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LAND POSSESSION AND RURAL ECONOMY
IN THE BYZANTINE EQYPT IN TWO LIVES
OF SAINTS (4th Century)

Egypt was the territory of the Byzantine Empire in which the asceticism appeared for the first time. There are chapters in the 'Lives of Saints' that vividly demonstrate how the people from wealthy families, both Greek and Egyptian, abandoned the comfortable cities for rustic country-side. These people tended to leave the society and to become monks, first in the rural area, then in the desert. Our task is therefore to examine how they confronted their financial needs.

LIFE OF ST. ANTONIOS: ENDOWMENT OF LAND, AGRICULTURE
AND PRODUCTION IN AND OUTSIDE THE KOME

We read in the 'Life of Saint Antonios' (fl. between 251–356¹) that he was an Egyptian of aristocratic origin, with some fortune²; his parents were Christian. Although his family was wealthy he did not enjoy the pleasantness of luxurious life³. This fact can sufficiently explain why he had chosen the hermit life after the death of his parents. Indeed when this happened, Antonios endowed under God's inspiration the inhabitants of his large village with his ancestral possessions. These possessions were three hundred (300) parcels, called κτήσεις στ ἄρουρες, of a fertile and wealthy land.

The data of our source, the 'Life of St Antonios', indicates that his donation was exceptional even by the standards of the time: Antonios gave the peasants of the rural place, κώμη⁴, the land estimated in no less than 816 στρέμματα⁵. It is not clear, however, whether these peasants who profited from the donation were cultivators of the farms of Antonios. We read that Antonios indeed had cultivators, but 'The Life' does not specify their status: the source only mentions the farms that brought Antonios plentiful harvests. This means that the farmers had been giving him and his sister the agricultural production. When endowed these farms to the cultivators, Antonios and his sister wanted to get rid of their property and to fully concentrate on the monastic life.

Besides the land estates, Antonios also had other items from his property which he sold; the sums that he received were given to the poor; only a part of the money

¹ The persecution of the Christians under the emperor Maximian is a *terminus post quem* of the beginning of Antonios' hermit life.

² Βίος Ἀντωνίου: Βίος καὶ πολιτεία τοῦ ἐν ἁγίοις πατρὸς ἡμῶν Ἀντωνίου, συγγραφεὶς καὶ ἀποσταλεῖς πρὸς τοὺς ἐν τῇ Ξένη μοναχοὺς παρὰ τοῦ ἐν ἁγίοις πατρὸς ἡμῶν Ἀθανασίου ἐπισκόπου Ἀλεξανδρείας. PG. 26. 835–976. P. 840.

³ Ibid. P. 841.

⁴ Ibid. P. 842.

⁵ 1 ἄρουρα was equivalent of 3,50 στρέμματα (or 0.68 akr.); the total Antonios' possession was therefore 816 στρέμματα.

was retained for his sister. Nevertheless Antonios did not forget his previous life as a landowner and the relations with his people. Later, when advised some monks, he mentioned the abandonment of his lands for the sake of God⁶.

The organised monasteries had not yet appeared in Egypt; and the monks did not go off to remote deserts but they dwelt in the vicinity of their κώμη⁷. Thus, the first anachoretēs came from the rural world, the *kome*. The data indicates that Antonios indeed came from the *kome*, as no city was mentioned as his birthplace. It seems that he belonged to the provincial aristocracy. His *kome* was called Κυριακό. An old man, who had been a monk from his young years, lingered in the nearest *kome* and became an example for Antonios. Like his teacher, Antonios choose the vicinity of his *kome* as his dwelling place. When he heard that a famous anachoretē passed through the village, he went there, looked for him, asked him for an advice, and then returned to his location⁸.

The peasants of the *kome* loved Antonios and called him “θεοφιλή”⁹. He nevertheless continued to have been tempted by his lost possessions, these πτήματα, and the enjoyments of his previous life¹⁰. Later on, he moved from his *kome* and found some graves as his new abode where he continued to exercise ascetic practice¹¹; the attack of demons left him half-dead. The person who customarily brought him his bread, found him and transferred him back to the *kome* of Kiriako. The farmers and his relatives surrounded him as if he was dead¹². One might note that these graves were located not too far from Antonios’ *kome* and that he did not lose contact with his people. Unfortunately, we do not know the exact location of Antonios’ *kome*. It might have been the vicinity of the canal of Arsinoites, full of crocodiles, which Antonios crossed later, at the time when the monasteries became numerous in Egypt¹³.

The existence of farmers is quite visible on the pages of the ‘Life of St. Antonios’. He even made some oracles, in which he warned the sailors and the farmers about the good or bad seasonal changes, or changes of the weather on this or that particular day¹⁴; and in good time beforehand the peasants managed to accommodate themselves to the abnormal weather conditions.

