

# Editor's Note

Volume 11 of the *Journal of the Canadian Society for Coptic Studies* includes the seven papers presented at the Eleventh Annual Coptic Studies Symposium dedicated to “Christian Pilgrimages in Egypt—Ancient and Modern” that took place at the University of Toronto on 28 April 2018. The Canadian Society for Coptic Studies, The Department of Near and Middle Eastern Civilizations (NMC) at the University of Toronto and the Coptic Museum of Canada sponsored the symposium.

Pilgrims and Pilgrimage sites are two fascinating aspects of religious piety. The act of visiting a holy place and the participation in various forms of devotion enable the believers to confirm their spiritual bond with the memories of saints surviving in that sanctified place. The process of sanctification of pilgrimage sites is complex and must be studied from different perspectives. There is an abundance of varied sources of data to draw upon; for example, liturgical, hagiographical, historical, documentary and archaeological, all of which represent tools for the study of pilgrimages in Egypt.

The contributors to this volume attempt to explore a range of available data by using various methodological approaches for the study of the pilgrimage phenomenon. Some focus on the reading of historical sources, while others suggest anthropological assessments, as well as geographical and socio-cultural analysis of “Holy Places.” The papers in this volume also explore different aspects of the “ancient” and “modern” Christian pilgrimages.

The first paper, presented by the keynote speaker Rebecca Krawiec discusses the notion of making of Egypt a sacred geography and a holy land. The author demonstrates how language about travel and geography shapes particular texts about monasticism in Egypt in the late antique period. She also argues that the land of Egypt was made sacred by the acts of pilgrimage to visit holy monks who sanctified the desert. A fresh reading of the writings of John Cassian and Palladius constitutes the basis for this study.

Simon Coleman experiments a new approach for the study of Christian Pilgrimages in Egypt from an anthropological perspective for which he claims has rarely been adopted in the field of Coptic Studies. He argues that there is an opportunity here to project anthropological conceptualizations of Christian pilgrimage, either from previous established Catholic case-studies or by focusing on the analysis of the complex relationships between *identity* and *space* revealed in the Coptic movements within Egypt and in the diaspora.

Ariel Shisha-Halevy's contribution is from a linguistic analysis of the Sahidic text of the *Apophthegmata Patrum*. This fifth/sixth century text was probably translated from Greek, and is important as it occurs in several translated versions. The author addresses three issues: the Coptic indicators of the Greek *Vorlage*, some of the post-classic Sahidic traits, and some narratological comments about that particular text.

Katherine Blouin focuses on the socio-environmental conditions under which wet and saline agricultural margins located in the area of the Lake Menzaleh, in the northeast of the Nile Delta, were occupied and

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conceptualized by Christian ascetics in the late fourth century CE. The most relevant sources used to illustrate this important phenomenon are John Cassian's *Institutes* and *Conferences of the Desert Fathers*.

Sabrina Higgins tackles the role of women in the spreading of the Cult of St. Thecla in late antique Egypt. She explores how visual culture associated with this cult was used as a tool to transgress the traditional forms of female iconography of that time. She also argues that this independent feminine aesthetic practice amongst the devotees of St. Thecla, contributed towards creating a new form of artistic expression and inadvertently the empowerment of women in late antique Egypt.

Amir Harrak examines how the desert of Scetes attracted pilgrims from far places. Between the eighth to the fourteenth centuries, the Monastery of Theotokos of Abba Bishoi, became not only a destination for monks, but a pilgrimage place for traders and lay people coming from as far as Mesopotamia, Syria and Anatolia. Pilgrims left numerous graffiti in Syriac on the walls of the main church, and were the benefactors of the wall paintings, which reflect the theology and spirituality of the Coptic and Syriac churches. Pilgrims offered other gifts to the monastery, some consisting of rare Syriac manuscripts.

The last paper by Ramez Boutros focuses on the structures dedicated to the accommodation of pilgrims (*xenodochia*) in pilgrimage sites and in Egyptian monasteries between the sixth and ninth centuries. In previous studies about pilgrimage sites in Christian Egypt scholars barely addressed this type of structure. After a cursory survey of literary and archaeological sources related to five different sites, the author is able to reveal a wealth of information that can be obtained to shed light on the organizing system of accommodation facilities offered to pilgrims during this period.

RAMEZ BOUTROS, Editor