

Andreas Müller

The Cult in the Cell

Abstract: Early monastic literature refers to a practice already mentioned for congregational Christians in the *Didache*: the prayers for different times a day. By late antiquity it is designated as something that could be practiced in the monk's cell. Individual prayer was probably not restricted to hermits but seems to have been practiced in the cenobia, too. The *synaxeis*—that is, the individual psalmodising of the hermits—clearly corresponded to services in church settings: both, for example, are called *synaxis*. A general practice of the Christian cult, that is, was transferred to the cell, so to speak. This transferal was probably due to the rather strong individualization tendencies of early monasticism. Thus it is no surprise that, especially for monks, domestic religiousness played a particularly prominent role.

Domestic Religiousness in Monasticism in Late Antiquity

In his *Leimonarion*, written in the late 6th century, John Moschos cites the report of the “very holy” Dionysios, presbyter and guardian of the treasure of the Most Holy Church of Askalon, about an anchorite named John, who was very fond of travelling. This Elder John, who lived in a cave in the area of Socho less than 20 kilometres away from Jerusalem, exercised a form of cult that turned out to be a hindrance in his travels: In the cave he had an icon of “our all-holy and spotless Lady, the Mother of God and ever virgin Mary, holding our God in her arms.”¹ An oil lamp constantly burned in front of this icon. Since the Elder used to go on long journeys that sometimes took as long as six months even to faraway places such as Seleukeia in Asia Minor and Ephesos, this domestic cult became a problem for him: The oil lamp was soon on the verge of burning out. According to Dionysios' report, John did not only turn to God himself to get his blessing for the journey, but also to the Mother of God, or her icon, respectively, with the words: “Holy Lady, Mother of God, since I am about to undertake a long journey of many days' duration, watch over your lamp and keep it from going out, as I intend that it should not...”² This entreaty to Mary was—as the report in the *Leimonarion* says—a permanent success. After his return from every journey John found the oil lamp in the same state in which he had left it. The narration about this miracle by the Mother of God ends with the words:

1 John Moschos, *prat.* 180, transl. Wortley.

2 John Moschos, *prat.* 180, transl. Wortley.

“He never saw it go out of its own accord; not when he awakened from sleep or when he returned to his cave from a journey or from the wilderness”.³

The report by Dionysios not only presents us with the standing⁴ personal prayer of an elder to God and Mary. It also goes to show—provided the narration in the Leimonarion is not a later addition—that the reverence of icons as a kind of cult in the cell can be seen in Late Antiquity already. There are no traces in the sources which tell us, what monks did exactly in front of these icons, but icons and crosses are still today giving some archeological evidence for a special kind of cult at these monastic places.

The text of John Moschos was written—as mentioned before—in the 6th century. Therefore the question arises whether domestic cult figured into earlier monastic texts already. To begin with: I have not yet been able to find in the monastic texts of Late Antiquity a practice comparable to that of John. However, in other places there are mentions of cult in the cell. This kind of private cult exists although monks had the possibilities to assemble for services in central churches of monastic settlements. This contribution will investigate that form of individual religiousness. First I will present the evidence of domestic religiousness in the *Apophthegmata Patrum*, then consider the location of such religiousness based on the description in Palladios’ *Historica Lausiaca* and match them with some archaeological examples before I close with some basic remarks about monasticism and domestic religiousness.

1 Domestic Religiousness in the *Apophthegmata Patrum*

The *Apophthegmata Patrum* contain reports from the semi-anchoretic monastic environment of Egypt at least from the first three centuries of monastic life. The situation in the Egyptian deserts is given particular focus, especially that of Scetis and Kellia. Since the so-called *Geronticon* was edited not there but probably in the monastic circles of Palestine, more exactly in the environment of Gaza, it reflects a monastic ideal cultivated in Palestine. Because of the potential continual revisions of the narrations it is correspondingly difficult to see reports of facts in the *Apophthegmata Patrum*. Probably they have a more constructive than descriptive character.⁵ At least the

³ John Moschos, *prat.* 180, transl. Wortley.

⁴ It is mentioned in the *Apophthegmes* that the monks do their prayer standing up, cf. Bessarion 4; Guy, *Apophthegmes* XV 120: ἰστάμενος ἐνώπιον τοῦ Θεοῦ ἐν τῇ εὐχῇ.

