by R. Staats, Der Traktat Gregors von Nyssa De Instituto Christiano und der Grosse Brief Symeons (paper read at the Fourth International Conference on Patristics held at Oxford 19th Sept. 1963) shortly to appear in Studia Theologica, that Gregory is here dependant on Macarius. Therefore the latter had reached his literary maturity before 390.


6 See E. Peterson, I Messaliani art. in Enciclopedia Cattolica vol. viii.

Macarius himself uses the monastic jargon familiar from the desert fathers: he once refers to his followers as of ‘σωματοφυής’ which is a term in coptic literature for a monastic community. He is also familiar with the ritual of baptism by fire as known also to the ascetics of Egypt. Again he cites Mt 6, 21 as follows ὅπως ὁ νοῦς σου, ἐκεῖ καὶ ὁ θησαυρὸς against the textus receptus ὅπως γὰρ ἔστω ὁ θησαυρὸς σου, ἐκεῖ ἔσται καὶ ἡ καρδία σου. The same reversal of the logion appears in the coptic Pistis Sophia and this, together with νοῦς for καρδία appears in Clement of Alexander and the coptic work of Pseudo-Shenoute. Finally an agraphon from the Didache 3, 10 is cited as scripture in the manner of Origen in his Alexandrian period and with a similar variant from the received Didache text.

8 See an exhaustive article on monastic vocabulary around Macarius’ time by G. M. Colombas, El Concepto de Monje y Vida monastica hasta fines del siglo V, in Studia Monastica vol. i fasc. 5, 1959, pp. 257-342. He cites Macarius rarely—and never from the homilies (see pp. 266 and 277)—but nearly all the typical words and phrases studied can be found there.


10 Cf. the works of Besa the fifth century abbot in upper Egypt: see Letters and Sermons of Besa, ed. and tr. K. H. Kuhn, CSCO no. 22, Louvain, 1956, p. 72, 28 (the greek word is transliterated into coptic).

11 See C.-M. Edsman, Le Baptême de Feu, Uppsala, 1940, p. 154 ff, giving several examples from egyptian asceticism parallel in thought and expression with the homilies of Macarius.

12 PG 34, 773A.


15 On Christian Behaviour, ed. and tr. K. H. Kuhn, Louvain, 1960, p. 41, 16 the coptic transliterates ‘ψυχή’.

16 Type III (ed. Klostermann and Berthold) p. 44, 6; following other NT quotations he says ἀλλαγοῦ (his normal phrase for introducing a random text from scripture) τὰ ἐπεφερόμενα σοι πάντα ὡς ἀγαθὰ πρόσωπι εἰδῶς, ὥστε ὅπως ὁ σάδε γίνεται.


18 Against the Didache 3, 10 and the Ep. of Barnabas 19, 6, Macarius has ‘πάντα’ a. ‘ὡς ἄγαθα’ cf. Origen ‘omnia’. Macarius can not be simply