
The monastic federation named after the famed abbot Shenoute of Atripe (also known as the White Monastery Federation) was incontrovertibly one of the largest and most important monasteries in Egypt. Extensive archaeological remains survive for both the women’s and men’s communities, as does a large corpus of letters, sermons, monastic rules, and other Coptic texts from late antiquity. The White Monastery (named for its large basilica built of white stone) was the central administrative settlement, with a smaller men’s monastery in the north (the Red Monastery) and a women’s monastery to the south in Atripe. Scholarship in the past two decades has increased our understanding of the site from multiple perspectives. Publications of Shenoute’s writings, historical and literary analyses of these texts, digital publications of primary sources, restorations and analyses of the extensive painting programs in the churches, and renewed archaeological excavations have illuminated multiple aspects of the Federation’s history, particularly in late antiquity. An Archaeology of Egyptian Monasticism builds on this work and also fills a critical gap. This impressive monograph sheds new light on daily life in the White Monastery Federation through an archaeological examination of all three settlements in the Federation. It is a revision of Blanke’s Yale dissertation and results from extensive fieldwork as a member of the Yale Monastic Archaeology Project. This detailed and well-documented book also contains ninety-nine photographs, tables, site plans, and other illustrations.

Chapter One presents a survey of Egyptian monasticism. Blanke steers clear of a “great men” approach to history in her summary of the main types of monasticism (urban, desert, coenobitic, i.e., community). She mentions the well-known Antony, Pachomius, and Shenoute but does not frame the monastic enterprise through their stories. Instead, the chapter surveys the monastic economy, emphasizing the diversity of economic contexts. Some monasteries banned private property while in others some monks designated heirs for their property. A brief deep dive into the known monasteries in and around Akhmim reminds readers that the White Monastery, while influential, was but one of many monastic settlements in the area. The chapter ends with a helpful digest of buildings and spaces typically found in late antique Egyptian monasteries.

Blanke writes a critical historical survey and historiography in Chapter 2, “Framing the White Monastery.” The story begins with “The White Monastery before the Monks,” where Blanke argues for likely human settlement in the Neolithic period. She then summarizes the pharaonic activity. The early history of the monastery is told through the lens of the first five abbots (Pcol, Ebonh, Shenoute, Besa, and Zenobios) and highlights building construction and key events in the growth of the federation. From the sixth to the sixteenth centuries, textual sources grow sparser, but Blanke nonetheless provides a mostly comprehensive account of continuous settlement, including its engagement with the patriarchs in Alexandria, the cult of the saints, and manuscript production. Especially of note is the Armenian community during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The section on Western “discovery” applies an appropriately critical eye to the orientalist and orientalizing narratives by American and European visitors who disparaged the local Christians living in the monastery’s church. The chapter concludes with judicious analysis of archaeological campaigns from Wm. Flinders Petrie to the present. Photographs, site plans, and a table of key historical moments illustrate the chapter. There are two absences of note (in an otherwise exemplary study). The Table overview omits nineteenth and early twentieth century publications of White Monastery texts by Johannes Leipoldt, Georg Zoega,
Chapter 3 presents a comprehensive archaeological history of the White Monastery site. Blanke partitions the site into smaller segments and provides not only her interpretations of the archaeology and surveys of each area, but she also summarizes and assesses centuries of surveys, visitors’ observations, and excavations at the White Monastery. A four-page table in an Appendix summarizes the features in each zone and subsection. Over fifty maps and photographs document the site’s features. The chapter draws substantially from previously unpublished field reports from the Yale project. Thus, the chapter provides an up-to-date authoritative survey of the monastery. Throughout, the author signals where her analysis departs from previous research (particularly Peter Grossmann’s, which until recently has been the authoritative work on the site). Anyone working on the White Monastery (from any discipline) should consult the relevant sections in this chapter. One book review cannot do justice to the meticulous detail and copious information presented. This chapter illuminates the structures of daily life in the late antique community—the refectory, streets, wells, kitchens, to name a few—and also later use. What emerges is a bustling monastic village, evolving over time, waning in use in by monastics after the ninth century, with a revival in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and then transforming into a primarily lay settlement in the eleventh and twentieth centuries until the Coptic Orthodox Church reestablished it as an active monastery.

Blanke then thematically analyzes all of this evidence in Chapter 4, which concerns settlement, economy, and visitors. Blanke begins with the basic architectural structure, “built environment,” and size of the monastery, demonstrating that this one residence in the larger Federation was one of the largest monasteries in Egypt at 77,500 square meters. Blanke describes streets ranging from smaller arteries to wide thoroughfares. A large courtyard with several entry-points, flanked by a large two-story administrative building, functioned as a major center of activity in late antiquity. Blanke also analyzes the water supply system, including wells, methods for retrieving water from wells, pipelines, and storage. Her descriptions paint vivid pictures of ancient and medieval labor and infrastructure. Her examination reminds historians such as myself that this infrastructure “was clearly an integral part of the design of the monastic space and of the construction of individual buildings” including the great basilica (p. 130).

