The cult of saints: a haven of continuity in a changing world?

Book or Report Section

Published Version

www.reading.ac.uk/centaur

CentAUR

Central Archive at the University of Reading

CHAPTER 17

The cult of saints: A haven of continuity in a changing world?[1]

Arietta Papaconstantinou

In the sixteenth century, Erasmus noted that 'several Countryes avouch to themselves their peculiar Saint, and as every one of them has his particular gift, so also his particular Form of Worship. As, one is good for the Tooth-ach; another, for Groaning women; a third, for Stolen Goods; a fourth, for making a Voyage Prosperous; and a fifth, to cure Sheep of the Rot; & so of the rest, for it would be too tedious to run over all . . . Yet what do they beg of these Saints but what belongs to *Folly*? To examine it a little: among all those offerings, which are so frequently hung up in Churches . . . did you ever see the least acknowledgment from any one, that had left his *Folly*, or grown a Hairs-breadth the wiser? One scapes a Shipwrack, and gets safe to Shore . . . Another, while the rest were fighting, ran out of the Field, no less luckily, than valiantly . . . Another recovered from his Fever in spite of his Physician . . . Another's Cart broke, and he sav'd his Horses; Another was preserv'd from the fall of a House . . . All these hang up their Tablets, but no one gives thanks for his recovery from Folly.'[2]

This vision of the cult of saints, which has antecedents among the church fathers, has persisted through the centuries to our own day. Irrespective of the moral implications of rigorist criticism, the description here given of the cult would be accepted as relevant by many an observer. Mostly called upon by 'the common people', a saint usually protects those who venerate him (or much more rarely her), and intervenes at key moments in their lives to save them from disease, death, or bereavement. The saint's gifts, often but not always bestowed during a visit to his shrine, are part of a complex system of exchange, with 'clients' returning the favour through material donations to the shrine, often votive offerings. So, one may ask, is there a point in engaging in a historical study of the social practices related to this phenomenon, if they show such continuity and are of so simple and

---

[2] Erasmus, *Moriae encomium, or The Praise of Folly*, translated by John Wilson (1668) 69–70.

direct interpretation? Is such work condemned to remain descriptive of the endless problems brought before the saints, and the no less numerous ways in which saints dealt with them?

These are of course rhetorical questions. We have all witnessed the recent deconstruction of the picture in which the credulous 'common people' continued with such age-old practices inherited from pagan religion while the educated elites saw the saints only as models of a pure Christian behaviour. Peter Brown has shown how wrong this assumption is in the case of the later Roman empire, and how deeply involved the elites were in the very practices they claimed to despise. He has also allowed us to distinguish between saints and holy men – the dead and the living – and prompted us to take a wider view of the social function of the cult, especially in its formative period.[3] So, beyond expressing 'what belongs to *Folly*', the cult of saints variously appears to have been an instrument of power relations and socio-economic strategies, both within the church and without it. It is this variety and its implications that justify study of these cults.

Having preserved a more complete set of sources than other provinces of the early Byzantine empire, Egypt offers a privileged vantage point for the study of the rise and development of the cult of saints. Information about the practices it involved has usually been extracted from miracle stories, bishops' sermons and homilies, pilgrims' accounts, or various kinds of archaeological evidence, such as the 'souvenirs' pilgrims brought back from their visits to saints' shrines, or the complex structures excavated at the sites of famous *martyria*.[4] Until recently, few studies had systematically used inscriptions, let alone papyri, even when focusing entirely on Egypt. At best, documentary sources had been used to illustrate specific points, such as the existence of churches of a given saint in cities of the Valley.[5] This neglect has to do with the very nature of documentary evidence, which is lacunose, erratic, laconic, and hardly given to commentary about the cult of saints. What can someone used to working on hagiographical and other narrative texts make of the mention in a list of taxpayers of a church of St Papnouthios? The only way to exploit such sources is by serial treatment, by collecting all the available evidence: only then can one hope to perceive the structures underlying the Egyptian cult of saints.

---

[3] The two classic studies are Brown 1971 (repr. in *Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity* (London 1982): 103–52) and Brown 1981.

[4] See Fernández Marcos 1975; Baumeister 1972; Kötting 1950; Maraval 1985; Frankfurter 1998b.

[5] So Davis 2001. Fowden 1999 focused on Rusafa/Sergiopolis; inscriptions are an essential part of the evidence used.

This brings me to an important question, which concerns the respective value of different sources to today's historian. Hagiographical and liturgical texts provide much of the background and the ambiance that documents lack. However, they also have shortcomings that can prove fateful. Many of these texts are difficult to date, were often written much later than the events they purport to describe, and contain little 'hard' information. They were composed for specific purposes, which must always be kept in mind when using them. For instance, their authors fail to disguise their often heavy-handed attempts 'to explain, and to maintain, the wealth of the [saint's] establishment',[6] and even to increase it when conditions allowed. Another common problem is the strong normative tendency of hagiographical liter-ature. It often presents an image of the cult as it should be, or as the author wishes it were. Imitation of the saint and his pious behaviour are presented as the norm among a saint's following. Scholars are thus often misled into seeing the cult of saints as a very intellectual or spiritual phenomenon, which it may have been for some, but certainly not for the mass of the population involved in it. All this does not make for very reliable sources as far as their vision of the cult is concerned, except perhaps to show that it was a hotly contested space in the ecclesiastical and monastic circles where these texts were produced.