⁵ Cf. A. Müller 2006, 343. There I am presenting the discussion after Hermann Doerries who believed, that the *Apophthegmata Patrum* were presenting an icon of the earliest monks in Egypt. I am not able to repeat the whole discussion here. Lucien Regnault 1981 for example thought that the *Apophthegmata* were composed in Palestine and present only an ideal of desert-monasticism. Samuel Ruben-

ideal image of semi-anchoretic monks, as we still know it today, can be analysed with regard to its religious practice. This can be compared to the other literary reports and also the archaeological remains to achieve a relatively reliable picture of the domestic cult in early monasticism.

The monks described in the *Apophthegmata Patrum* celebrate service in the central church of semianchoretic settlements. Many apophthegmata bear witness of this.⁶ The celebrations of the Eucharist of the monastic settlement are held in the church. In the kellion they are expressly not provided. For the central services of worship there is the appropriate staff. Thus Scetis has, for example, a deacon who acts in celebrations of the Eucharist.⁷ Several kellia each have a priest⁸ who seems to celebrate in the common church. Even ritual exorcisms of demons are held in the church.⁹ In addition the *Apophthegmata Patrum* describe numerous spiritual practices in the cell.

1.1 The Cult of Prayer

The centre of the cult in the cell is prayer. Besides completely free individual prayer¹⁰ there is also mention of one in accordance with a certain rule in the Geronticon.¹¹ Occasionally a fixed hour for prayer is mentioned, for which all manual labour is to be interrupted.¹² This is usually called σύναξις¹³. The hours of this synaxeis (τῶν συνάξεων) are terminologically distinguished from the concealed ones (τῶν κρυπτῶν), those spent in individual prayer.¹⁴ Probably the synaxeis were held together with all inhabitants of a kellion—there is no other explanation for the use of the greek word σύναξις which derives from συνάγω (english: to assemble). Thus the joint cult action, which should actually be held in church, is shifted to the cell. This is

son 1990 assumed an anti-origenistic revision of the text, which also resulted in an ideal of rural monasticism.

⁶ Concerning the celebration of the joint service of the Egyptian anchorites cf. Holze 1992, 88–93. The individual elements of the joint service are also mentioned therein, cf. *ibid.* 92.

⁷ Cf. Theodore of Pherme 25.

⁸ Cf. Benjamin 2.

⁹ Cf. Bessarion 5.

¹⁰ Cf. for instance John the Dwarf 35, which mentions the prayer, meditation (μελέτη) and psalmody of the Elder. They served to re-establish the order of his thoughts. Cf. also, *inter alia*, Zeno 5; Guy, *Apophthegmes* XVIII 14—here a εὐχή for himself and for others is mentioned.

¹¹ Cf. Serapion 1.

¹² Cf. N 592/47.

¹³ Cf. Serapion 1, also Joseph of Thebes 7. Concerning the very widely defined term of synaxis cf. also Taft 1985, 71: “In the *Apophthegmata*, ‘synaxis’ is synonymous with ‘office,’ or a period or place of prayer, and ‘to do the synaxis’ (*ballein tēn synaxin*) is used indifferently for common assemblies as well as for the prayer of solitaries.” Cf. also Holze 1992, 89. Holze interprets σύναξις above all as a joint service in church.

¹⁴ Cf. Poemen 168.

probably why there only a μικρά σύναξις is often mentioned, which is one of the duties of the elders in their cells besides individual prayer.¹⁵ Μικρά perhaps means “with a small number of monks”. Terminologically anyway, the regulated prayer in the cells and that in church have the same name. Synaxis also means service in church—at least an apophthegma says that the famous monk Poemen went to synaxis (ἤμελλεν εἰς σύναξιν ἐλθεῖν), sitting aside (κατ’ ἰδίαν). This can be understood only to mean that he sat aside in church.¹⁶ In other places of the *Apophthegmata*, service in church is expressly called synaxis.¹⁷

