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**EARLY CHRISTIAN ASCETICISM IN THE VITA
OF ST PAUL THE FIRST HERMIT.
A tale of the transformation
of Ascetics and Martyrs into warrior monks**

Introduction

Movements, ideals, and dreams are created by people for people to be lived by people. These things arise spontaneously. Paradoxically they may be said to be surprising at the time and completely unsurprising when one begins pulling on their historical threads. At times, a personality or an authority arises that desires to regularise such phenomena. This paper will examine the Early Christian asceticism that is exemplified in St Jerome's *Vita* of St Paul of Thebes and how it aids in the transformation of early Christian asceticism into Christian monasticism. This paper will consist of three sections; firstly, nothing exists in a vacuum, and therefore the historical setting of the *Vita* will be discussed in regard to persecution, toleration and the context of the metropolitan see of Alexandria. Secondly, asceticism itself will be defined then the *Vita* itself will be outlined and elaborated upon. After which the literary type of a *Vita* will be discussed. Thirdly, the paper will discuss the asceticism found within the *Vita* of St Paul, namely the asceticism of celibacy, fasting, and separation from the world. Finally, mention will be made of monasticism's association with the angelic life.

The Historical Setting of the Vita

St Paul the First Hermit also known as St. Paul of Thebes is said to have lived from 227 to 343 in Egypt. Our chief source of information about

him comes to us from St Jerome who lived from 347 to 420. Jerome is said to have written the *Vita* in the year 374 or 375 when Jerome stayed in the desert of Syria¹. Three facts must be understood about this historical context. This is a very interesting time for Christianity. Firstly, towards the end of 249 Emperor Decius obliges all his subjects to offer sacrifice for the empire, thus testing the loyalty of all his subjects. It is certain that an emperor was not worshiped whilst still alive, but it remains doubtful whether this was to be a sacrifice to the Pagan gods of the empire or a sacrifice to one's own deity for the empire. In any case this became a useful tool for testing people's loyalties as well as a convenient means of removing them. As a result, it became quite easy and popular to persecute Christians, who were not only very separative from imperial culture, but also maintained great secrecy as to the precise nature of their faith through the *disciplina acrana*². The existence of other groups, such as the Gnostics, who shared vaguely similar beliefs spread by men from Palestine, certainly sowed the seeds of confusion as to what Christians actually believed and practised. A good example of this is the belief that Christians ate flesh and drank blood, which was actually practised by certain groups³.

It should be noted that Christianity to this point was a very demanding religion that required quite a long period of initiation and formation before becoming a full member⁴. It may be assumed that either one had to be serious about the religion, or membership was not worth the risks for the indifferent membership. Many believers were killed for their faith, and this became a great honour. Winning the crown of martyrdom, although not actively sought was happily accepted as a means to ultimately prove one's faith in the religion. Such an environment tends not to promote pedestrian believers.

Secondly, in the year 313 the Emperor Constantine proclaims the edict of Milan, which grants official toleration to the Christian faith and adopts the faith as his own, therefore winning Christianity a powerful patron indeed. Since the 'powers at be' begin to promote Christianity and adopt it, hordes of various persons desire to become Christian either out of

¹ Cf: JEROME, "The life of Paulus the First Hermit", in *Nicene and Poste-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, Vol 6, *Jerome: The Principal Works of St. Jerome*, ed Philip Schaff, New York 1893, 299-303.

² Cf: JOSEF JUNGSMANN, *Liturgical Worship*, New York 1941, 77.

³ Cf: ROD BENNET, *Four Witnesses: The Church in her own words*, San Francisco 2002, Chapter 1: *Clement of Rome*.

⁴ Cf: THOMAS SCANNELL, "Catechumen", in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, New York 1908.

political reasons or various others which are not primarily based on belief in the Divinity of a Palestinian Rabbi. Because of this massive influx of ordinary members, the quality of both the followers and their belief, and practices declines greatly. From being a small group of serious believers, Christianity came to be a mass rabble of lukewarm believers. This must have been quite a traumatic change for believers. Daly summarises this crisis as many Christians realising that it was easier to be Christian with Caesar as their enemy rather than as their friend⁵.

Thirdly, Paul lived in Egypt, in the shadow of its provincial capital, Alexandria. The city is famous for not only for its political importance or for its economic dominance but also for its reputation for excellence in philosophical learning and education. The city itself paradoxically combines economic prosperity with its hedonistic pleasures, and academic pursuits with its aesthetical pleasures of contemplation.

“Woe to thee, Alexandria, who instead of God worshippes monsters! Woe to thee, harlot city, into which have flowed together the demons of the whole world! What will you say now? Beasts speak of Christ, and you instead of God worship monsters”⁶.

Paul himself is from Thebes. Thebes is a Roman subdivision of the diocese of Egypt. It is for us moderns a lower part of Egypt around the base of the Nile⁷. It is important to bear in mind that for Anthony and Paul, Egyptian geography was inverted: Thebes would have been regarded as Upper Egypt and Alexandria as Lower Egypt. Thebes is in the shadow of Alexandria, feasibly the third most important city in the empire and likewise for the Church. The Metropolitan of the city was a powerful figure and exercised a tremendous influence on the church, so much so that at times he was referred to as the Pharaoh of the Church⁸. St. Athanasius, arguably the most famous bishop of the city, features in the life of Anthony by his authorship of it and in the life of St. Paul in his cloak being used a burial shroud for the body of Paul. Alexandria also hosted a famous school of philosophy. The school certainly would have influenced Paul being “a man of letters

⁵ GABRIEL DALY, “Prayer and Asceticism”, in *The Furrow*, 22 (1971), 678.