The evidence from the papyri both qualifies and supplements the usual hagiographical material. It tells of some practices that are left unmentioned in ecclesiastical sources, or sheds a colder light on some of hagiography's wilder claims concerning the popularity of such and such a saint. In most cases, these documents were not written to promote a specific cult, nor do they reflect the interests of ecclesiastical power centres or monastic communities. When a saint is invoked in an amulet or on a tombstone, we know the saint was venerated then and there by a certain number of people more surely than when we are told the same thing by the administrators of the saint's memory a couple of centuries later. Documents also bring to our notice a much greater number of churches dedicated to saints than do narrative texts. In 2001, I could compare the forty-three saints' shrines mentioned for Egypt by Pierre Maraval in his inventory of holy places to the 232 I had come across in papyri and inscriptions, and the latter is an ever-growing number.[7] One has to bear in mind, of course, that the distribution of Byzantine papyrological evidence does not exactly reflect the reality of Valley life during that period. The absence of the Delta, or of cities such as Panopolis or Lykopolis, obviously very active centres of

---

[6] Brown 1995: 63.   [7] Papaconstantinou 2001: 14. Maraval 1985: 311–27.

Egyptian Christianity, is a sign that a purely papyrological vision can also be heavily distorted.

In this survey I shall adopt a chronological point of view, trying to bring out the main lines in the evolution of the cult after the middle of the fifth century and insisting on aspects of structure rather than on individual cases. In it, 'saint' is used to mean a character who, after his death, became the centre of a cult. This is far from including all the people about whom *Vitae* were written – namely martyrs, Biblical figures, bishops, special monks or 'holy men', and even some rather ordinary monks whose life could be a model to others. The surest sign distinguishing a saint from other religious figures in documentary sources is the use of the term *hagios* before his name. However, it can only work as a positive sign, since we note its absence in several cases where there are obvious signs of a public – or publicly recognized – cult. Among these signs, the presence of a shrine is probably the most compelling, and has been treated as such. Others are fixed public commemorations, prayers, invocations, or devotional objects, even though sometimes the relevance of such documents may be questioned. This definition obviously excludes living 'holy men', whose interaction with the society they lived in was of a quite different nature.

The middle of the fifth century is a convenient starting point, because it avoids the rather difficult question of the rise and early development of the cult of saints and the relative disagreement on this question between 'field' and 'literary' sources. Judging by their homilies, fourth-century bishops all over the empire seem to have been confronted with a flowering cult as early as the 370s,[8] but its manifestations hardly appear in documents before the middle of the fifth century, with the notable exception of a couple of texts.[9] Only after 450 does the cult actually become visible in the field. In the second half of the fifth century, it rapidly started rising into prominence in the cities and villages of the Nile Valley, until it reached its full potential in the sixth century. At that time, the late Roman city remained a centre producing strong civic identities and local patriotism, which were reflected in the structure adopted by the cult of saints. Mostly martyrs, the saints were defined primarily as city patrons. Cities, towns,

---

[8] See, for instance, Athanasius of Alexandria, *Festal Letters* 41 and 42, ed. Lefort 1955: 42–4 and 46–7; and the texts in Leemans et al. 2003.

[9] *P.Haun*. III 67, dated 398, mentions an offering to an unnamed martyr-shrine in Oxyrhynchos, and *P.Mert*. I 40, of the early fifth century, the feasts of 'John' and 'Eutropia' in the Arsinoite village of Selleion. A marble slab with the inscription 'the *oikos* of Ioannes the saint' was reused in a fifth-century Hermopolite church, which means it would have belonged (or referred) to some earlier structure: Bailey and Grossmann 1994: 64, ill. p. 65; see also the variant readings by Łajtar 1996 (repr. in *SEG* 44, 1455) and Bernand 1999: 95–7, no. 21bis/B. Unconvinced by both, I have preferred Bailey's text.

and villages would compete for the 'ownership' of one or several saints, often inventing a couple or so to enrich their pantheon.[10] The proliferation of saints' shrines in and around cities seems quite impressive during this period. In Oxyrhynchos and Aphrodite, two sites for which sixth-century evidence abounds, there were at that time thirty and thirteen churches respectively dedicated to saints alone. At the end of the fourth century, visitors to Oxyrhynchos had found twelve churches in all, and had deemed that number exceptionally high. Other cities probably experienced the same phenomenon. Even though Hermopolis has yielded less evidence for this early period, we nevertheless know of at least eight saints' shrines within the city alone, and four more in the surrounding countryside. It is in this region, in the neighbouring Antinoopolis, that we hear of one of the earliest Egyptian martyr shrines: that of Kollouthos, 'the local martyr', mentioned by Palladius in the late fourth or early fifth century.[11] It is probably also here that, around the year 400, the authors of the *Historia monachorum in Aegypto* venerated the bodies (*skênômata*) of the martyr Apollonios 'and those who were martyred with him'.[12]

The saints to whom the churches were dedicated partly made up the religious identity of each city. Thus Oxyrhynchos had its local martyrs, Serenus, Philoxenos and Iustus, as well as a special piety for Menas and the archangel Michael. In Hermopolis, the presence of John the Baptist is quite important at this early date, together with the archangels and Phoibammon. The sixth-century evidence from Aphrodite mentions several characteristic saints of the town or the region: Hermaouos, Onnophrios, Patemouos, Promaos, Horouonchios, as well as Victor, Kollouthos, Menas, Michael, and the Apostles. The limited early sources from Arsinoe mention Elias, George, and Dorotheos, of whom the last two were still venerated there at the end of the seventh century.

