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SOME REMARKS ON THE EGYPTIAN
MONASTIC DRESS IN THE CONTEXT
OF LITERARY SOURCES
AND FUNERARY FINDS

Information on the subject of Egyptian monastic dress do frequent all kinds of literary sources. On one hand we come across abbots' lectures (Pachomius, Shenoute of Atripa) regulating the clothing issue for monks, on the other – various remarks in monasteries related literature (e.g. apophthegmata, *Historia Lausiaca* by Palladius, *Historia Monachorum in Aegypto*). Due to the wide diversity of names brought by our sources, sometimes more than one used to describe a single piece of clothing, all attempts at reconstruction must be made carefully.

As many before have conducted an in-depth analysis of the existing texts for clues on that subject¹, it is unproductive to mention more than a few crucial statements here. The aim of this essay is to further stress the value of the material coming from Coptic cemeteries, enabling us to draw a distinction between the grave of a monk and that of a layman. Archaeological data from Christian nekropoleis in Egypt seem to suggest that the burial's very location was of no importance. Monastic cemeteries were used universally by the members of local communities, men and women alike². Granted that a large

¹ See e.g.: R. Draguet, *Le chapitre de l'Histoire Lausiaque sur les Tabennésiotes dérive-t-il d'une source copte?*, Muséon 57 (1944), p. 53-145; P. van Moorsel, *Les peintures du Monastère de Saint-Antoine près de la mer Rouge*, t. 1, MIFAO 112, IFAO, Le Caire 1995, p. 50-72; V. Desprez, *Cenobitizm pachomiański* [in:] *Pachomiana Latina*, tr. A. Bober, W. Miliszkiwicz, M. Starowieyski, ed. M. Starowieyski, *Źródła Monastyczne* 11, Wydawnictwo Benedyktynów Tyniec, Kraków 1996, p. 40-41; V. Desprez, *Początki monastycyzmu: dzieje monastycyzmu chrześcijańskiego do soboru efeskiego (431)*, tr. A. Dembska, *Źródła Monastyczne* 21, Wydawnictwo Benedyktynów Tyniec 21, Kraków 1999, p. 309-310.

² We find examples of such secular burials e.g. in cemetery C near the Naqlun monastery. See: W. Godlewski, *Naqlun (Nekloni). Season 2004*, PAM XVI (Reports 2004), p. 185.

number of inscribed funerary stelae, clearly belonging to monks³ have been discovered, they were only very rarely still *in situ*⁴ – removed and reused in nearby buildings. Poverty or even total lack of equipment – a feature shared by those early Christian burials, makes any attempt to deduce if the person laid inside belonged to the convent futile. As has been indicated, most data can be therefore derived from the clothing itself.

Needless to say, the trait recognised at first glance is the amount and quality of the fabric. A layman would be usually dressed in a variety of colourful, embroidered clothes – made mostly of linen but sometimes also silk – as in the case of the necropolis of the city Antinoe or cemetery located upon ruined St. Jeremiah monastery at Saqqara⁵. One should not expect such finery in monk's grave – they were buried in what clothes they possessed, the usual fabric being linen⁶. Indeed, some texts describe not only the way the cenobites dressed everyday but also what was considered suitable for them in death – a case in point being Letter 30 of Shenoute of Atripa, mentioning *three pairs of clothes and two scarfs*⁷. These numbers illustrate the rules drawn by Pachomius on the monastic dress code⁸.

The number of graves, belonging doubtlessly to monks isn't large, fine examples being: burials from Deir el-Medinah site⁹, from Epiphanius monastery in Western Thebes and St. Mark monastery in Gurnet Marei.

³ As can be observed e.g. on a stele from Asuan (St. Simeon monastery): H. Munier, *Les stèles coptes du Monastère de Saint-Siméon à Assouan*, Aegyptus 11 (1930-31), p. 264, 266, 268, 269.

⁴ Interesting examples being the burials of monks (e.g. Apa Kafka, Apa Herakleides), located in the perimeter of a church belonging to Abu Fana monastery. Votive plates situated above the graves as parts of the floor were decorated (crosses, peacocks) and inscribed with names of deceased. See: H. Buschhausen et al., *Ausgrabungen von Dair Abu Fana in Ägypten im Jahr 1990 (=Dair Abu Fana II)*, *Ä&L* 4 (1994), p. 104-106.

⁵ There are two Coptic cemeteries at Saqqara – one located upon the ruins of the monastery mentioned (south of the ramp once leading to the pyramid of Unis), the other in the northern part of the site, near the ancient necropolis for sacred animals.

⁶ Draguet, *op.cit.*, p. 109 together with footnote 143.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 144.

⁸ It seems plausible that the correct number of clothes prescribed by Pachomius was three rather than two as occasionally mentioned in the monastic literature (See: Desprez, *Cenobityzm...*, p. 40-41). Praecepta 81, which listed the items a monk could own, says: *two lebitonaria and one worn down by use* – that gives us three tunics, the last one used for work and sleep. St. Jerome in his Preface to Rules by Pachomius mentions *two lebitonaria (which is a garment of Egyptian sort, sleeveless) and one already worn out, to work and sleep*. Similarly *Book of Horsiesius* (chapter 22): *two lebitonaria and another in use*.