⁶ JEROME, “The Life of Paulus the First Hermit”, 300.

⁷ Cf. JEAN BESSE, “Thebaid”, in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, New York 1912.

⁸ Cf. JOHN A. ZAHM, *From Berlin to Bagdad and Babylon*, London 1922, 315.

and skilled in both Greek and Egyptian learning”⁹. One of the most famous sons of this city and its famous university is Philo, a Jewish Philosopher. Although a point of contention, there is an opinion that Philo wrote a rule for monastics and he himself lived an ascetical life. Eusebius of Caesarea put forward this view. He goes so far as to mention that Philo and St. Peter had contact with one another. This is quite fanciful indeed¹⁰. Regardless, Alexandrian letters can certainly be said to have influenced Paul and the Hermits of Thebes, after all not even the deserts exist as vacuums.

Asceticism and the Vita

Asceticism comes from the Greek word *ασκεσις* which was used by Greeks to describe anyone who enters strict training and disciplined practise to achieve a certain goal¹¹. Originally this was applied to athletes who practised asceticism to be good at their sports and ultimately win at their games. This terminology was also later applied to philosophers, who also began to practise various disciplines in order to better learn and cleave to more spiritual, intellectual, and academic delights. St. Paul the apostle being a skilled preacher also begun to incorporate this kind of metaphor for the Christian life, of Christians entering into strict training in order to win the crown of eternal life¹². It has been suggested that Athanasius’ *Vita* of St. Anthony met with such a warm reception, because of it offering a concrete hero for the newly emerging enterprise of professional Christian asceticism. The average Roman citizen was quite familiar with heroes such as charioteers and gladiators¹³. Romantically one can perhaps compare Anthony leaving society to becoming a professional daemon wrestler right in the heart of the desert. It is interesting to note that although asceticism becomes a spiritual path towards the divine, it never really loses its connotation with sports and perhaps unsurprisingly also adopts many militaristic characteristics. Ascetics quickly not only become Christian heroes like the martyrs,

⁹ JEROME, “The Life of Paulus the First Hermit”, 299.

¹⁰ Cf: J.C. O’NEIL, “The Origins of Monasticism”, in *The Making of Orthodoxy: Essays in Honour of Henry Chadwick*, Cambridge 1989, 275.

¹¹ Cf: DALY, “Prayer and Asceticism”, 676-678.

¹² Cf: 1 Corinthians 19: 24-27

¹³ Cf: PETER BROWN, “The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity” in *The Journal of Roman Studies*, 61 (1971), 94.

but also athletes and soldiers for Christ. Interestingly there is evidence that there existed a link in the minds of early Christians between martyrs and gladiators, which perhaps is not too much of a surprise as both died in the same arena¹⁴. In short asceticism in the Christian setting may be said to be training, a toughening of the body and of the mind in order to follow Christ and be ready for the final moment of death in order to enter the kingdom of heaven¹⁵. Originally, it may be said to have prepared one for martyrdom, but in the era of friendly emperors it transformed into a means of not being seduced away from Christ or the faith¹⁶.

The ascetical movement quickly blooms and becomes a powerful force both in society and in the Church. The *Vitae* of both Anthony the Abbot and Paul the First Hermit both exemplify this trend and have a formative influence on it. Although this paper is not primarily about St Anthony it is important to briefly outline his life before mention is made of Paul, since Paul can only be understood in relation to Anthony.

Anthony's life contains many tales and examples of his ascetic life, too many to mention here. Briefly Anthony moves to the desert, men come to him, he begins a more active life, with greater contact with the outside world, eventually going so far as to go on missionary journeys to strengthen the brethren, even so far as to Alexandria herself¹⁷. Although much is made of Anthony beginning the eremitical life in the desert, his living experience of it greatly changes throughout his own lifetime.

Anthony, who suffered a great many temptations, finally fell prey to the worst of them all, pride. The story goes that Anthony eventually came to believe that he was the perfect ascetic or monk, that there was no one else in the world who surpassed him in Holiness and closeness to the Lord. Humility and Kenosis are the path to holiness, whilst pride leads to satanic damnation, but it is an all too easy trap to fall into when setting out on the path of perfection. Desiring to save Anthony, God made known to him that there is another man who is greater than he is. This man was completely unknown to the world and lived in a deeper part of the desert. Wishing to learn from this greater man or perhaps out of a desire to seek whether this

¹⁴ Cf: Ibid, 94.

¹⁵ Cf: DALY, "Prayer and Asceticism", 677.

¹⁶ Cf: Ibid, 678.