The saints accumulated by each city were inscribed in the urban and suburban environment through their shrines, of which we have comparatively little direct evidence. Many of the churches found in excavations remain unidentified, and certainly not all were dedicated to saints. However, several church lists from Oxyrhynchos[13] show how important these buildings, whatever their size, had become within the city and its immediate surroundings in the first half of the sixth century. They were part of the

---

[10] See Shenoute's *Catechesis* translated in Lefort 1954. The practice was by no means confined to Egypt or to provincial towns. The bishop of Milan, Ambrosius, and indeed the emperor himself, used the same tactics: see e.g. Dassmann 1975 and Mango 1990 with an 'Addendum', p. 434.

[11] Palladius, *HL* 60.   [12] *HMA* 19.12.

[13] *P.Oxy.* LXVII 4617, 4618, 4619, 4620; XI 1357; *SPP* X 35; *PSI* VII 791; *P.Lond.* V 1762 (*BL* 10).

local economy and played an important role in the liturgical and festal life of the city. Stational liturgy was perhaps the institution that most effectively integrated the city's churches into a ritual network under the patronage of the bishop, who could thus better control this topographical proliferation of cult establishments. An exceptional document from Oxyrhynchos gives us a glimpse of how this worked at the level of a medium-sized provincial city.[14] Each saint's feast was publicly celebrated in his own church by the bishop himself, sometimes including processions through the streets. In the case of important saints, there were multiple celebrations in the shrine. The feast of the local martyr Philoxenos on Choiak 22 was the occasion of four consecutive days of celebration in his *martyrion*, followed by two days in that of the other local martyr, Serenus, which brought the calendar to Christmas Eve, itself celebrated over three days and followed on Tybi 1 by the feast of St Peter. There were thus ten days of episcopal celebrations combining local martyrs and an important Christian feast, and culminating in a procession between two churches on the last day. This situation made the period before the Nativity much more festive and solemn in Oxyrhynchos than in other cities, where the local martyrs had different commemoration days. There, the simple combination of the Nativity and St Peter's Day would have made for a much smaller festival. The same can be observed for the period between Hathyr 12 and 17 (at least), when the feasts of Michael the archangel, Menas, and the local martyr Iustus take place within less than a week. The period seems to have been named 'the feast of Saint Michael' by the inhabitants and to have lasted at least eight days.[15]

Such periods created a rhythm within the year specific to each city, and this specificity was created by the local saints, the other festivals such as the Nativity or some 'universal' saints being common to all. The bishop's choice to celebrate a second and a third stational service for a saint was partly dictated by the saint's popularity, but it also partly served to create that popularity by opening the possibility of a real festive period or *panegyris*. As is obvious from Oxyrhynchos, the moments chosen were also in accordance with the agricultural calendar and, in some cases at least, corresponded to traditional festive periods in that city.[16]

Starting around the middle of the sixth century, this general image gradually underwent a slow but lasting transformation that only became clearly visible

---

[14] Papaconstantinou 1996; in general, see Baldovin 1987.
[15] *PSI* I 63.24–8.   [16] Papaconstantinou 1996.

much later. By the end of the century, the urban, suburban, or rural shrines that had until then been the cult's exclusive loci were being confronted with the competition of shrines housed within monasteries in the periphery of the towns. This seems to have happened in two main ways. At first monasteries seem to have promoted the cult of their own monastic saints. Later they are also found to be housing the cults of martyrs who were previously celebrated in independent shrines, either because the relics of these martyrs had been transported to monastic institutions, or because such institutions developed around established *martyria*.

Even though monks were the subject of many *Vitae* and much related literature in the fifth and sixth centuries, they were rarely the beneficiaries of a cult during that period. The earliest documentary mention of a monk bearing the title *hagios* alone is that of Jeremias of Saqqara in 545, but it does remain an exception.[17] Several others, such as Apollo, Onnophrios, Papnouthios, or Patermouthis, had their feast days celebrated or had churches dedicated to them. They often bore the title *hagios apa* or *hagios abba*, sometimes even *apa* or *abba* alone, more rarely simply *hagios*. However, most monastic saints mentioned in documentary sources appear during the seventh and eighth centuries.

It is the Middle Egyptian town of Aphrodite, which has preserved evidence both from the sixth century and from the turn of the seventh to eighth century, that may best illustrate this tendency. Of the thirteen or so shrines present in or around the town in the sixth century, two were dedicated to the Apostles, one to Michael the archangel, six at least to martyrs, two to unidentified saints, and only two to monastic saints, one of whom was the famous Onnophrios, not a local character. Two of them are presented as monasteries, one dedicated to the Apostles and the other to a local monastic saint. In the late seventh and early eighth centuries, there were eighteen religious institutions bearing the names of saints, among which we find the Apostles, two New Testament saints, two angels, six martyrs, two unidentified saints, and five monks, all local and celebrated in their own monastery. Of these, only the Apostles, two martyrs, one local monastic saint, and another local saint were already present in the sixth century.[18] Three cases are of particular interest here. The first two show monastic figures acquiring the status of saints. In 547, we meet *abba Henoch archimandritês*,[19] probably the founder of the monastery called *hagios apa Henoch* in a contract.[20] A century and a half later, this institution is named *topos*

[17] *CPR* X 122.8–11.   [18] See Papaconstantinou 2001: 296–8.
[19] *P.Cair.Masp*. II 67242.   [20] *P.Cair.Masp*. II 67234.6.