It is not mandatory that the minor synaxis is held in a monastic cell. Elder Serapion even held it in the evening in the room (κέλλιον) of a whore who he wanted to see the error of her ways. The report on this is particularly interesting because it renders a somewhat more detailed account of the agenda of a synaxis: Elder Serapion began with a psalm prayer (τὸ ψαλτήριον) accompanied by individually spoken prayers (κατὰ ψαλμὸν ἐποίει εὐχήν). Probably in the synaxis the entire psalter (ἔτέλεσεν ... ὅλον τὸ ψαλτήριον) was cited. Possibly, however, it means only 12 fixed psalms, all of which Serapion prayed. At least Robert Taft, in his basic study on the monastic hours in the 4th century, assumes such a number of twelve psalms in the hours of hermits.¹⁸ This reading of the psalms was followed by a reading from “the apostle”, i. e. from the letters of the apostle Paul. This reading from the apostle seems to have taken place at the end of this synaxis in the cell (ἐπλήρωσε τὴν σύναξιν).¹⁹

However, this order of reading and recital, respectively, does not appear to have been completely fixed. Thus, in an anonymous apophthegma, two brothers decide to carry out a minor synaxis. One of them prayed the entire psalter while the other one recited the two major prophets by heart. In this case they seem to have spent the whole night with that.²⁰ Georges Descœudres worked out further elements of the monks’ hourly prayers, which however do not appear in all evidential apophthegmata about the practice. Thus he perceives a sequence of psalm prayer, freely worded prayer, lengthy prostration, intercession and hallelujah psalm ending with a doxology. But probably the practices in the individual cells differed from each other. What they all had in common was the dialogic character of the prayer, stated by Descœu-

15 Cf. Joseph of Thebes 7. Here, however, the minor synaxis is equated with a μικρὰν νηστείαν, which here might possibly be seen as a mere expression of modesty. Elsewhere, though, it is clearly meant to mean some kind of hourly prayer or minor service, respectively; cf. Guy, *Apophthegmes* V 45. Occasionally this is also called λειτουργία (Guy, *Apophthegmes* XIV 23).

16 Cf. Poemen 32.

17 Cf. Guy, *Apophthegmes* XVIII 14.

18 Cf. Taft 1985, 60 et seq. What is problematic in Taft’s exposition is that in his description of the Hours in Scetis he relies almost exclusively on the highly systematising and idealising statements by John Cassian.

19 On the intensive lecture of the Bible in the kellion cf. also N 541.

20 Cf. Guy, *Apophthegmes* IV 70.

dres, and the strong prevalence of psalmodising.²¹ Accordingly, in the *Lausiaca History*, which merits further investigation, Palladios describes the situation at Nitria: “And indeed at the ninth hour it is possible to stand and hear how the strains of psalmody (ψαλμωδία) rise from each habitation so that one believes that one is high above the world in Paradise.”²²

The idea of the synaxis was to direct one’s thoughts to God and not to fall into a total carefree state (ἀμέλεια). Thus elders during synaxis could feel a particular sense of being haunted that was in their view a haunting by inner thoughts (λογισμοί)²³, or so-called demons, respectively.²⁴ During the hourly prayers (συνάξεις) the gerontes were particularly threatened by the demons of acedia and carelessness (ὀλιγωρία).²⁵ Thoughtlessness (ἀμέλεια) and distraction (αἰχμαλωσία) characterised the prayers and psalmodies of the elders at least according to their own statements.²⁶ The intensive practice of prayer simultaneously served to fight such demons by helping to bring a structure to the day. Even a simple psalm prayer could help to achieve this.²⁷ This practice of prayer also enabled them to be completely committed to God.²⁸ Sometimes it is even mentioned that the synaxis rendered it possible to fight diseases. While at the beginning of the prayers the thought of disease might well appear and distract from prayer, overcoming such thoughts and a stringently conducted synaxis brought an end to such diseases.²⁹

The time for the synaxeis does not seem to have been absolutely fixed in all cases. While the above-mentioned Elder Serapion held it in the evening, another anonymous apophthegma reports that the geron slept four hours at night, stood four hours for synaxis and worked four hours.³⁰ This lengthy nocturnal activity was particularly emphasised and might therefore have been somewhat exceptional.³¹ Other texts also mention prayer in the evening and at night, though. Thus it says in an anonymous apophthegma that the geron and his guests did “the mentioned twelve psalms” in the evening and in the night as well. However, according to the

21 Cf. Descœudres 1999, 102. Descœudres understands the prayer as dialogue, because the monk is answering in his prayer on the voice of the Lord he heard through the biblical lectures.