⁹ At the site of Hathor temple was a monastery and church of St. Isidore.

In 1973 one of the mummies found in Gurnet Marei – a man around 45 years old – has been examined more closely with a detailed register of clothes being created. The monk wore a sleeveless tunic, reaching his ankles and made from a single, rectangular piece of linen (2,26 x 1,3 m), sewn at the sides¹⁰, with the orifices for head and arms additionally strengthened. A sort of a shirt, hips-length completed the outfit¹¹. It is worth mentioning that the clothes were definitely an everyday use item, not one created especially for the deceased¹². The mummy's head was covered with a cap made of a rectangular, good quality linen (73 x 45 cm)¹³. When folded in half, one of the longer sides was sewn together, with strings attached to the free corners. Two crosses decorated its back.

Interestingly, the man's dress included a (ram's or goat's) leather apron, covering his chest and tights¹⁴. Two stripes fixed to the upper corners (36 and 44 cm long, 3 cm wide¹⁵) enabled the owner to hang it around his neck. Another piece of leather (ca.73 x 3,6 cm¹⁶) circled the waist to be fastened at the back. Embossed with geometric patterns (e.g. concentric circles), it also had a small pocket on the right side, breast-high¹⁷. The upper part of the apron broadened, the lower one narrowed – protecting the legs, it was cut into three stripes, the middle one with additional cuts¹⁸. It's worth mentioning that this last item wasn't placed immediately on the body but upon ten shrouds protecting it, under the cover of narrow ribbons¹⁹.

Clothing found in two graves near St. Epiphanius monastery show close similarity to those just described. Here, the leather apron and stripes were also placed atop the layer of shrouds and ribbons²⁰, the only exception being grave number 9, where it covered the body. Examples of this kind are known from Deir el-Medinah as well²¹, – a similar item served as an outer cover for the mummified, linen-wrapped body.

¹⁰ G. Castel, *Étude d'une momie copte* [in:] J. Vercoutter (ed.), *Hommages à S. Sauneron*, vol. 2: *Égypte post-pharaonique*, IFAO, Le Caire 1979, p. 137.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 137-138, 141.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 121.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 136.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 125.

¹⁵ As above.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 127.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 125.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 140.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 121, 125 and p. 140-141.

²⁰ H. E. Winlock, W. E. Crum, *The Monastery of Epiphanius at Thebes*, vol. 1, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York 1926, p. 49.

²¹ B. Bruyère, *Rapport sur les fouilles de Deir el Médineh (1935-1940)*, IFAO 30, Le Caire 1952, p. 19-20.

One may reasonably suppose that the garment described above is to be identified with a *melota*, known from literary sources²². According to those, it was made from the goat's leather²³ and covered one side²⁴. In some instances (during meditation or prayer) the lower part of *melota* could be folded and used for sitting down, protecting the tunic lying underneath²⁵; other times it served as a bag for carrying bread or water. H. Leclercq and a large number of scholars consider the *melota* to be a kind of cape²⁶. Indeed, our sources differ in their description of it, suggesting that a "leather coat" covered the shoulders or hung from them, uncovering one side²⁷. Some facts, however need considering here. Firstly, the only leather item found in the graves of Gurnet Marei, Deir el-Medinah or St. Epiphanius monastery is the very apron mentioned above. Secondly, our sources use a variety of names for certain parts of clothing. A coat, covering neck and shoulders called *sabanum* or *palliolum* in Pachomian texts was actually made of linen, not leather²⁸. Nevertheless, one can suppose a *melota* could be used as a coat or apron. A well known fresco from the Faras cathedral (VII-IX AD)²⁹ – St. Ammonios of Tuna – shades more light on the matter. The ascetic wears a apron fastened round the waist, narrowing downwards and resting on his right side, which partly corresponds with its description above. The upper part with the pocket and stripes, clearly absent here, seems to be of lesser importance. Our written sources emphasise the use of the lower part – for carrying things and protecting the tunic while sitting down. It is therefore valid to speculate that the design of a *melota* could differ from one to the other – the piece with a pocket added for convenience. Similarly, the cuts visible were there for practical reasons – once tied to the belt at the waist, they formed a sack, used for transport. Otherwise, the end of the strap would have to be supported by hand all the time.

²² Castel, op.cit., p. 140-141.

²³ Desprez, *Cenobityzm...*, p. 41.

²⁴ Praecepta 81. All references to Pachomian texts after: *Pachomiana Latina*, tr. A. Bober, W. Miliszkiwicz, M. Starowieyski, Źródła Monastyczne 11, Wydawnictwo Benedyktynów Tyniec, Kraków 1996.

²⁵ Draguet, op.cit., p. 99.

²⁶ H. Leclercq, *Mélote* [in:] F. Cabrol, H. Leclercq (ed.), *Dictionnaire d'archéologie chrétienne et de liturgie*, vol. 11, part 1, Letouzey et Ané, Paris 1933, col. 280-281; See: P. Ladeuze, *Étude sur le cénobitisme pachomien pendant le IVe siècle et la première moitié du Ve*, A. Fontemoing, Louvain 1898, p. 275.