hagiou Henoch or *hagios Henoch*, and also *abba Henoch*.[21] Again, in the early sixth century, there was an institution called *topos apa Psoiou*, represented by a monk;[22] in the late seventh or the early eighth century, it had turned into *hagios Psoios*.[23] These were obviously not the only monks to have become saints at Aphrodite. Although they are unknown from sixth-century texts, *hagios Abraamios* and *hagios Psempnouthios* appear in late seventh- and early eighth-century texts which also call them *abba*, and even mention the *monastêrion abba Psempnouthiou*.[24] The opposite move is illustrated by the case of the martyr Hermaouos, whose oratory (*euktêrion*) is mentioned in the sixth century,[25] and seems to have been transformed into a monastery (*monastêrion, oros*) in the early Arab period.[26]

Few other sites offer sufficient evidence over a period long enough to allow such comparisons. Cities of some size such as Arsinoe or Hermopolis seem to have kept their network of urban and suburban saints' shrines well into the eighth century, and even later in the case of Hermopolis, with a pantheon essentially made up of well-known martyrs and Biblical saints. Oxyrhynchos has not yielded enough late evidence to allow generalizations. The few seventh-century texts from the city do not show much merging between monasteries and martyrs. On the other hand, between the sixth and the eighth century, the *martyrion* of the Antinoite martyr Kollouthos migrated from the city cemetery,[27] where it had probably been since Palladius saw it around 400, to the 'mountain' behind Antinoopolis.[28]

The evolution in the countryside is difficult to follow. However, this move towards the monasteries may be confirmed by the situation observed in the old Theban area. Massive documentary evidence from the region starts in the late sixth and continues through the eighth century, showing a flowering of religious institutions situated in small villages or standing alone in the countryside. Around the small town of Jeme on the west bank of the Nile there were at least thirty establishments dedicated to saints, mostly martyrs or Biblical figures, while we only know of three such churches in the main city, Hermonthis, and six in Jeme itself. The nature of most of these establishments remains unknown, as they are mostly called by the generic term *topos*. However, we may note the presence in the early eighth

---

[21] *P.Lond.* IV 1424.25; 1420.66, 108; 1555.23; 1572.1, 3, 7, 8, 20, 23, 28; 1419.1064, 1148, 1151; 1420.24, 38, 45, 74; 1424.13; 1459.26.

[22] *SB* XX 14669.182.   [23] *P.Lond.* IV 1444.3.

[24] Psempnouthios: *P.Lond.* IV 1419.363, 1002, 1133; 1421; Abraamios: 1429.15; 1420.214; 1481.

[25] *P.Cair.Masp.* III 67288 col. 6.5.   [26] See *P.Lond.* IV, index p. 583.   [27] Manfredi 1984.

[28] Till 1935: 173 mentions 'the body of holy Apa Kollouthos in his *martyrion* on the mountain of his city Antinoe'. It was still there in the twelfth century, according to the *History of the Churches and Monasteries of Egypt*, fol. 8b (ed. Evetts 1895: 244).

century of a 'holy monastery of St (Apa) Paul' on the mountain of Jeme, founded by Paul 'the anchorite, who is now among the saints', sometime during the seventh century. In the neighbouring town of Ape, there was in the eighth century a monastery of St Sergios. Most significantly perhaps, during the seventh and eighth centuries, the religious landscape of the west bank was dominated by the Monastery of St Phoibammon, which was in possession of that martyr's relics and seems to have functioned as the main healing shrine in the region.

Villages of the nearby Koptite nome also housed some monastic saints. There was a *topos* dedicated to *hagios apa Abraham* at Tousieh, a church of *apa Onofrios* at Pallas, a *topos* of *apa Pesynthios* at Tche, one of Shenoute on the mountain of Pahme, and one of *hagios apa Hatre* on the mountain of Pmile. Martyrs were of course not entirely dislodged, and the same region had churches dedicated to Theodore, Kollouthos, and George, as well as to the very popular archangel Michael. Further to the north, near Panopolis – for which there is a cruel lack of documentary evidence – there is mention in the early eighth century of a *monastêrion hagiou Ieremiou* and of a *monastêrion hagiou Senouthiou*, a type of expression that was to become more and more common.

The rising role of the monasteries in the cult of saints marked the beginning of a slow process which was to form the characteristic structure of the medieval religious landscape, with monasteries and *martyria* converging in the same sites. The twelfth-century *History of the Churches and Monasteries of Egypt* shows Christian space dominated by monasteries bearing the names of the martyrs whose cults, and sometimes whose relics, they housed. This move has been explained by the rising insecurity for shrines situated outside the city walls, and the fact that it took place first in the south may seem to confirm this hypothesis. However, it is also in the south that we see a great number of rural shrines with no apparent protection. On the other hand, as time went by, even urban churches came to be dedicated to monastic saints such as Shenoute, Antony, or Onnophrios. With its roots well beyond insecurity, the 'monasticization' of the cult of saints was in fact a widespread phenomenon that still remains to be satisfactorily studied.