22 Palladios, *h. Laus* 7, transl. Clarke 1918, 58.

23 Cf. Guy, Apophthegmes X 149.

24 Cf. Guy, Apophthegmes XI 121. About the monks in the desert and their combat of the demons there exists a quite big bibliography, cf. i.a. Brakke 2004.

25 Cf. Guy, Apophthegmes VII 44; Guy, Apophthegmes X 186. The struggle with prayers against demons is also reported outside the explicit practice of the hourly prayers, cf., for instance, Theodore of Pherme 27. The fighting of demons by prayer is also mentioned in Guy, Apophthegmes XVIII 14.

26 Cf. Theodore of Enaton 3.

27 Cf. Guy, Apophthegmes X 34. The apophthegma mentions μικρούς ψαλμούς.

28 Again cf. Guy, Apophthegmes X 186.

29 Cf. Theodora 3. New literature about the diseases is to be found in B. Müller 2000, 177, especially n. 69.

30 Cf. Guy, Apophthegmes XX 14.

31 A similar practice of nocturnal services is also reported by Abbas Macarios in Am 167,8, who even used half the night for service.

same apophthegma all-night services can be celebrated in the kellia—again, these seem to be rather exceptional.³² Another apophthegma emphasises that service could theoretically be held at all hours of the day and the night in the kellion, particularly when a monk had overslept and missed the synaxis.³³ Ultimately there are several indications that hermits started the day with a prayer containing hymns and psalms.³⁴ The anonymous apophthegma from Thebais mentions that an elder gave his student an admonition in the evening, then prayed with him (ποιεῖν εὐχήν) and afterwards let him go to sleep. In the morning he also prayed together with his student, which in this case was called morning prayers (τὰ ὀρθρινά) or synaxis, respectively.³⁵ This morning synaxis is often mentioned in the apophthegmata.³⁶ Probably, thus, synaxeis concentrated on the evening and morning, but were occasionally also held at night. The apophthegmata do not speak of synaxeis during the daytime, though. These hours were more likely to be dedicated to free individual prayer.

Individual prayer is repeatedly mentioned in the apophthegmata.³⁷ Such prayer can in these texts become a kind of uninterrupted, continuous prayer.³⁸ Even the synaxis can be described as non-ending. Thus, Elder Isidore remarks in an apophthegma that in his younger years he sat in the kellion and knew no bounds in synaxis, celebrating service day and night: ἡ νύξ καὶ ἡ ἡμέρα, σύναξις ἦν.³⁹ This, again, is called the exception rather than the rule. Other elders incessantly spent time with προσευχή, so that they did not have leisure for anything else.⁴⁰

Occasionally the different kinds of domestic cult are brought into a hierarchy. Thus an anonymous apophthegma mentions three forms of prayer in increasing importance: meditating of psalms, unceasing prayer and prayer in tears, which even causes sins to be washed away. This is likely to refer to free individual cult practices in the cell. Meditating of psalms probably means a personal reflection of them and not necessarily a minor synaxis.⁴¹ Similar ideas about a hierarchy of prayer-forms in the cell are found in the so-called erotesis *Pos dei hesychazein en to kellio*, which,

32 Cf. Guy, Apophthegmes X 150. The narrator here also mentions a μεγάλην σύναξιν, i. e. probably simply a long prayer.

33 Cf. Guy, Apophthegmes X 152.

34 Cf. for instance N 487, here the report of the third anchorite; N 592/43.

35 Cf. Guy, Apophthegmes VII 52.

36 Cf. Guy, Apophthegmes X 138. On the morning prayer cf. also Guy, XV 120. Here the prayer of psalms is mentioned in particular. It is remarkable that in the apophthegma the practice of prayer, resp. the psalmodising by the monk is called λειτουργία.

37 Cf., inter alia, Guy, Apophthegmes XX 21 (εὐχομένου); N 490.

38 On the unceasing prayer cf., inter alia, Holze 1992, 107 et seq., which also indicates further literature on this topic.

39 Cf. Isidore the Priest 4.

40 Cf. Macarius of Alexandria 3.

41 Cf. N 572.

however, must very likely be dated to a time later than the 6th century. It also makes mention of constant prayer.⁴²

1.2 The Cult of Sitting

According to the *Apophthegmata Patrum* the cult in the cell consisted not only in minor synaxis, respectively free prayer. Other forms of living spirituality can be observed in the kellia.