¹⁷ Cf: ATHANASIUS, "Vita S. Antoni" in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christians Church*, Second Series, Vol 4: *St. Athanasius Selected Works, and Letters*, New York, no. 46 & 69.

man is greater than himself, Anthony sets out to meet him. It is interesting to note that Athanasius does not record Anthony's meeting with Paul. Perhaps it did not suit his purposes in writing the *Vita* or perhaps he was not aware of it, although this seems unlikely. Jerome claims that Macarius, a disciple of Anthony, recounted this story to him¹⁸.

Our knowledge of Paul primarily comes to us from Jerome's *Vita*. There also exists a Coptic account of Paul's life, which varies in various degrees¹⁹. Essentially, after Paul is orphaned, he is forced to flee for his life due to an inheritance dispute with either his brother-in-law or actual brother. Jerome sets this in the context of the persecution of Decius²⁰. Paul's brother-in-law, seeking to secure the whole inheritance for himself, threatens to hand over the Christian Paul to the persecuting Roman authorities. Paul first withdraws to the very peripheries of the village. He then quickly proceeds further away from the persecution and flees into the desert. Jerome tells us that although he fled out of necessity, soon Paul embraced the eremitical life²¹.

Pushing further into the desert he soon finds a cave with an inner sky opening, where he not only found a palm tree, but also an oasis of water. Mention is made that according to Egyptian writings this very cave served as an illegal mint during the turbulent times of Mark Anthony and Cleopatra's partnership against Caesar. Paul lives in the desert for close to a hundred years. After his forty-third birthday, a crow begins to bring him half a loaf of bread daily, before which of course he survived from figs and dates from a palm tree. Paul spends almost the entirety of his life in solitude in the desert. Unfortunately, unlike the *Vita* of Anthony that chronicles many of his adventures, Jerome's *Vita* does not give us a great deal of information concerning Paul's day-to-day life in the desert, much to even the displeasure of Jerome himself²². Fortunately, much of what occupied his time can be deduced from conjecture with the lives of other Desert Fathers and Holy Men. Luckily, Jerome does outline one episode in the life of Paul, perhaps the most important, his last, his meeting with Anthony.

¹⁸ JEROME, "The Life of Paulus the First Hermit", 299.

¹⁹ Cf: SAMAAN EL SOURIANY, "Abba Paula, the First Hermit", in *The Hermit Father: The Spirit Born*, (2010), <http://www.copticbook.net/books/20130207001.pdf> (Accessed 06/11/2021).

²⁰ Cf: BAZYLI DEGÓRSKI, Critical study, in *Św. Hieronim, Żywoty mnichów Pawła, Hilariona, Malchusa*, ed. Marek Starowieyski (Źródła Monastyczne, Vol 10), Kraków 1995, 90.

²¹ JEROME, "The Life of Paulus the First Hermit", 300.

²² Cf: *Ibid*, 1.

As mentioned before Anthony only hears about St Paul in a dream from God Himself. Anthony is instructed to meet the Holy man who is greater than he is. Setting out into the desert, Anthony encounters many strange creatures, animals, and sights. It is worth noting that among these creatures is a centaur, who will be discussed later in this work. After many wondrous encounters, where even exotic mythical creatures entreat Anthony for his prayers (A change from the usual confrontation ending in exorcism), Anthony in the middle of the night follows a wolf-mother into a cave complex²³ and eventually finds Paul's cell. Jerome in these sentences calls Anthony a soldier of Christ.

Paul upon hearing Anthony strike his foot against a stone²⁴ is reluctant to admit him into his presence. Jerome certainly makes clear that Paul is testing Anthony to see if he really is a man not some sort of demon or apparition. Perhaps it may be implied that Paul already had many visitors or pilgrims attempt to find him or perhaps treasure hunters seeking the abandoned illegal mint. After prayers, exhortations and finally tears on the part of Anthony, Paul is convinced that another Holy Man has come to visit him. He opens his cell door, and both warmly embrace each other, with a holy kiss and call each other by name. Degórski suggests this use of each other names suggest an affirmation of each other's dignity and orthodoxy, according to an ancient custom²⁵. Next, the Paul and Anthony begin the usual formalities of a visit between desert hermits, which we shall discuss later in this paper. After which the usual crow appears, this with a whole loaf of bread, enough for both, at which Paul refers to both as soldiers of Christ²⁶.

“Behold the man whom you have sought with so much toil, his limbs decayed with age, his grey hairs unkempt. You see before you a man who ere long will be dust. But love endures all things. Tell me therefore,

²³ It is interesting to note that Jerome himself spent time living in a cave. More so it is important to understand that such a cave was rather a complex of caves, less of a sepulchre and more of a complex of rooms much like the hobbit hovels in the Lord of the Rings. Jerome's cave complex was quite large to accommodate his scribes and library. Cf: STEFAN REBENICH, *Jerome*, London 2002, 14.

²⁴ I think this is possibly a biblical allusion to Psalm 91:21 and Our Lord's temptation in the desert in Luke 4:11. This would be a very skilful allusion to both the angelic and desert life of Paul.

²⁵ DEGÓRSKI, Critical study, in Św. Hieronim, *Żywoty mnichów Pawła, Hilariona, Malchusa*, 103-104.

²⁶ JEROME, “The Life of Paulus the First Hermit”, 301.