In the absence of a document such as the Oxyrhynchos stational calendar, it is quite difficult to know how, in this period, the various churches of a diocese were brought together into a coherent whole. The late sixth- and early seventh-century correspondence of bishop Abraham of Hermonthis, much of which was preserved in the ruins of St Phoibammon, reveals a rich network of rural churches dedicated to saints, and the bishop's concern for practical matters. Making sure that the service was celebrated and that the

altar light burnt day and night was the task of a cleric specially appointed by the bishop. However, nothing in this correspondence implies the existence of a mobile liturgy, which ensured that the bishop celebrated at least once a year in each church set under his jurisdiction. This may seem natural, given the predominantly rural setting of the churches and the high number of monasteries. After all, stational liturgy has been defined as a purely urban phenomenon, which marked the 'public cultural domination' of space and society by one religious group.[29] Hints of such a practice, though, come from several sermons by contemporaries of Abraham. John, bishop of Hermopolis, delivered his encomium of St Antony 'before a *topos* that is far from the city and before people who have come from the city and have yet to return to the city'[30]; and Constantine, bishop of Siut (Lykopolis), is twice seen celebrating the feast of St Claudius in the village of Pohe, once 'with all the people of the three cities' (namely Lykopolis, Hermopolis, and Panopolis),[31] the second time with 'all the people, men and women, and a crowd from the city of Shmun [Hermopolis], who had come for the feast'.[32] Of course, John and Constantine were bishops of two still important cities, while Abraham's see, Hermonthis, seems to have lost its lustre by the late sixth century. Abraham lived in an area of low urbanization, where civic identity may have declined earlier than elsewhere.

However, another explanation could come into play here. As Ewa Wipszycka has rightly noted, Abraham never seems to go to Hermonthis, and churches of that city never appear among the ones over which he has authority.[33] She understands this as a sign that the episcopal city was controlled by the Chalcedonian church, and probably had a Chalcedonian bishop, Abraham having been displaced towards a monastic residence. If this is the case, what about John and Constantine, also monophysite bishops, who conspicuously vaunt their links with 'the city'? In fact, these links hardly resist closer examination. That people should have come from the city does not mean that the bishop normally officiated there. Both bishops tell of their excursions in highly rhetorical works that follow earlier models of city pride and repeat a number of clichés. Constantine's second sermon is said to have been delivered in the presence of 'the vicar of the patriarch',[34] while the first was given before the prefect and 'an imperial envoy sent by the *basileus* with letters of peace'.[35] This last phrase could possibly allude

---

[29] Baldovin 1987: 262.   [30] John of Hermopolis, *Panegyric of Saint Anthony*, ed. Garitte 1943: 347.
[31] Godron 1970: 509.
[32] Godron 1970: 593. Pisentius of Koptos probably also gave his sermon on Onnophrios in the village of Pallas: see Crum 1915–17: 41.
[33] See this volume, chapter 16 above.   [34] Godron 1970: 593.   [35] Godron 1970: 509.

to some attempt at reconciliation with the Chalcedonian party, and may confirm the impression that Constantine also had his episcopal authority restricted to a rural network.[36] Indeed, of the few surviving sermons by those bishops, none is given in their respective episcopal cities. Such a shift of the anti-Chalcedonian clergy could go a long way towards explaining the displacement of at least some cults from the cities towards rural and monastic settings.[37]

Considering the degree of change that has been described, it may seem remarkable that many scholars have seen in the cult of saints a field where continuities are most striking. Many practices support this view, to be sure, repeated as they are century after century, in Egypt as elsewhere, until Erasmus and beyond. The Egyptians formed a traditional rural society who brought to the divine basic questions concerning subsistence, pro-creation, health, and protection. Some of the problems raised might have been particular to the Egyptian landscape, such as scorpions, against which St Phokas offered protection, or the eye-illness caused by the desert sand against which St Kollouthos had a recipe. Most of them, however, seem as eternal and as universal as the ways in which they were tackled.[38]

Capturing holy beneficence was achieved by various means. The easiest and probably the most common was the use of amulets that bore the names or the images of saints, or even more elaborate texts containing invocations to such and such a holy figure. They could be made of stone or metal, but also of a bit of papyrus which was folded into a small enough shape to be hung around the neck. Some were used as protection in general; others had a more specific purpose, such as the healing of an illness, often fever. Michael and Gabriel are the most popular saints in these texts, but local saints appear in many of them. Some of the texts found on papyrus may have been written by the wearers themselves, but many were probably brought back from visits to a saint's establishment, where they were produced by 'professionals', as their often formulaic nature and theological correctness indicate.

---

[36] In the fourth and fifth centuries, 'letters of peace' were a restricted form of the letter of recommendation, which were intended only for the less prominent laity and only provided for physical support. Already in the sixth century, however, this initial meaning seems to have been lost: see Teeter 1997, esp. 958. Here, the status of the bearer definitely excludes its traditional use, and the context could favour a more literal interpretation of the term, which the passage to Coptic may have fostered.

[37] This can only be a partial explanation, however, considering that the same shift took place in parts of the empire where there was no anti-Chalcedonian hierarchy. The concentration both of text production and of the training of the higher clergy within the monasteries must also be taken into account.

[38] See in particular Frankfurter 1998a.

Other vehicles of the holy were the various *eulogiai* that could be obtained at sanctuaries. Oil, water, or dust often came from the immediate vicinity of the saint's tomb. They could be sanctified by presumed contact with the saint's relics. At Abu Mina, the oil that filled the thousands of *ampullae* carried away by the pilgrims was taken from a jar of oil placed underneath the crypt's altar, where the martyr's body would have lain.[39] Oil could also come from the lamps that burnt next to the tomb, and water from holy springs in shrines. These kinds of *eulogiai* do not appear at all in papyri: they are known by archaeological finds and by the descriptions given in narrative texts. A couple of accounts, however, mention another kind of saint's *eulogiai*, small white breads distributed during feast days.