In his dissertation Franz Dodel defined the desert fathers' habit of sitting as a spiritual practice of its own.⁴³ Indeed it is often mentioned how the monks sat in the kellion, which must be understood as some kind of contemplative meditation.⁴⁴ This meditation could bring the elders into an ecstasy.⁴⁵ Sitting, being mindful of God, and achieving a state of calm (ἀνάπαυσις) are also closely linked to each other.⁴⁶ They can—like the prayer mentioned before—well go together with acts of penance, respectively with tears, which according to Barbara Müller characterised the spirituality of the desert fathers to a large extent.⁴⁷

1.3 The Cult of ἡσυχάζειν

The cult of ἡσυχάζειν, meditative rest in the kellion, is closely linked to sitting. This, too, is often pointed out in the apophthegmata.⁴⁸ Ἠσυχάζειν is often mentioned as the highest level of meditation at all. Occasionally there is a programmatic demand in the kellion that hesychia is given appropriate attention.⁴⁹ Among others, namely Abbas Hesaias is asked about this practice. He sees the rest in the kellion as a double activity: An intense prayer to God (παραρρίπτειν ἑαυτὸν ἐνώπιον τοῦ Θεοῦ) and the struggle against the logismoi. Ultimately Hesaias sees the flight from the world and from distraction in precisely these two practices.⁵⁰ Ἠσυχάζειν in connection with prayer in the cell can even make free from thoughts of revenge.⁵¹

⁴² Cf. Er 18 et seq., Schweitzer 1714/18 et seq.

⁴³ Cf. Dodel 1997.

⁴⁴ Cf., inter alia, Poemen 168.

⁴⁵ Cf. for instance Guy, Apophthegmes VII 52.

⁴⁶ Cf. John the Dwarf 27; Guy, Apophthegmes III 46; XI 66; N 147.

⁴⁷ Cf., inter alia, John the Dwarf 19; Poemen 162. On the topic of tears among the desert fathers cf. B. Müller 2000.

⁴⁸ Cf., inter alia, Ammonathas, 154; Theodora 3.

⁴⁹ Cf. Evagrius 1.

⁵⁰ Cf. Guy, Apophthegmes II 15. Cf. also Mega Geronticon 2,72, wherein hesychia and incessant prayer are connected to each other.

⁵¹ Cf. Guy, Apophthegmes 14,22.

Thus the apophthegmata in many places give information about how the cult was carried out in the cell. We learn less, however, about the exact location where the monks exercised their cult. More details about this can be found in a monastic writing of about 420 AD, namely, the *Lausiaca History*.

2 The Layout of a Monastic Cell According to Palladius

A detailed description of a monastic cell is found in the chapter on John of Lycopolis in the *Lausiaca History* by Palladius.⁵² His kellion consisted of three overarched chambers (θόλους). One of these chambers is extraordinary for the early kellia⁵³, namely that for the bodily needs (τὰς χρείας τῆς σαρκός), i.e. the toilet. John had an urgent need for that because he had immured himself into his kellion on the mountain of Lycos with his own hands.⁵⁴ The two other rooms served different purposes, one for work and meals and the other for prayers (καὶ ὁ εἷς ἔνθα εἰργάζετο καὶ ἤσθιε, καὶ ὁ ἄλλος ἔνθα προσήχετο). Additionally there was a hall for visitors (προεισοδικὸν μέγιστον) in front of the kellion that could accommodate over a hundred visitors—at least according to the description by Palladius, which might be a slight exaggeration. Thus John clearly had a special room for prayer, a kind of oratory.

Palladius' description of the kellia of Macarius of Alexandria does not make it so clear what particular functions they had.⁵⁵ This Elder had several abodes (κέλλας διαφόρους), one in Scetis, one in Nitria and one in Kellia. Some of the rooms were doorless (ἀθυρίδωτοι). Macarius spent the forty day fast there in the dark to sit there (καθέζεσθαι ... ἐν τῇ σκοτίᾳ), i.e. probably for prayer and meditation.⁵⁶ Another room was so narrow that the Elder could not stretch his feet out in it—it was most likely to have been the bedroom of this strict ascetic. Finally he, too, had a larger room for visiting guests (τοῖς φοιτῶσι πρὸς αὐτόν). Although no definite function can unambiguously be ascribed to the narrow room, it becomes clear from the text that monks had rooms specifically for the cult of sitting.