I pray you, how fares the human race? Are new homes springing up in the ancient cities? What government directs the world? Are there still some remaining for the demons to carry away by their delusions?"²⁷

The world has indeed dramatically changed since Paul fled into the desert. No longer is the Church facing persecution. Certainly, the human race is faring much the same as it has before. The same empire governs the "world" as before, although now its head has become a fellow follower of Christ, even if in name only. The same demons that terrorised Christians are still there. It is interesting to note that other translations of Jerome text, translate these last questions as "mastered by the error of demons,"²⁸ which would refer to idolatry or perhaps even more broadly pride²⁹. With the benefit of hindsight, it would have been very apt for Anthony to sum up the transformation of the known world as Christianity itself being split not between the Orthodox and Heterodox, but also between secular Christians³⁰ and ascetical Christians, whose who like our two heroes follow the Christian way whole heartedly. Paul, although he has left the world, still shows an interest in it. This can be interpreted positively as an interest motivated by Christian charity or more neutrally as an expression of desert "gossip". In fact this whole; exchange of greeting, questioning, sparing over precedence in humility in regards to who should break the bread brought by the crow, perfectly exemplifies a typical visit by two desert fathers³¹. Both Anthony and Paul, in what can be called a show of one down-manship³² try to encourage the other to break the bread as a show of their own humility and a demonstration of the greatness of the other referring to things such as age or the hospitality of the other. Jerome remarks that this discussion took "the whole day until eventide"³³. After breaking bread and praying together, Paul prophetically reveals the purpose of Anthony's visit.

²⁷ Ibid, 301.

²⁸ *Opanował błąd demonów* is the Polish rendering that Degórski uses. DEGÓRSKI, Critical study, in Św. Hieronim, *Żywoty mnichów Pawła, Hilariona, Malchusa*, 104. The English translation is my own.

²⁹ Cf. Ibid, 104.

³⁰ Cf. DALY, "Prayer and Asceticism", 678.

³¹ Cf. MAUD GLEASON, "Visiting and News: Gossip and Reputation Management in the Desert" in *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, 6 (1998), 504.

³² Cf. Ibid, 504.

³³ JEROME, "The Life of Paulus the First Hermit", 301.

“I knew long since, brother, that you were dwelling in those parts: long ago God promised you to me for a fellow-servant; but the time of my falling asleep now draws nigh; I have always longed to be dissolved and to be with Christ; my course is finished, and there remains for me a crown of righteousness. Therefore, you have been sent by the Lord to lay my poor body in the ground, yea to return earth to earth”³⁴.

Paul having spent most of his life in the desert is aware of his coming death and believes that the visit from Anthony is the final sign that his death is imminent. It is as though he sees Anthony as the final few metres before the finish line of his ascetical race. His death is near, he is eager to finish the race and win his crown. Paul much to Anthony’s dismay sends him away to fetch for himself the cloak of St Athanasius so that he may be buried in it. Jerome reveals that this is a ruse in order to regain once more the solitude of the desert for his departure³⁵. Eventually returning with the cloak, Anthony sees Paul’s spirit being carried to heaven in the company of angels³⁶. Upon entering Paul’s cave, he sees Paul kneeling with his arms extended and assuming Paul is wrapped in prayer, joins him. Upon realising that Paul is now in fact dead, Anthony despairs at the prospect of having to bury him himself, with no tool in order to dig his grave. As a final demonstration of the holiness of Paul, two lions appear and dig a grave for Paul with their own paws, being blessed by Anthony before departing. At last, Paul is buried wrapped in the cloak of Athanasius.

“Woe to me a sinner! I do not deserve the name of monk. I have seen Elias, I have seen John in the desert, and I have really seen Paul in Paradise”³⁷.

Paul’s *Vita* is certainly fantastic. Many people doubt whether Paul existed or not³⁸. However, this is perhaps to miss the point of the *Vita*. Whether he existed or not, is certainly irrelevant for the purposes of this paper. The fact remains that Paul’s *Vita* was very popular and very well

³⁴ Ibid, 11.

³⁵ Ibid, 12.

³⁶ Ibid, 14.

³⁷ Ibid, 13.

³⁸ Cf: STEFAN REBENICH, “Inventing an Ascetic Hero: Jerome’s Life of Paul the First Hermit”, in *Jerome of Stridon, His life, Writings and Legacy*, Cardiff 2009, 13.

read, so much so that it was translated from its Latin original into various other languages such as Greek and even Coptic³⁹. Certainly, most pious Christians and particularly monks never really doubted his existence until the 18th century⁴⁰. Rebenich suggests that Paul is merely a construction by Jerome of a perfect ascetical hero by which to inspire other ascetics and perhaps lukewarm Christians in order to follow Christ more closely⁴¹. This is evidenced by the exhortation for readers to prefer the clothes made of palms of Paul to the purple of kings⁴².

Certainly, this would fit well with the literary genre that is a *Vita*. After all, Athanasius' *Vita* of Anthony may be said to be both a thanksgiving for the hospitality of the hermits that looked after him during his many exiles and as well as means to bring the growing eremitical-monastic movement under a more efficient ecclesiastical control. The use of Athanasius' cloak as a burial shroud for Paul certainly would not have escaped early readers as a symbol of both orthodoxy in the Christological controversies⁴³ and perhaps an association of Paul with the Alexandrian hierarchy. If one views the *Vita* as both an example of a hero of the ascetical movement or as a tool by which to shape the movement, then the *Vita* may offer us valuable insights into the asceticism practised by early Christians.