In the description of such practices, the various sets of sources tend to give the same picture of the cult. However, through papyri we learn of a practice almost unmentioned in other sources, namely the oracular activity of saints' shrines. Although various kinds of divination techniques were otherwise known, such as dreams during incubation or *sortes sanctorum*, a number of papyrus leaflets from three or four shrines also show the continuing use of an age-old oracular technique. Petitioners presented their questions about the future in pairs, one in the positive and one in the negative form, and the saint made the right one 'come out'. Most queries were about the stance to be taken in some future action, often related to health, but sometimes also to business. They were presented to Philoxenos in Oxyrhynchos, to Kollouthos in Antinoopolis, to Leontios and perhaps Kosmas and Damian in shrines whose location remains uncertain. These were either physician saints (Kollouthos, Kosmas, and Damian) or saints who had *nosokomeia* attached to their shrines (Philoxenos and Leontios).[40]

The best way to obtain all those benefits was by travelling to the saint's shrine, or by sending somebody there who would bring back the *eulogiai*. The number of visitors to saints' shrines seems to have risen considerably in the course of the sixth century, if we take the size of the churches as an indication. In Oxyrhynchos, the church of St Philoxenos, already present in the first half of the sixth century, underwent considerable rebuilding towards the end of that century, at which time it was obviously a very big structure, housing, among other activities, the oracle of the saint and per-haps even the related *nosokomeion*. The size of St Philoxenos' church can only be inferred from an account of the stones used in that rebuilding.[41]

[39] Grossmann 1989: 64–9 and figs. 11, 13.
[40] *P.Oxy.* VIII 1150 (Philoxenos). *SPP* III 314; 47.1, verso; 47.1, 16, 21 (Leontios). See Papaconstantinou 1994: 281–6, 2001: 336–9, and 2005.
[41] *P.Oxy.* XVI 2041.

Archaeological remains of similar shrines, however, confirm this kind of development.[42] The most impressive is of course that of Abu Mina, to the south-west of Alexandria. It all started in the late fourth or early fifth century, with the building of a simple mausoleum over the martyr's supposed tomb. By the end of the sixth century, Abu Mina had been transformed into a huge pilgrimage centre whose focal point was still the tomb of the martyr. But it was now rebuilt as a tetraconch, and was accompanied by several churches, *xenodocheia* meant to accommodate pilgrims, and housing for local personnel, so that, in the end, Abu Mina looked like a classical city in its own right, with colonnaded streets and public buildings.[43]

This extraordinary development of the site in the sixth century reflects that of the cult of saints in general, but it more specifically echoes the great popularity of Menas' cult, both within Egypt and elsewhere. Pilgrims' flasks with oil from Abu Mina have been found in places as remote as Romania or southern France. Most cults, however, were of more modest proportions, and so was the development of their shrines, which in most cases were situated in the immediate vicinity of cities. This is also true of the practice of travelling to saints' shrines, usually called pilgrimage by scholars and hagiographers alike. Documentary evidence only partly supports hagiography's insistence on large-scale pilgrimage to saints' shrines. Pilgrims from afar were obviously an exception, and a rare one at that. Graffiti left on the walls of various establishments or on the surrounding rocks show the traffic was in fact extremely local. People from neighbouring towns particularly seem to have made such trips on the saint's feast day, when along with the saint's blessing they would also find a festive meal awaiting them. The use of the term pilgrimage in this context may be slightly confusing, since it normally evokes a rather long voyage to 'the centre out there', to use Victor Turner's famous phrase.[44]

The saint's favours were not entirely free of charge. Beneficiaries were expected to present their offerings to the shrine, in the form of votive objects, of goods for the preparation of the saint's feast, but also, for richer members of the community, of financial contributions for repairs, decoration, or the erection of outbuildings. The *Passions* and *Miracles* read out during the liturgical celebration of the saint's feast constantly reminded their public that piety and gratitude were highly esteemed virtues in the saint's eyes.

There were two ways of calling upon oneself the saint's protection without any direct or indirect contact with his shrine. One was at death, when a

---

[42] What we know about the wealth of religious institutions also points in the same direction: see Bagnall 1992 and 1993: 289–93.
[43] Grossmann 1998.   [44] Turner 1973. See also Kötting 1988, and the classic Kötting 1950.

saint was invoked in the epitaph to see the deceased through his last voyage; and the other was at birth, when a child was named after a saint. The choice of patron was of course in both cases made by somebody else, according to criteria that most of the time remain undecipherable to us. However, in some cases, the pairings of names between parent and child have an obvious connection, as for example the Oxyrhynchite couple Serenus and Philoxena who called their son Iustus, thus placing their household under the triple patronage of the local martyrs Serenus, Philoxenos, and Iustus. We know of women named Thecla who called their sons Paul, thus reproducing the duo of the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*,[45] of physicians who were named Kollouthos, a famous physician saint,[46] and even of a man named Theodore who called his son Stratelates.[47]

The stability of such practices is indeed striking. The extreme importance of health questions among the varied problems brought before the saints, the role of spatial proximity with the saint's purported material remains, the possibility of transferring the saint's power to different media so as to take it home, as well as what the beneficiaries had to offer in return all remain the same throughout the period, and are not fundamentally different from what Erasmus described. The general structure of the 'saint' population also remained stable from the fifth to the eighth century and beyond, although the individuals who made it up were constantly renewed. From the earliest years, the saints formed a pyramid with at its top a few famous martyrs who were venerated all over the country and at its bottom a mass of local saints who were hardly known outside their city or region, and who slowly disappeared to be replaced by others as time went by. The top group also changed, but less radically, especially through the appearance of St Mercurius and the breakthrough of St George, who became the two most important martyrs in the medieval period.