⁵² Palladius, *h. Laus.* 35, ed. Butler 100.

⁵³ Palladius, *h. Laus.* 22, says that Antonios did not leave his kellion for three days, not even to relieve himself. This shows that he did not have a latrine in his monk's abode but answered the call of nature outside.

⁵⁴ Cf. Grossmann 2002, 259, annotation 259.

⁵⁵ Cf. Palladius, *h. Laus.* 18, ed. Butler 51.

⁵⁶ Also cf. Grossmann 2002, 260.

3 The Archaeology of the Cult in the Cell

The indications of the *Apophthegmata Patrum* and the *Lausiac History* can definitely be reconciled with archaeological remains, although a simple attribution would be inappropriate. Archeology can produce a more vivid icon of the early monasticism, if it combines an outlined practice in the texts with a specific archeological structure. In the following I will concentrate on the situation in Egypt, since it is here that most archaeological finds of early monasticism still exist.⁵⁷ Places that were clearly provided for individual prayer can be found in various locations. The place for the cult in the cell was above all the oratory of the cell.⁵⁸

Such oratories were particularly emphasised e. g. by niches in the eastern wall.⁵⁹ One example of this is a two-room hermit kellion built into an older burial chamber in Abydos.⁶⁰ However, oratories are not always that easy to identify. Many kellia probably did not have their own prayer room at the beginning.⁶¹ Often the hermits only had a common congregation room. Thus e. g. in the laura of Abu Mina monk's dwellings existed that were grouped around a main room which could be entered from all sides. The latter apparently served as prayer room, but could also be used for the handiwork of the monks. Such rooms often had a niche pointing east.⁶² In the *Apophthegmata Patrum*, rooms for several purposes were also the rule. They do not at all mention explicitly the existence of a specific room for the monks to pray in.⁶³

There is, however, archaeological evidence that the oratories in the kellia in fact usually were a special room. The classic construction type of monastic cells was essentially developed in the 6th century. The oratories also contained niches for prayer oriented eastward which often were designed aedicula-like. They were framed by half-pillars. Since dowel holes were often found on the upper edge, we can assume that the niches could be closed with a curtain when they were not in use.⁶⁴ Smaller box-type niches on both sides probably served as a shelf for books needed for prayer. Opposite the prayer niche, low seating benches were arranged at the west wall. In

57 A short overview of the more recent research on the archeology of early monasticism in Egypt and its possible use in church history research is offered by Moschos 2010, 32–36.

58 On the oratories in the monastic cells cf. the overview in Grossmann 2002, 185 et seq.; also Corboud 1984, 85–92.

59 A lot of examples for oratory-niches could be found in Bridel 1994, cf. i.a. 48, 104s., 115, 132, 147, 172, 202–207, 208, 210, 218, 226, 227s., 234, 245, 260, 264s., 267, 269s., 272, 278, 280s.; cf. also Henein 2000, 158, 164, 182, 187 i.a.

60 Cf. Grossmann 2002, 260 et seq.

61 Cf. Grossmann 2002, 261. In Dayr Abū Fānā the archeologists did not find any oratories at all, cf. *ibid.* p. 270.

62 Cf. Grossmann 2002, 262.

63 Cf. Grossmann 2002, 262.

64 Cf. Grossmann 2002, 263.

the centre of the room a marble plate inserted into the floor often marked the position of a person praying. Oratories can be found in other monastic settlements, for instance in the *laura* Dayr al-Naqlūn. The room arrangements, each designed for a community of two, did not only have a common kitchen and pantry but also separate accommodation rooms each with a big room serving as oratory and a small bed-chamber.⁶⁵ In the subterranean *laura* of 'Adā'ima near Isnā there were even two oratories allocated to the *kellia*, which presumably had each been built at a different time. They were equipped with more care than the other rooms, having a western seating bench, numerous niches and a rich niche for prayer, often designed as an *aedicula*, to the east. Two hermitages even comprised an accessible apsis. There were no altars here, though—therefore these were probably not churches in the strict sense for the community. However, a separate church was also found in this settlement, which, as we know for certain, was inhabited only between 550 and 630 AD.⁶⁶ There is a particularly richly designed oratory in Manq̄bād, which perhaps can be identified with the monastery of Onuphrios north of Lycopolis.⁶⁷ The latter does not only have an accessible apsis but also numerous larger and smaller wall niches. At least one of them could be locked. Originally this *kellion* had apparently been inhabited by only one monk, who probably used the oratory for prayer and meditation.⁶⁸