Antonios himself mentioned that in the place where he dwelt as a hermit, some passer-byes were forced to steal the agricultural production of the monks because they were tired and hungry during their travel¹⁵. That is why Antonios asked for his monks-companions to bring him a grubbing-hoe, an axe¹⁶ and some wheat seeds. He then found a piece of land just in the vicinity of the mountain where he was a hermit. He began sowing and watering the land; and he thus obtained his every-day bread enough to support himself and the strangers if these passed by. Like a good saint, he also brought up some vegetables.

It is interesting to see how a former landowner turned into a simple farmer. The tools which he used, the sowing, the irrigation of field and the concern for the

⁶ Βίος Ἀντωνίου... P. 868–869.

⁷ Ibid. P. 842.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid. P. 845, 4.

¹⁰ Ibid. P. 845, 5.

¹¹ Ibid. P. 853, 8.

¹² Ibid. P. 846.

¹³ Ibid. P. 865.

¹⁴ Ibid. P. 892, 33.

¹⁵ Ibid. P. 916, 50.

¹⁶ These are agricultural tools.

strangers – all these pointed out to traditional peasant values. The most important is the fact that the monks were farmers and possessed fields which they cultivated themselves. It is not quite clear if these monks were the farmers of lands of Antonios, who later became monks following the example of Antonios. But the location of the cultivated fields where Antonios was lived as hermit was far away from the original *kome* of Antonios.

For our source reads that Antonios' agricultural production was damaged by the desert animals. Likewise, there was some food (oil, olives, and legumes) which he could not grow and which the monks who took care for him brought to him¹⁷. It seems that in the final stage of his life Antonios lived in the deep desert in which these products could not have been produced as indeed were in the mountainous fields where he had been before. Likewise, the water in the mountains was clearer than that in the desert¹⁸.

The food which Antonios ate was remarkable: he started with bread, salt, and water and avoided even to ask for meat and wine¹⁹; sometimes he lacked even the bread (when he was closed in the tombs²⁰ or was isolated in another place within six months²¹ – but the monks brought the bread to him). On the one hand, he managed to provide himself with his every day bread; on the other hand, he used to employ other agricultural products from the soil more fertile than his.

LIFE OF PACHOMIOS: AGRICULTURE AND PRODUCTION IN AND OUTSIDE THE KOMÉ, MONASTIC PROPERTY, MONKS AS FARMERS AND CULTIVATORS

Pachomios appeared in Thebais of Egypt at the beginning of fourth century, some time later than Antonios, and certainly after the persecution imposed on the Christians by the emperors Diocletian and Maximian²².

Though born from pagan Greek parents, Pachomios turned himself Christian²³. His way of conversion is remarkable because he was baptised in the peasant community: during the civil war in the Roman Empire, in which Constantine the Great emerged as a victor, he was arrested and jailed in Thebais²⁴. When released, Pachomios moved to the Upper Thebais and there, in the church of one *kome* of Χηνοβοοσχαία, was baptized²⁵.

In the 'Life of Pachomios' the information concerning the rural communities is scanty. Fortunately we have enough data to suggest that the production of wheat in the Byzantine Egypt was abundant (the fact which is also visible in the 'Life of Antonios') and that the monastic property gradually increased.

The monastery of Pachomios was in the *kome* and possessed rural estates. This is evident from the fact: once Pachomios compared the children and the land which

¹⁷ Βίος Ἀντωνίου... P. 917.

¹⁸ Ibid. P. 920.

¹⁹ Ibid. P. 853.

²⁰ Ibid. P. 853, 8.

²¹ Ibid. P. 861, 12.

²² Βίος Παχωμίου: Sancti Pachomii Vitae Graecae, ediderunt Hagiographi bollandiani, ex recensione Francisci Halkin S.I. Bruxelles, 1932.

²³ Ibid. P. 2.

²⁴ Ibid. P. 3.

²⁵ Ibid. P. 4.

can be ploughed. Both are rough and uncultivated when at the first age, then both must obey to those superior and reach perfection later. The cultivated sou is always ready to be used for a vineyard, but the fallow land has to be smooth in order to take the seed. Even the level ground where a good seed was planted will be fallow if kept slovenly. And if the fallow land becomes smooth with care and attention, it will produce worthy fruit²⁶. The details of description were so characteristic that only a peasant could have made these.

The occupation of the Pachomios' monks with rural works is also evident from another fact: they go to the small island of Nile in order to reap θρύα; Pachomios himself took part in the harvesting. After a hard day, they usually retired to their closures for the rest. Once Pachomios came back ill in the evening and went to his bed shivering. A monk wanted to give him a mattress from animal hair, but Pachomios refused and asked to give him a straw one from palms like the other monks²⁷.

The explanation of Pachomios' humbleness is that he knew the toils of the monks' everyday labour as well as their requests. There might have been other ill monks in need of nursing too²⁸. Pachomios is shown as a person with deep affection for his monks; and also as a supervisor interested in the health of his staff. The most interesting is that the monks were cultivators of estates of their monastery and themselves produced their food.