²⁷ Praecepta 2; Praecepta 99.

²⁸ Pref. 4; Praecepta 81; Praecepta 102; Book of Horsiese 22.

²⁹ K. Michałowski, *Faras: Die Kathedrale aus dem Wüstensand*, Benziger, Zürich-Köln 1967, p. 113, Tf. 31.

Linen tunic, mentioned in the case of the monk from Gurnet Marei, formed a basis of monastic outfits, both in Pachomian congregation and that of Shenoute, though the design could differ slightly. According to Pachomian texts, so called *lebiton* was a long, sleeveless cloth made of linen³⁰. There are however reasons to believe that the Shenoutian garment had sleeves³¹. Therefore the monk from Gurnet Marei represented a group following Pachomian rules – another characteristic feature being the belt³².

As for his head cover, one is tempted to identify it with *kukulla* worn by both congregations – the word “scarf” used in Shenoutian texts seems to represent a *kukulle* as well³³. Each monk owned two kinds of caps³⁴, marked accordingly and used in the monastery or house he lived in³⁵. Their shape was modelled after children’s caps³⁶, numerous examples of which are to be found in the cemeteries e.g. those from Antinoe, sometimes adorned with a cross³⁷. In one of his essays, R. Draguet contemplates the possibility of wearing a *kukulla* only with other specific items e.g. a short coat, covering the shoulders (*palliolum*, *sabanum*, *amictus*, *maforium*) but he almost simultaneously provides arguments against this idea. The cap from Guret Marei seems to indicate, it could be worn independently, with stripes fastened below the chin. The two crosses mark also corresponds with what we can learn from the texts, though



Fig. 1. Fresco from the Faras cathedral – St. Ammonios (Amone). National Museum, Warsaw

³⁰ Prefatio Hieronymi 4; Praecepta 2; Praecepta 81.

³¹ Texts mention rolling up the sleeves. See: R. Szmurło, *Życie monastyczne w pismach Shenutego z Atripe*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Kardynała Stefana Wyszyńskiego, Warszawa 2001, p. 115.

³² See: Praecepta 81.

³³ V. Desprez, *Cenobityzm pachomiański* [in:] *Pachomiana Latina*, tr. A. Bober, W. Miliszewicz, M. Starowieyski, Źródła Monastyczne 11, Wydawnictwo Benedyktynów Tyniec, Kraków 1996, p. 41; Szmurło, *op.cyt.*, p. 115 together with footnote 172.

³⁴ Praecepta 81.

³⁵ Praecepta 99.

³⁶ Moorsel, *op.cit.*, p. 67.

³⁷ F. Calament, *La révélation d'Antinoé par Albert Gayet*, vol. 1, BEC 18, IFAO, Le Caire 2005, p. 291-292

it is worth mentioning that an additional sign, indicating the monk's congregation, was also placed on the *kukulla*³⁸. *Historia Lausiaca* offers more insight into this problem, recording, apart from crosses, also letters of the Greek alphabet³⁹. Still, one cannot be certain that the markings were placed exclusively on head covers - Palladius does state that the monks were divided into groups distinguishable only by the signs but he does not specify their exact location on clothing. The Gurnet Marei cap is devoid of any markings, though according to some Coptic versions of the text, an ornament was to be placed at the belt⁴⁰. As for the Faras fresco, a cross sign is adorning the upper part of St. Ammonius cape⁴¹. Nothing therefore impedes the notion that an additional sign could not be placed somewhere else than the *kukulla*, still in the case of Gurnet Marei mummy, no such ornament was found.

From the above data we can conclude that any interpretation of the Egyptian monastic dress, based on texts and archaeological sources is seldom clear or unambiguous. In connection with this whole problem, it is worth remembering that close to nothing is known about the types of clothes nuns wore, although the tunic design was probably similar to the one described above. Still, the simplicity of those outfits and their specific elements like *melota* or *kukulle*, let us immediately recognise the grave as that of a monk.

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³⁸ See: Praecepta 99.

³⁹ HL XXXII, 4-5. After: Palladius, *Opowiadania dla Lausosa (Historia Lausiaca)*, tr. S. Kalinkowski, ed. M. Starowieyski, Źródła Monastyczne 12, Wydawnictwo Benedyktynów Tyniec, Kraków 1996, p. 155.

⁴⁰ A. Boon (ed.), *Pachomiana latina: Regle et epîtres de s. Pachome, Epître de s. Theodore et "Liber" de s. Orsiesius. Texte latin de s. Jerome: Appendice: La Regle de s. Pachome. Fragments coptes et Excerpta grecs*, Bibliotheque de la Revue d'Histoire Ecclesiastique 7, Bureaux de la Revue, Louvain 1932, p. 164; Draguet, *dz.cyt.*, p. 110, footnote 146.

⁴¹ M. Martens-Czarnecka, *Faras VII: Les éléments décoratifs sur les peintures de la Cathédrale de Faras*, PWN, Warszawa 1982, p.18 and pic.21.