There is archaeological evidence for the existence of oratories not only in hermitages and semi-anchoretically inhabited *kellia*, respectively. They verifiably existed also in accommodation buildings of *cenobia*, such as the Monastery of Jeremias in Saqqāra.⁶⁹ Single oratories can also be found in the Monastery of Apollon in Bawīt.⁷⁰

As far as the artistic side is concerned, the back walls of the oratory niches often show a painted cross as early as in the 5th century.⁷¹ From the 6th century onwards the painting became ever more copious.⁷² The additional painting imitated architecture or costly materials. As a consequence the oratory was more and more interpreted as a heavenly Jerusalem, the prayer niche being taken for the tabernacle. Thus, future salvation was shown to the monk in his ascetic prayer practice, as it were.⁷³ At least in this image he already became part of the place he sought, that is, heavenly Jerusalem. Simultaneously the iconography of the cross as a symbol of Christ should advance the spiritual development of the monk, the emulation of Christ, which was an-

65 Cf. Grossmann 2002, 267.

66 Cf. Grossmann 2002, 268 et seq.

67 Cf. Grossmann 2002, 271.

68 Cf. Grossmann 2002, 271.

69 Cf. Grossmann 2002, 277.

70 Cf. Grossmann 2002, 278.

71 Cf. Rassart-Debergh 1991; Rassart-Debergh 1986; Rassart-Debergh 1987.

72 Cf. Descoëdres 1999, 105.

73 Cf. Grossmann 2002, 279; also Descoëdres 1996, 189.

other objective of asceticism in the cell.⁷⁴ Georges Descœudres pointed out that the changes in the equipment of the monks' cells expressed a stronger effort to look more presentable. According to Descœudres, particularly since the 6th century an increasingly closer proximity of monastic prayer to the cathedral office occurred in parallel to the increasingly clearer visualisation of the representation of the nearness of God in the cell.⁷⁵ At that time, he argues, hymns and troparias as well as psalms that were sung instead of being merely recited increasingly characterised the hourly prayer.⁷⁶

Accordingly, oratories appear to be images or models of altar rooms in churches. Often marble plates are inserted into the niches, which seem to represent the altar mensa.⁷⁷

Proper monastic churches remain in Egypt beyond the oratories. They are mostly to be found in the area of the large lauras of Kellia.⁷⁸ However, they were all created in the 7th century or later. They differ from the oratories most of all in that they contained an altar fit for liturgy. These can thus be neglected here, because the monks assembled here additionally to the cult in the central churches and in the individual oratories. Possibly they had been built by priest monks who wanted to celebrate the Eucharist on weekdays also, in addition to the assemblies in the main churches.⁷⁹

4 Monasticism—Individuality—Domestic Religion— Summarising Deliberations

Regular prayers at different times of the day were not invented by monasticism. This practice, known from Judaism, can be already found in the Didache (Did 8:3).⁸⁰ It calls on congregational Christians to pray the Lord's Prayer three times a day, namely in the morning, at noon and in the evening. Prayers for different times of the day are also anecdotally mentioned elsewhere in texts of early Christianity.⁸¹ Thus early monasticity generally continued this practice—of course at other times in the night –, now explicitly designing it as a cult that could be practised individually in the cell.