Dunn suggest that a motivation for writing the *Vita* of Anthony is to bring the fledgling monastic-ascetic movement in Egypt under ecclesiastical control⁴⁴. This is very interesting and has great merits; after all, the chief bishop of Egypt is its author. It is important to remember that the church, then and now has suffered from various factions such as confessors⁴⁵ or pious visionaries⁴⁶ challenging episcopal authority either directly or through their existence offering an alternative *magisterium*. This is made even more unsurprising when we consider the various other monastic movements in Egypt that were associated with various Christian heresies and sects such

³⁹ Cf: *Ibid*, 13.

⁴⁰ Cf: *Ibid*, 13-15.

⁴¹ Cf: *Ibid*, 24-26.

⁴² JEROME, "The Life of Paulus the First Hermit", 307.

⁴³ Cf: DEGÓRSKI, Critical study, in Św. Hieronim, *Żywoty mnichów Pawła, Hilariona, Malchusa*, 106.

⁴⁴ MARILYN DUNN, *The Emergence of Monasticism – from the Desert Fathers to the Early Middle Ages*, Oxford 2003, 12.

⁴⁵ Cf: PHILLIP HUGHES, *History of the Church: Vol. 1: The World in which the Church was founded*, London 1948, 156.

⁴⁶ Cf: *Ibid*, 140-141

as the Manicheans and the Melitians⁴⁷. Dunn notes that Athanasius is also silent about the growing monastic movement associated with Pachomius, perhaps this is an indication of the preference for less militaristic monks associated with Anthony's tradition⁴⁸.

Monasticism, the Asceticism of the Vita, and the Angels

The inauguration of the monastic movement may be dated either about 285, when St. Anthony, no longer content with the life of the ordinary ascetic, went into the wilderness⁴⁹.

Monasticism is a very general term. It means very different things to different people and different traditions. Monasticism and monk, come from the Greek word *μονος*, meaning alone or solitary. The author of the rule of St Benedict, although slightly after the focus of this essay outlines four types of people who are in general "monks". The coenobites, who live in community under an Abbot or *Abbas*. anchorites or hermits, those who fight beyond the ranks of their brethren in the "single combat" of the desert. Abbot Piamon, who is mentioned by Cassian, also corroborates this view by mentioning that "anchorites were first trained in the coenobium and then went on to harder things alone in the desert"⁵⁰ Thirdly, he lists Sarabaites who have no master and live-in small groups. Lastly, he lists landlopers who move around constantly enjoying the hospitality of others. Since the rule is written for coenobites, the author heaps praise upon this type of monk, which he believes is the perfect form of monastic life. Hermits are held in esteem by him but seem to be viewed as extraordinary monks as opposed to the ordinary coenobites. The two remaining categories are greatly disliked by him, so much so that he wishes not to discuss them at all⁵¹. Jerome too makes a similar distinction dividing monks into three categories, Hermits and Coenobites being his two preferred categories with *remnuoth* being a disliked third⁵².

⁴⁷ Cf: DUNN, *The Emergence of Monasticism*, 31.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 13

⁴⁹ FRANCIS JOSEPH BACCHUS, "Eastern Monasticism before Chalcedon (A.D. 451)", in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, New York 1912.

⁵⁰ O'NEIL, "The Origins of Monasticism", 274.

⁵¹ BENEDICT, *The Holy Rule of St. Benedict*, New York 1949, 4.

⁵² Cf: DUNN, *The Emergence of Monasticism*, 12.

Paul's *Vita* exemplified eremitism, but with its focus around Anthony may also be said to support Anthony's style of coenobitism. Both Paul and Anthony introduce the flight into the desert as a new and stable element into early Christian asceticism, but this may be seen as a stronger and more physical form of separation that was already practised by Christian ascetics. This separation can be characterised by a separation from sex, food and lastly society, which led to a strong association with the heavenly life and its principal citizens, the angels.

Sex is an important element of human life. Becoming an ascetic, 'particularly a monk', does not remove this element, much to the dismay of many a young man. Jerome does not directly speak about the sexual renunciation of Paul. We can safely assume that Paul lived a celibate life in the desert. Jerome does indirectly refer to sex twice in the *Vita*. To begin the *Vita* Jerome recalls the story of how a young martyr was tortured by being strapped to a feather bed, in a luscious garden and subject to the passionate embrace of a beautiful prostitute. The brave martyr literally bites off his tongue, in order to drive away the woman and triumph in his confession of Christ⁵³. The image of a luscious garden and a beautiful woman invoke an image of paradise and of the fall, or perhaps they are used by Jerome to indicate that the struggle of the desert not without its sexual dimensions. Perhaps this is a way to associate the pains of martyrdom with the struggles of the ascetic.

The second image of sexuality used by Jerome is the centaur that Anthony encounters along his journey to meet Paul. A centaur is half man and half horse, literally an animal from the waist down⁵⁴. Miller suggests that the centaur is a hyperactive image of both the ascetical, tame desert and the wild, devilish desert⁵⁵. Goldberg rather adventurously suggest that the She-Wolf that led Anthony to Paul's cave was also a literary device recalling a Roman prostitute and thus should also be counted as an image of sexuality in the *Vita*⁵⁶. This would connect well with the temptress and the martyr earlier in the *Vita*. Goldberg suggests that this sexual tension symbolised by the She-Wolf may have been associated with the dangers

⁵³ Cf. JEROME, "The Life of Paulus the First Hermit", 299.