The meal of the monks consisted of oil, vinegar, lapsarao²⁹ (which Pachomios did not taste, because, as it is said, he avoided the luxurious food for two years after he became a monk³⁰) and, of course, bread, the chief food in Pachomios' monastery.

There were events of shortage of wheat from which we can note the existence of money economy and trade in the *kome* in which the monastery was located. When there was a lack of bread because of charity that monastery has done, Pachomios intended to buy wheat by giving in exchange two mattresses which had been donated to his monks. At that night a wheat trader appeared. He brought the wheat with the explanation that these packs are his pious donation for the people of God. Pachomios received the offering but asked him for a deadline to pay. The wheat was then transferred to the monastery³¹.

The story of healing the possessed man in the monastery also mentions some food. When the porter of cage where the monks closed him, brought to him the bread from his father, the possessed one did not taste it, but ate the other, the monastery's. The same happened when the porter brought to him the dates from palm tree and fresh cheese together with the crumb of bread from his father: he ate the others' but not his father's. But when he had been constrained to have no meal for two days, Pachomios cooked the ἄθηρα a pie, mixed with bread, and spread with oil and gave to him: the possessed one ate it and finally slept in his cage. His happy father thanked Pachomios for the healing of his son³². This story indicates that various diseases could have been healed with the help of hunger or by the lack of necessary nutrition.

²⁶ Ibid. P. 32.

²⁷ Ibid. P. 33.

²⁸ Ibid. P. 34.

²⁹ Ibid. P. 5, 7.

³⁰ Ibid. P. 21.

³¹ Ibid. P. 24.

³² Ibid. P. 28–29.

We can find in two passages of the 'Life'³³ the mention of the process of reaping *θρύων*³⁴ and the consequent transfer to the ship. There are also mentions of other rustic food such as cheese, figs³⁵, olives with bread³⁶, and the *γαρέλαιο*³⁷. These products were produced in the monastery called *Μώνχωσιν*. These indicate the units of agriculture tools and equipment such as oil-presses or cattle-breeding for milk.

The clearest mention of rural installation is *άρτοκοπέιο*, the furnace where bread is kneaded and which was looking like a mill. The furnace was in the *kome* of Tabenisi, the location of the monastery of St Pachomios³⁸. It was said that the saint recommended the monks not to chatter during the kneading.

St. Pachomios' monastery had also farms outside the village, or *kome*, of Tabenisi, in the island of Nile. Pachomios worked there himself in order to obtain the provisioning for his monks. Once they had no food and starved. To feed them, he worked in the island for days and therefore had to neglect the visit of his brothers. The assembly of the abbots apologized for him³⁹.

In this same assembly an abbot called Theodoros was reproved for his lust for power and was sent to the monastery of Monchosin for punishment. When he arrived in the *kome* Chinovoskia, he went aboard the ferry boat in order to travel to his monastery. Two old men were on the boat. One of them, the abbot Theodoros, was happy but the other told him that he had not reached the measure of *margoniou* to be called as a happy one. This measure unit mentioned in the conversation is of particular interest as points out to the location of the monasteries of St Pachomios in the countryside.

Beside a farmer, our source also mentions a salaried peasant-worker. The irrigation of the field started at night. Both the peasant and the farmers usually had an agreement according to which the animals and the people could come to drink from the aqueduct at day. The mention of that installation indicates that there was an organised system for water-provisioning of the villages as well as the irrigation of the fields; the latter however might have been a monopoly of some local landowners who wanted to profit from this.

When our source says that the farmer did not worked with anyone, the expression might have meant that he quarrelled with his fellow-villagers for water supply which he wanted entirely for himself.

When the season of ploughing began, farmer carefully planned with his peasant where they had to plant wheat (in a dike), or barley, or lentil, or peas, or other corns⁴⁰. The mention of so many types of grain shows the extent of cultivation of corns in the fertile valleys of Nile.

During the season of reaping when the greens grew the peasant went to pick the straws which were fresh and abundant⁴¹. The last phase in the process was threshing; then the farmer asked the peasant to bring *margonio* to measure and transfer the straws to a storehouse⁴².

³³ Βίος Παχωμίου... P. 48.

³⁴ A kind of grain.

³⁵ See also in p. 65 for a basket with figs.

³⁶ Βίος Παχωμίου... P. 37.

³⁷ Ibid. P. 43.

³⁸ Ibid. P. 60.

³⁹ Ibid. P. 69–70.

⁴⁰ Ibid. P. 70–71.

⁴¹ Ibid. P. 71.

⁴² Ibid. P. 71.

During all these phases of harvesting the farmer tested the obedience of his peasant, persuaded and salaried him and after some time, if childless, he usually accepted him as his son and heir. Thus the salaried cultivator could have become a proprietor and heir from his farmer.

The last indicator of the rural property in the 'Life of Pachomios' is the mention of the monasteries' ships that had to transport the big harvests, a real nightmare for the busy abbots⁴³.

Thus, the 'Life of Pachomios' is indeed an evidence for the increased wealth of the monasteries in Thebais.

⁴³ Ibid. P. 92.