Individual prayer was probably not restricted to hermits. It seems to have been practised in the cenobia, too. I have already made reference to the archaeologically verifiable single oratories in the accommodations of the cenobite monks. However, it

74 Cf. Grossmann 2002, 279; also Bolman 1998.

75 On the cathedral office in the 4th century cf. Taft 1985, 31–56, on Egypt particularly 34–36.

76 Cf. Descœudres 1999, particularly p. 112.

77 Cf. Grossmann 2002, 279.

78 On the following cf. Grossmann 2002, 54–59.

79 Cf. Grossmann 2002, 55.

80 On daily prayers in Judaism cf. Taft 1985, 5–11; on the Didache *ibid.* 13.

81 Cf. Taft 1985, 14–29. Three daily prayers linked to specific psalms are found in the 3rd century *inter alia* in Origenes, cf. *ibid.* 16.

is assumed *inter alia* in the rules of Pachom that the psalm prayers and also the lecture of the scripture take place in the *collecta*, the joint prayer of the Pachomians.⁸² Such forms of common prayer are also mentioned in the *Apophthegmata*: An abbas of a monastery from Palestine explained to Epiphanius of Salamis that the regular prayer was held diligently in that monastery, doing the third, the sixth and the ninth. The cenobion, too, accordingly speaks about regular hours of prayer in accordance with a fixed “canon”. Thus, prayer was held in the monastery at the third, sixth and ninth hours (οὐκ ἡμελήσαμεν τοῦ κανόνος ἡμῶν, ἀλλὰ μετὰ σπουδῆς καὶ τὴν τρίτην καὶ τὴν ἕκτην καὶ τὴν ἐνάτην ἐπιτελοῦμεν). In the apophthegma, this practice of prayer is not enough for Epiphanius. Rather, he demands of the true monk to psalmodise unceasingly (ἀδιαλείπτως) in his heart (ἔχειν ... τὴν ψαλμωδίαν ἐν τῇ καρδίᾳ αὐτοῦ). This comes very close to the anchoritic practice.

In the anchoritic and semi-anchoritic environment the individual cult in the cell can be clearly observed.⁸³ Not only the *Apophthegmata Patrum* bear witness to this, but in a comparable manner so do authors like John Cassian.⁸⁴

The synaxeis, respectively the individual psalmodising, here clearly corresponded to services in church. As we were able to observe, both are called synaxis.⁸⁵ Moreover the individual psalmodising can even be called leiturgia.⁸⁶

Thus in early anchoritic monasticism there were not at all any practices carried out in the house which did not in principle exist outside the house. First of all the cult practice, which also existed in the surroundings, was transferred to the cell, so to speak. This is probably due to the rather strong individualisation tendencies of early monasticism. The concept of the monk stands, from its beginnings, “for a confirmation of radical individuality vis-à-vis the rest of the world, the epitome of

⁸² Cf. Pachom Praecepta 8, ed. Bacht 83.

⁸³ In early Christianity, it could be by no means taken for granted that prayer was individual, let alone private. Taft 1985, 29 states that it was the prayer as such that had significance, rather than the social form in which it was held. “Was this ‘liturgical prayer’ or ‘private prayer’ or something in between? The very question is anachronistic in this early period. Christians prayed. Whether they did it alone or in company depended not on the nature of prayer, but on who happened to be around when the hour for prayer arrived. The various ‘rubrics’ about praying facing East, or with hands raised (Clement, *Stromata* VII, 7, 40:1); when to kneel and when not to; were equally observed alone or in company. The point was to pray. In times of persecution, or during the workday, that usually meant alone. When they could come together they did so, because the very nature of Church means to congregate.”

⁸⁴ Cf. above all John Cassian, *Inst. coen.* II,5-III,2.

⁸⁵ Similarly, cf. Taft 1985, 71: “The point was not with whom one prayed, nor where, nor in what form, nor at what fixed times, nor in how many common synaxes, but that one’s very life be totally prayer.”

⁸⁶ Cf. Guy XV 120; cf. also *Dialexis geronton pros allelous peri logismon* 7. There the service (leiturgia) of psalmody is mentioned. Liturgies are also mentioned elsewhere in the apophthegmata, but these need not explicitly refer to prayer practice. It is only said that a monk should carry out his liturgies with humility (cf. Guy, Apophthegmes XV 22). This could, in the biblical word usage, generally mean any kind of service to God.

an individual.”⁸⁷ Accordingly, it is no surprise that especially for monks domestic religiousness played a particularly prominent part. Besides the synaxeis, the ritual prayer, more radical forms of individualised religiousness were also very significant, as we have seen with regard to sitting and *hesychazein*. Thus the cult in the cell is an important piece in the entire mosaic of domestic religiousness in Late Antiquity. This holds true even though by no means all monks, like John of Socho to whom I referred to at the beginning, exercised a strong icon cult in the cell.

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