It is not entirely without reason, then, that historians have considered the cult of saints as the domain of continuities. However, even though one can hardly see any chronological variation on the surface, changes there were. These did not affect so much the practices as their meaning and function, and the discourse that carried them. As noted above, visits to shrines intensified in the course of the sixth century, probably a sign of the increasing control of religious institutions over the cult's practices. At the same time, there was a growing insistence on the glory of the martyr,

---

[45] *O.Douch* I 20.1; *P.Mich.* XIII 668 r.1; see Davis 1999 (repr. as Appendix B in Davis 2001: 201–8).
[46] *CPR* IV 130.   [47] Munier 1930–1: 446, no. 106.

who was given longer and more sophisticated titles as time went by, and seems to have become a more remote figure. The model of the 'physician' seems to have lost its symbolic power in favour of the 'general' or *stratêlatês*, as implied by the slow decline of Kollouthos or Kosmas and Damian set against the rise of Victor, George, Mercurius, or Phoibammon. As for the composition of the *Vitae* and the content of *Miracle* collections, they followed the general tendency of hagiographical writing, which was itself linked to the monasticization of the cult of saints. The focal point of this very normative literature gradually shifted between the fifth and the eighth century. While initially it was aimed above all at obtaining the conversion of the remaining infidels who visited the saints, or, after the Council of Chalcedon, adherence to and constancy in the 'orthodox' creed, with time it laid more and more weight on the financial support expected by the saint for the glory of his establishment. Those who forgot to show their gratitude were often wildly chastised, and were only pardoned after (and if) they had done their duty. In this way, the saints actually patronized their own establishments, helping them raise the funds they needed to stay in the very competitive race between shrines. With the move of martyrs into monasteries, the latter also benefited from the system; this proved extremely useful in the eighth century, when taxation of monastic estates was introduced by the Arabs.

Although changes in the structure of the cult of saints started before the Arab conquest, somewhere around the late sixth and the early seventh century the situation created by the Caliphate's dominion reinforced the new structure and helped it take a new turn. Saints seem to have definitely lost power over cities, which were now mostly in 'infidel' hands and hardly the glamorous entities they had once been. The new social entity of the Christians in the Islamic empire was the local community. Following the move, the saint was now no longer the patron of a city, protecting it against outside dangers and used by the bishop and the people to enhance its prestige, but the patron of a community, offering it a sort of symbolic or mythical paternity and a shared socio-religious experience.[48] His memory and cult were often administered by monastic circles, where accounts of his *Life* and *Miracles* were written and copied, and where bishops themselves now almost exclusively received their training.

Structurally, institutionally, and ideologically, the Egyptian cult of saints was transformed between its beginnings and the Umayyad period. Of course, consciousness of such macro-historical change among Egyptian

---

[48] Papaconstantinou (2006); Naguib 1994.

Christians was probably even weaker than it has been among historians. The continuity, indeed the 'immobility', of exterior forms of worship, which are the main focus of religious historians, can however be quite misleading. Through the timeless repetition of the 'culturally-inscribed gestures, responses, habits . . . that inform the supplicants' behaviour before saints',[49] the Christian communities most certainly created for themselves a reassuring sense of continuity, reinforced by a hagiographical production which prompted them to identify with the heroic past of the persecutions and the origins of the Egyptian church. The need for such stability was probably never greater than in times when important changes were taking place, so that, to a certain extent, it has worked as a veil behind which these changes are hidden. To paraphrase Antony Cutler and Alexander Kazhdan, who two decades ago went against the tide in denying the cultural continuum between Byzantium and classical antiquity, 'sometimes it is the Egyptian yearning for continuity that prevents us from seeing discontinuity'.[50]

Ultimately, it is perhaps the lens through which one looks at the cult of saints that determines how one sees it. At the level of the individual supplicants, saints did fill essentially the same needs throughout our period and even beyond, as Erasmus' complaints testify. Seen from further afield, however, those saints had a different identity, acted differently, and were used by institutions in quite different ways as time went by – and, despite a deep attachment to tradition, those changes were not entirely unrelated to the transformation of the society of the supplicants themselves.

REFERENCES

Bagnall, R. S. (1992), 'Landholding in Late Roman Egypt: The Distribution of Wealth', *JRS* 82: 128–49.
   (1993), *Egypt in Late Antiquity*. Princeton.
Bailey, D. M. and P. Grossmann (1994), 'The South Church at Hermopolis Magna (Ashmunein): A Preliminary Report', in K. Painter (ed.), *Churches Built in Ancient Times: Recent Studies in Early Christian Archaeology*. London: 49–72.
Baldovin, J. (1987), *The Urban Character of Christian Worship: The Origins, Development and Meaning of Stational Liturgy*. Rome.
Baumeister, T. (1972), *Martyr invictus: Der Martyrer als Sinnbild der Erlösung in der Legende und im Kult der frühen koptischen Kirche. Zur Kontinuität des ägyptischen Denkens* (Forschungen zur Volkskunde 46). Münster.

---

49 Frankfurter 2003: 345.
50 Kazhdan and Cutler 1982: 476, with 'Byzantine' instead of 'Egyptian'; see also 478: 'Continuity was rather the exterior shape of its existence, a form of its self-consciousness, capable of masking its real discontinuity.'