Blanke treats the monastic economy next. This section also discusses discoveries (such as coin hoards) that are not well published, and draws on Shenoute’s writings to his monks to supplement the archaeological evidence. (As the author notes, we have little documentary evidence from the White Monastery Federation, and the bulk of our literary sources date to the fifth century). Once again the water system proved essential for pottery, food, and textile production as well as building projects (of which there were many). The size and quantity of vats for crushing olives suggest the monastery may have sold or traded olive oil not used in the community. A millstone and ovens were used for baking bread (the primary food staple). Book production certainly occurred on site, and Blanke explores the possibility that book commissions may have contributed to the monastic economy. Gold coin hoards, individual copper coins, and a mold for producing imitation copper coins “reveal a scale of wealth that emphasizes the economic importance of the White Monastery” (p. 143). The final section of the chapter examines the history of visitors, especially to the White Monastery church. Pilgrimage seems to have developed in earnest at the end of late antiquity, and there is some evidence of relics as well as a robust liturgical calendar that may have drawn pilgrims and other visitors. Of the three monastic settlements in the Federation, only the White Monastery church had a baptism, and Blanke explores the possibility of pilgrim baptisms, since the phenomenon is attested elsewhere in Egypt and the Mediterranean.

The men’s community at the Red Monastery to the north and the women’s community in Atripe to the south receive attention in Chapter 5. Blanke examines the settlements at each site as well as the overall federation’s economic interdependence. Remains at the Red Monastery site are fewer and less studied than at the White, but Blanke nonetheless finds evidence for a substantial water system, food production areas (including oil, flour, and bread), and storage. Although monastic settlements (and literary texts about them) often attest to craft production, Blanke finds none surviving here. The community was active through at least the thirteenth century, with its most robust period likely in the fifth through seventh centuries (as deduced from ceramics, the decorative program in the church, and other factors).

In Atripe to the south, we find remarkable evidence for a women’s monastic community and their reuse of pharaonic structures (notably a substantial Ptolemaic temple). Blanke here relies on previously published material from four cycles of excavation, providing her own interpretations of the evidence and providing a detailed account of the site few outside of late antique Egyptian archaeology would

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2 See Diliana Atanassova’s digital editions published in the Coptic Old Testament project website (http://coptot.manuscriptroom.com/web/apa-johannes), some of which have been annotated and republished in searchable formats at the Coptic SCRIPTORIUM project site (http://data.copticscriptorium.org/urn:cts:copticLit:johannes.canons.)

3 Peter Grossman’s oeuvre is too extensive to cite here; see for example his Christliche Architektur in Ägypten (Leiden, 2002).
have already known. A substantial refectory with circular benches survives, from which Blanke deduces the population was 200–300 monks. Blanke then uses this data along with size of the water system to extrapolate to the populations of the White Monastery—up to 600 monks—and the Red Monastery—perhaps as many as 300. These estimates contrast with the Life of Shenoute, which assuredly exaggerates in its assertion that the Federation housed thousands of women and men. A kitchen and food production space were in the remains of the temple, and three dye shops for coloring textiles have also been found, although no evidence for weaving has yet been discovered. The Atripe community provided the wider federation with fabric and clothing, while they in turn received other goods and supplies from the White Monastery. Blanke proposes that the women’s monastery died out by the eighth century. Inscriptions and dipinti have been found in situ, but had not yet been published at the time of the book’s release; readers should see recent publications by Stephen Davis and the Yale Monastic Archaeology Project about these finds, which include the names of some of the late antique women monastics.

The conclusion presents the federation as a complex human and economic system much like the other landed estates of late antique and medieval Egypt. They produced food, books, olive oil, and garments for their own use and may have sold some of these goods in the wider region. Likewise, pilgrims and other visitors contributed to the Federation’s economy. Blanke discusses many political, religious, and economic factors leading to the Federation’s contraction in the medieval period—taxes, the changing religious demographics of Egypt, and violent regional conflicts all contributed.

In sum, An Archaeology of Egyptian Monasticism proves itself already to be a contemporary classic, a must-read for scholars of multiple disciplines and methodologies. Blanke provides essential updates to older theories of the sites, particularly to the heretofore authoritative work by Grossmann. The extensive maps, photographs, tables, and other illustrations are important complements to Blanke’s narrative analysis. The photographs also function as an important tool of preservation, recording the state of the remains at certain moments in time on sites that are heavily traveled and, in the case of the men’s monasteries, face continued modern construction. Additionally, Blanke’s prose is quite accessible to archaeologists and non-archaeologists alike, presenting in clear language a complex analysis that draws on multiple streams of evidence. This important volume should find a place in most scholarly libraries, and in mine I suspect it will quickly become well-worn from much use.

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4 See for example Rafed el-Sayed, Yahya el-Masry, and Victoria Altmann, Athribis I. General Site Survey 2003–2007. Archaeological & Conservation Studies. The Gate of Ptolemy IX. Architecture and Inscriptions, Athribis 1.1 (Cairo, 2012); Christian Leitz, Daniela Mendel, and Yahya el-Masry, Athribis II. Die Inschriften des Tempels Ptolemaios XII. Die Opfersäle, der Umgang und die Sakntuarräume, 3 volumes, Athribis 2 (Cairo, 2010); Christian Leitz and Daniela Mendel, Athribis III. Die östlichen Zugangsräume und Seitenkapellen sowie die Treppe zum Dach und die rückwärtigen Räume des Tempels Ptolemaios XII, 2 volumes, Athribis 3 (Cairo, 2017) and also Athribis IV. Der Umgang L 1 bis L 3, 2 volumes, Athribis 4 (Cairo, 2017).

5 I follow Krawiec’s work (AU: provide citation) in using the terminology of monk for both male and female monastics in the White Monastery Federation.


7 See also the literary analysis of the federation as an estate in the conclusion of my Children and Family in Late Antique Egyptian Monasticism.