ON THE VISIBILITY OF GOD IN THE HOLY MAN:
A RECONSIDERATION OF THE ROLE OF THE APA IN THE PACHOMIAN
VITAE

BY

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The various biographies of Pachomius have been traditionally read as literary monuments written and preserved in order to celebrate the figure whom Bousset describes as 'the hero of the coenobitic monastic ideal.' Yet a close reading of these Vitae suggests that these are accounts fashioned to portray Pachomius not as the administrative or organizational genius of a new, communal form of monastic life, but as a holy man whose peculiar presence itself organizes that life. It is the man, rather than the method, which dominates these narratives. The matter of Pachomius' praesentia dominates these biographical accounts as the constitutive gesture of potentia in the emerging communities: the coenobitic life is founded not by an act but by the presence of this particular holy actor. Not what Pachomius does, but how his very being stabilizes these communities by rendering God 'visible' becomes the fundamental message of these early portraits. Thus, these Vitae bear witness to the founder of coenobitic monasticism, but deflect interest away from the question of the disciplined administration of the communities or the giving of laws governing communal life. Rather, they portray Pachomius as the originator of this new monastic model because of his identity as a holy man, one whose life itself becomes revelatory. Pachomius stands out in these narrative accounts as the locus of the holy which disrupts the homogeneity of mundane life, both secular and eremitic, and it is precisely in this interruption that the emergence of monastic communities takes place.

Such an approach to the Pachomian Vitae offers a revision of the traditional emphasis of Pachomius as the administrative mind which organized and brought order into the eremitic monastic world of Late Antiquity. Yet this is a revision which is not extrinsic to our sources, but rather emerges out of these early records themselves. Indeed, the focal point of these narratives is neither the community nor the com-
munal nature of this "new" monastic experiment, even though they agree in portraying this community as "the model for all those who wish to assemble souls in God, to succour them until they be made perfect." Rather, they direct the narrative focus persistently upon the singular figure of Pachomius, "the holy man," whose praesentia itself bears an organizational power both during his life and posthumously. In other words, the question which these texts raise assumes, as does the modern historical reception, that Pachomius is a leading figure in this development, yet the original narratives move further to ask precisely how it is that Pachomius functions as the hero of coenobitic monasticism.

To press this point even further: these highly stylized accounts of Pachomius' growth into "the perfect monk" set forth a social portrait of religion which locates its central axis not in what others are called to do, but in what the "apa" himself does. Pachomius stands in these Vitae at the navel of the human community. To borrow Mircea Eliade's descriptive language, he is the "center" of orientation, the "fixed point" which localizes the holy in a manner disruptive of the otherwise daunting "chaos of homogeneity." Not only in his commandments and rules, but in his very person Pachomius integrates the cosmos by establishing "the perfect man" as the new center of gravity. The orienting force of his presence poses the question of access to the divine not so much as a matter of "how," but of "who." Thus, these narratives concern themselves at their most fundamental level with the person and role of "the father," and speak of the community only in terms of its dependent development around this focal person. The social momentum of this coenobitic model is centripetal; Pachomius himself is the effective reason for the development of the koinobion. That is, the community exists because of who Pachomius is, for he is the anthropos theou who exemplifies the invitation to see "the invisible God in the visible man, who is God's temple." In this sense, the power of the coenobitic experience derives not from the group, but from the lone figure of the "apa" himself.

At the outset of our discussion, a seemingly self-evident observation strikes this reader of Pachomian scholarship as a matter which has received insufficient attention: namely, the thesis that these Vitae tell us eminently more about Pachomius than they do about coenobitic life at Tabennisi. The communal life which they describe thrives because of the stabilizing presence of Pachomius, "the father." To be more precise, the new community exists because of the peculiar "locus" of the holy