⁵⁴ Cf. PATRICIA COX MILLER, "Jerome's Centaur: A Hyper-Icon of the Desert", in *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, 2 (1996), 299.

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 299.

⁵⁶ CHARLES GOLDBERG, "Jerome's She-Wolf", in *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, 21 (2013), 626.

of interacting with the outside human world, paradoxically symbolised by none other than Paul⁵⁷. Goldberg more reasonably suggests a connection between the She-Wolf, Anthony and Paul, and the Twins of Rome, Romulus and Remus⁵⁸. This may be seen as a programmatic literary device of the greatness of Monasticism rivalling the glory of Rome herself. Rome being born out of a Fratricide and Monasticism being born of two men sharing bread.

For Latin ascetics food and sex were strongly connected. Paul also subjected himself to a rigorous diet and fast. Jerome mentions that Paul lived off the food afforded to him by the palm tree, the water from the stream and later the half-loaf of bread brought to him, daily, by the crow. Degórski suggest that Jerome based his description of Paul's cave on Latin classical authors such as *Seneca*, *Florus* and *Sallustius*.⁵⁹ It is also traditionally assumed that these figs that were provided by this palm tree were dried out by Paul, as it was assumed to be the poor and simple food associated with monks⁶⁰. The Desert Fathers were very particular about good, they saw eating as a post-fall indulgence that led to a surplus of energy that caused people to overeat, get angry and become sexual aroused⁶¹. Desert ascetics avoided "warming foods", such as meat, which were particularly good at providing surplus energy⁶². In addition to these base problems, filling up the body with food, weighted down the soul and caused problems in prayer and spiritual pursuits⁶³. As mentioned earlier Paul is providently brought a half loaf of bread by a crow and a double portion when Paul visits him. It is worth noting that it was a stable feature of Egyptian monasticism to reverse some food for the unexpected visitor, to show hospitality. This hospitality was so important and valued that monks were allowed to break their fast in order to eat with their guests⁶⁴. The crow is a clear allusion to the feeding of Elijah in the desert.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 626.

⁵⁸ Ibid, 625, 627.

⁵⁹ DEGÓRSKI, Critical study, in Św. Hieronim, *Żywoty mnichów Pawła, Hilariona, Malchusa*, 95, no.34.

⁶⁰ Cf: Ibid, 96.

⁶¹ Cf: HERMAN PLEIJ, "The intoxicating effect of Fasting", in *Dreaming of Cockaigne*, Columbia 2003, 118.

⁶² Cf: HIND SALAH EL-DIN SOMIDA AWAD, "Some Aspects of Monastic Diets from Thebes, A comparative Study of the Consumption of Fish and Meat" in *Scrinium*, 16 (2020), 48.

⁶³ Cf: HERBERT MUSURILLO, "The Problem of Ascetical fasting in the Greek Patristic writers", in *Traditio*, Vol. 12 (1956), 15.

⁶⁴ Cf: WILLIAM, H. MACKEAN, *Christian Monasticism in Egypt*, New York 1920, 57.

The most notable characteristic of the asceticism of Paul is his life in the desert. In fact, the desert is the most prominent aspect of early monasticism that separates it from the earlier ascetical tradition. The desert itself is rich in meaning and value for the ascetical undertaking of monks. Primarily it is a separation from the present world in order to focus on attaining the next. Although this paper focuses on Egyptian monasticism, it is worth noting that the Egyptian and Syrian experience of the desert were different. Brown suggests that the Syrian Desert was not as radically cut off from society as the Egyptian. He suggests that the Syrian Desert was less removed from society and more hospitable, therefore enabled a more “traditional” ascetical form of life, like some see in the old man at the end of the village in the *Vita Antoni*⁶⁵ or the old man of antiquity discussed by Brown, who is a religious intermediary of the divine for the village⁶⁶. This enabled these men to go to greater extremes in asceticism and be more removed from secular pursuits. Brown on the other hand suggests that the Egyptian desert by its extremes and isolation forced ascetics to band together in *cenobia* or form the pachomian monasteries solely to survive life in the desert itself. This paradoxically led to the formation of monastic villages and even cities, to form the support structures needed by men to live in the desert. This led to monks essentially living in a similar world to one which they left, complete with social tension, trade, and society.

Mackean, although not as recently as Brown, suggest a slightly different view, which appears very sound. He suggests that the Egyptian desert presented the ideal place for monasticism, particularly of the eremitical kind. It offered a very stable temperature, with no snow, little rainfall, and a warm climate. He acknowledges that the nights were cold,⁶⁷ but certainly the climate would not present the great challenges that Northern Europe or for that matter central Italy.

O desert, bright with the flowers of Christ! O solitude whence come the stones of which, in the Apocalypse, the city of the great king is built! O wilderness, gladdened with God’s special presence! What keeps you in the world, my brother, you who are above the world? How long shall gloomy roofs oppress you? How long shall smoky cities immure you? Believe me, I have more light than you. Sweet it is to lay aside the weight of the body and to soar into the pure bright ether⁶⁸.