Bernand, E. (1999), *Inscriptions grecques d'Hermopolis Magna et de sa nécropole*. Cairo.

Brown, P. (1971), 'The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity', *JRS* 61: 80–101.

(1981), *The Cult of Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity*. Chicago.

(1995), *Authority and the Sacred: Aspects of the Christianisation of the Roman World*. Cambridge.

Crum, W. E. (1915–17), 'Discours de Pisenthios sur saint Onophrius', *Revue de l'Orient chrétien* 20: 38–67.

Dassmann, E. (1975), 'Ambrosius und die Märtyrer', *JbAC* 18: 49–68.

Davis, S. J. (1999), 'Namesakes of Saint Thecla in Late Antique Egypt', *BASP* 36: 71–81.

(2001), *The Cult of Saint Thecla: A Tradition of Women's Piety in Late Antiquity*. Oxford.

Evetts, B. T. A. (1895), *The Churches and Monasteries of Egypt and Some Neighbouring Countries Attributed to Abû Sâlih the Armenian*. Oxford.

Fernández Marcos, N. (1975), *Los Thaumata de Sofronio: Contribución al estudio de la incubatio cristiana*. Madrid.

Fowden, E. K. (1999), *The Barbarian Plain: Saint Sergius between Rome and Iran*. Berkeley.

Frankfurter, D. (1998a), *Religion in Roman Egypt: Assimilation and Resistance*. Princeton.

(ed.) (1998b), *Pilgrimage and Holy Space in Late Antique Egypt*. Leiden.

(2003), 'Syncretism and the Holy Man in Late Antique Egypt', *JECS* 11: 339–85.

Garitte, G. (1943), 'Panégyrique de saint Antoine par Jean, évêque d'Hermopolis', *OCP* 9: 347.

Godron, G. (1970), *Textes coptes relatifs à saint Claude d'Antioche* (*PO* 35: 424–669).

Grossmann, P. (1989), *Abu Mina* I: *Die Gruftkirche und die Gruft*. Mainz.

(1998), 'The Pilgrimage Center of Abu Mina', in D. Frankfurter (ed.), *Pilgrimage and Holy Space in Late Antique Egypt*. Leiden: 281–302.

Kazhdan, A. and A. Cutler (1982), 'Continuity and Discontinuity in Byzantine History', *Byzantion* 52: 429–78.

Kötting, B. (1950), *Peregrinatio religiosa: Wallfahrten in der Antike und das Pilgerwesen in der alten Kirche* (Forschungen zur Volkskunde 35). Münster.

(1988), *Ecclesia peregrinans: Das Gottesvolk unterwegs. Gesammelte Aufsätze*. 2 vols. (Münstersche Beiträge zur Theologie 54.1–2). Münster.

Łajtar, A. (1996), 'Bemerkungen zu drei kürzlich veröffentlichten griechischen Inschriften aus der Spätantike', *ZPE* 114: 143–6.

Leemans, J., W. Mayer, P. Allen, and B. Dehandschutter (2003), *'Let Us Die that We May Live': Greek Homilies on Christian Martyrs from Asia Minor, Palestine and Syria (c. AD 350–AD 450)*. London.

Lefort, L. (1954), 'La chasse aux reliques des martyrs en Égypte au IVe siècle', *La nouvelle Clio* 6: 225–30.

(1955), *Saint Athanase: Lettres festales et pastorales* (*CSCO* 150–1). Leuven.

Manfredi, M. (1984), 'Notizie sugli scavi recenti ad Antinoe', in *Atti del XVII Congresso Internazionale di Papirologia* 1. Naples: 85–96.

Mango, C. (1990), 'Constantine's Mausoleum and the Translation of Relics', *ByzZ* 83: 51–62.

Maraval, P. (1985), *Lieux saints et pèlerinages d'Orient: Histoire et géographie, des origines à la conquête arabe.* Paris.

Munier, H. (1930–1), 'Les stèles coptes du monastère de Saint-Siméon à Assouan', *Aegyptus* 11: 433–84.

Naguib, S. A. (1994), 'The Martyr as Witness: Coptic and Copto-Arabic Hagiographies as Mediators of Religious Memory', *Numen* 41: 223–54.

Papaconstantinou, A. (1994), 'Les oracles chrétiens dans l'Égypte byzantine: le témoignage des papyrus', *ZPE* 104: 281–6.

(1996), 'La liturgie stationnale à Oxyrhynchos dans la première moitié du 6e siècle: réédition et commentaire de *P. Oxy.* XI 1357', *REByz* 54: 135–59.

(2001), *Le culte des saints en Égypte: des Byzantins aux Abbassides. l'apport des inscriptions et des papyrus grecs et coptes.* Paris.

(2005), 'La reconstruction de Saint-Philoxène à Oxyrhynchos: l'inventaire dressé par Philéas le tailleur de pierres', *Mélanges Jean-Pierre Sodini* (*T&MBYZ* 15). Paris: 183–92.

(2006), 'Historiography, Hagiography, and the Making of the Coptic "Church of the Martyrs" in Early Islamic Egypt', *DOP* 60.

Teeter, T. M. (1997), 'Letters of Recommendation or Letters of Peace?', in *Akten des 21. Internationalen Papyrologenkongresses.* Berlin: 956–60.

Till, W. C. (1935), *Koptische Heiligen- und Märtyrerlegenden* 1 (*OCA* 102). Rome.

Turner, V. (1973), 'The Center Out There: The Pilgrim's Goal', *History of Religions* 12: 191–230.