

LIFE IN THE EASTERN DESERT OF EGYPT

Unit 9 – Hermits and Monks: Christian
Communities in the Eastern Desert

HPAH7006

Christians in the Eastern Desert

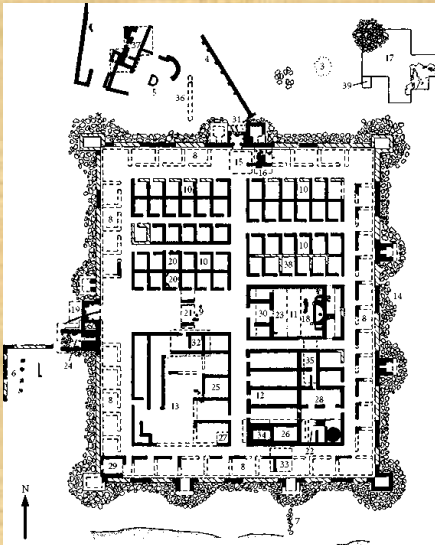
- ❑ In the late Roman period the Eastern Desert often a refuge for those feeling punishment, including persecuted Christians.
- ❑ The Eastern Desert ideal hermits and those seeking “monastic” solitude – *anachorsis*.
- ❑ Quite a large “monastic” population of Christians in the Eastern Desert by the early fifth century AD.
- ❑ Greek word ὄρος means both “desert/mountain” but also by this time could mean “monastery”.



Monastery of St Antony, Egypt –
Suez area (norther Eastern Desert).

Identifying Christian Settlements

- *laura* community – monks coming in a living in cells, often grouped together and near inhabited caves and a church.



Fort at Abu Sha'ar, occupied by Christian hermits from around early fifth century AD

Probable *laura* communities:

- Abu Darag (coast of Gulf of Suez)
- A site in Wadi Nagat (near the northern quarries)
- Late Roman fort at Abu Sha'ar (northern coast)

■ Possible *laura* communities?:

- Umm Howeitat Bahri
- Bir Gidami
- Bir Handosi
- Hitan Rayan
- Qaria Mustafa Amr Gamaa

Nomads and Monks

- A mixed picture of toleration, cooperation and occasional hostilities.
- One account reports on the monastery of St. Anthony being attacked by Saracens while under the direction of Apa Sisoës who lived there for 72 years just after the death of Antony - *Apophthegmata patrum* (collectio alphabetica), Apa Sisoês, 21 (= PG LXV, col. 401, 38).
- 'But the voice said unto him ... "if you wish really to be in quiet, depart now into the inner desert.' And when Antony said, 'Who will show me the way for I know it not?' immediately the voice pointed out to him Saracens about to go that way. So Antony approached, and drew near them, and asked that he might go with them into the desert. And they, as though they had been commanded by Providence, received him willingly.' – *Athanasius Life of Antony* 49.

A Church at Berenike

- ❑ Late Antique 'Christian ecclesiastical facility', including a church.
- ❑ Church measures about 21.5 metres E-W x 8.8 metres N-S and seems to have included kitchen facilities and a food storage area.
- ❑ Church that served many peoples of different origins?
- ❑ Existence of "pagan" religious practices and structures alongside Christian ones.



Images from Sidebotham (2014)

Battling Demons in the Eastern Desert

- AD 356 the hermit Antony had died – by this point he was renowned for his aesthetic life, specifically his long time spent in the Eastern Desert of Egypt.
- Turmoil in Egypt at this time – Bishop Athanasius (orthodox) vs. Constantius II (Arian).
 - Athanasius himself, hide for a while among the desert hermits.
- Around the period AD 356 to 358 Athanasius wrote a hagiography on the *Life of Antony*.



Saint Anthony Abbot Tempted by Gold -Giovanni di ser Giovanni Guidi (mid-15th century).

Life of Antony (1)

- ▣ Antony growing up a Christian in a village along the Nile - orphaned as a young man.
- ▣ Gives away much of his property and sends his young sister to be taken care of by chaste virgins.
- ▣ Took up an “apprenticeship” under an aesthetic:
 - manual labour, night longer prayers, maintaining an austere diet or fasting, spiritual introspection, abstinence and memorising.
- ▣ Shuts himself in a necropolis and battles demons.
 - On the second night he battles the devil.
- ▣ At 35 Antony moves out of necropolis and into the desert, living in an abandoned military fort. It is here that he became a hermit or anchorite.
- ▣ He spent 20 years in this fort before disciples break in.

Life of Antony (2)

- ❑ In AD 311 Antony visited Alexandria to help those Christians suffering from the persecution of Maximin Daia.
- ❑ Returns to desert and seeks even more remote location – joining a party of nomads travels three days into the desert – arrives at Mount Qulzum (30 km from the Red Sea)?
- ❑ While residing at this place Antony battled with many demons, trained monks, and periodically roams about.
- ❑ Athanasius claims that Antony performed various miracles, including healing people and demoniacs, and placating crocodiles.
- ❑ Antony dies at the age of 105.

The purposes of the Life of Antony

- Life of Antony seems to show a number of influences:
 - Old and New testaments
 - parallels with Porphyry's *Life of Pythagoras*, Lucian's *Philopseudes*, and Philostratus's *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*.
- Texts as a vehicle for Athanasius' spiritual ideas.
 - *Logos*
 - Nature of demons.
- Text as a means of attacking Athanasius' opponents.



Image of Athanasius, Fresco at Hosios Loukas, Greece (11th century AD)