⁶⁵ ATHANASIUS, “*Vita S. Antoni*”, 4.

⁶⁶ BROWN, “The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity”, 83-86.

⁶⁷ MACKEAN, *Christian Monasticism in Egypt*, 42, 43.

⁶⁸ JEROME, *Select Letters*, (Harvard, 1933), Letter XIV, no.9.

The desert itself provided many facets for both the polemic work of Jerome and the Romanticism of the early monks themselves. Jerome states that Paul fled into the desert to avoid his jealous brother-in-law. Indeed, Paul begun his ascetical life in the desert as a coward from the world, not a hero choosing to leave it. Although Jerome redeems this flight saying that Paul, after it is safe to return, freely chooses to stay in the desert⁶⁹. Two things can be said here. Firstly, Paul's flight is a clear rejection of martyrdom. Had Paul remained there is no doubt his brother should have betrayed him to the persecution and Paul would have met a martyr's death. Rożej commenting on this, suggests that Paul was called by God to the Eremitical life and therefore he could not have freely chosen to remain in the desert had it not been by the grace of God⁷⁰. Secondly, it should be noted there was a general tendency in Egypt to flee to the desert to avoid worldly troubles, be it to flee debt, punishment, or the draft⁷¹. Many people fled to the desert; many Christians fled persecution in the refuge of the desert. It would not be too wise to strongly connect this flight to the beginnings of monasticism. Thebes historically was a centre for rebellion, be it to fight Caesar or Satan.

Another important aspect of the desert is that biblically it has been associated with the dwelling place of demons. There is a tension between the desert and the city; both are at various stages seen as being the hives of villainy and the dwelling place of demons⁷². It is a place without life, a place of rebellion against God. Christ was tempted in the desert; the chosen people were tested in the desert. Paul or Anthony withdrawing into the desert, if we are to take the athletes or soldiers for Christ motif further, can be seen as taking the fight to Satan⁷³. Indeed, it seems as though our ascetical champion rushes at Satan's adobe as a wrestler in full form.

More positively, the desert is seen as a privileged place. In the desert distractions are removed. One is forced to confront Satan directly, to confront one's own sin directly and to prepare for one's final meeting with God. There by far less things to worry about and less things to occupy the mind. God can be always present before one's eyes, it is a privileged mee-

⁶⁹ JEROME, "The Life of Paulus the First Hermit", 300.

⁷⁰ STEFAN J. ROŻEJ, *Poprzez stulecia śladami św. Pawła Pierwszego Pustelnika*, Kraków 1990, 25.

⁷¹ JAMES E. GOEHRING, *Ascetics, Society, and the Desert: Studies in Early Egyptian Monasticism*, London 1999, 45.

⁷² Cf: MACKEAN, *Christian Monasticism in Egypt*, 40.

⁷³ Cf: DEGÓRSKI, Critical study, in *Św. Hieronim, Żywoty mnichów Pawła, Hilariona, Malchusa*, 26.

ting place and providence is appreciated fully⁷⁴. Death was always before one's eyes, thus characterising monastic life as a preparation for death⁷⁵. Likewise, in the *Vita Pauli*, Paul's death is seen as the main focal point of the life, it seems as though Anthony meets Paul primarily to witness his death. Paul may have escaped a Martyr's death in the persecutions, but by remaining in the desert he chooses to die to none the less.

He persuaded many to embrace the solitary life. And thus it happened that the desert was colonised by monks, who came forth from their own people, and enrolled themselves for the citizenship in the heavens⁷⁶.

There is a strong connection between the angelic life and monastic life. Both have as their aim the total contemplation and worship of God. Angels feature prominently in the *Vita Pauli* as they witness to his soul's ascent into heaven. It would be safe to assume that since the desert is a dwelling place of demons, then their angelic counter parts also abide among them. There is an interesting motif in the withdrawal to the desert of, "Quitting men to live amongst the angels"⁷⁷. Certainly, angels appear in our Lord's temptation in the desert,⁷⁸ the lives of early Christians⁷⁹ and the lives of various desert fathers. In many ways the involvement of angels and demons in the lives of the desert monks, of Anthony or even of Paul can be seen as an extension of the Alexandrian philosophical influence on monasticism, or perhaps a continuation of the anthropology of Origen⁸⁰. After all these spirits battle over the souls of Christians, how much more prominent would this battle be in the desert, their abode and over Christianity's' new monastic heroes⁸¹.

Certainly, the aspect of celibacy won for monks the titles of angels among men. Even Our Lord makes the comparison between celibacy and the lives of the Angels⁸². It was not too long before people made a con-

⁷⁴ Cf: Ibid, 26.

⁷⁵ Cf: MACKEAN, *Christian Monasticism in Egypt*, 40.

⁷⁶ ATHANASIUS, "Vita S. Antoni", 21

⁷⁷ ROBIN LANE FOX, *Pagans and Christians: In the Mediterranean World from the Second Century Ad to the Conversion of Constantine*, London 2006, 569.

⁷⁸ Cf: Matthew 4:1-11

⁷⁹ Cf: FOX, *Pagans and Christians*, 484, 516, 539.

⁸⁰ Cf: DUNN, *The Emergence of Monasticism*, 4.

⁸¹ Cf: Ibid, 22.

⁸² Cf: Matthew 22:30.

nection of monks not only living amongst angels, but also actually being angels themselves. Fox states that some monks were known to have been addressed as “your angel” by other Christians⁸³. Perhaps having angels assist Paul in his soul’s ascent into heaven is a means of Jerome contributing to this association between monks and angel. After all, if he lived the life of an angel in the desert, among angels, would not it be right for them to welcome him to heaven as one of their own. The association between the angelic life and Paul continues to today in the white habits of his spiritual sons.

13th century Hungary saw a very strong eremitical movement. Much like the in the 4th century, these hermits were noticed by the hierarchy and were gathered and moulded into a more controllable and useful form for the church. These hermits were collected together into monasteries, most notably the monastery of the Holy Cross in *Pilis* and the Monastery of St James in *Patacs*. These two monasteries, under the leadership of Blessed Eusebius of Esztergom, inspired by the *Vita Pauli*, chose St Paul the First hermit as their patriarch or *fundator* and patron of their order⁸⁴. Płatek, a former prior general of the order, states that it was simultaneously a choice by the monks to have an ascetic hero as their patron and a means by the church to keep the spirit of desert monasticism preserved in the Church⁸⁵.

Conclusion

The change for Christianity in the transition from the third to the fourth century was very dramatic and remarkable. The martyrs had won, their era ends and now even Caesar himself is a Christian. With toleration, comes secularisation, the quality of Christians decays and becomes more accommodating to the world. Building upon the Philosophical ascetical tradition and in response to the moral decay of life in the cities, new athletes, soldiers, and heroes begin training not for an earthly crown, but for the final meeting with death in order to be welcomed by God into paradise.

The *Vita Pauli* was written by St. Jerome to provide an inspirational and ascetical hero, to inspire Christians in an era of transition following the end of the martyrs. Paul is a hero who touches both ages, that of the martyrs

⁸³ FOX, *Pagans and Christians*, 539.

⁸⁴ Cf: REBENICH, “Inventing an Ascetic Hero”, 14.

⁸⁵ JÓZEF STANISŁAW PŁATEK, *Wybrane zagadnienia z historii i duchowości Paulinów*, Częstochowa 2009, 18.

and that of the new coenobitical ascetics of St. Anthony. Jerome frames Paul and Anthony as the new Romulus and Remus, the new founders of a city of angels in the desert. He does this to inspire and encourage a type of monk who is loyal to the hierarchy.

This new type of aestheticism retains the characteristic celibacy and fasting, whilst adding the element of separation from the world. This separation is lived out by withdrawing into the desert and having the new aesthetic heroes, take the fight into the very dwelling place of demons.

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ASCEZA WCZESNOCHRZEŚCIJAŃSKA
W ŻYWCIE ŚWIĘTEGO PAWŁA PIERWSZEGO PUSTELNIKA.

O przemianie ascetów i męczenników
w mnichów wojowników

S t r e s z c z e n i e

Status chrześcijaństwa na przełomie III i IV wieku ulega głębokiej przemianie. Męczennicy zwyciężyli, ale ich epoka się kończy. Teraz nawet sam cesarz jest chrześcijaninem. Wraz z tolerancją przychodzi jednak zeświecczenie. Religijna jakość życia chrześcijan obniża się. Staje się bardziej dostosowana do świata. Opierając się na filozoficznej tradycji ascetycznej i w odpowiedzi na moralny upadek życia w miastach, nowi Chrystusowi atleci, żołnierze i bohaterowie decydują na swego rodzaju duchowy trening. Czynią tak nie po to, by uzyskać ziemski wieniec chwały, ale dlatego, by po śmierci cieszyć się wiecznym szczęściem w raju.

Dziełko *Vita Pauli* zostało napisane przez św. Hieronima w tym właśnie celu, aby ukazać ideał ascety i mnicha, który dla chrześcijan byłby natchnieniem w epoce przemian. Albowiem przeminęła już era męczenników. Paweł z Hieronimowego dziełka jest bohaterem, który dotyka obu epok, epok męczenników i nowych ascetów - cenobitów, jak np. św. Antoni. Hieronim przedstawia Pawła i Antoniego jako założycieli miasta aniołów na pustyni, *per analogiam* do Romulusa i Remusa, legendarnych założycieli Rzymu. Autor *Vita Pauli* daje ponadto przykład mnicha, który potrafi być wierny Kościołowi uosobianemu przez prawowierną hierarchię (motyw płaszczka Atanazego).

Ten nowy typ świętości ma charakter dziewiczy. Opiera się na bardzo wymagających zasadach ascetycznych, które są niezbędne w duchowej walce. Mnich wojownik jest odseparowany od świata. To oddzielenie od świata zapewnia odejście na pustynię - szczególne miejsce przebywania demonów.

Słowa kluczowe: św. Paweł z Teb, św. Hieronim, asceza chrześcijańska, duchowość pustyni, mnich wojownik.

Keywords: St Paul of Thebes, St Jerome, Christian asceticism, desert spirituality, warrior monk.