MONASTIC MEALS AND RITUAL PRACTICE

Traditional scholarly renderings have long grounded the ritual practice of early monasticism in narrative sources characterized by hagiographical hyperbole. Granting this frame, it is perhaps hardly surprising that standard depictions of emergent monastic meal norms take signature abstinence, rather than indulgence, as their starting point. Frequently cited accounts feature vignettes depicting radical ascetics who eat, at most, every other day, and drink water as occasionally. One hermit is reported to have “made

1 Portions of this essay represent a compilation and re-working of material variously presented in a range of sessions supported by the Society of Biblical Studies, Greco-Roman Meals seminar, and/or derivative meetings. Thanks to the members of this group for their useful questions and comments as, over the years, the results of sometimes fledgling research have grown richer and more nuanced; Cf. L. I. Larsen, “Early Christian Meals and Slavery” in Meals in the Greco-Roman World, Volume One: Social Conflict, Experimentation and Formation at the Meal. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 191-203; Larsen, “Resisting a Reclining Culture” in Meals in the Greco-Roman World, Volume One, 245-260; Larsen, “Early Monastic Meals” in Meals and Religious Identity (Matthias Klinghardt and Hal Taussig, eds.; Tübingen: A. Francke, 2012), 307-328.


3 For example, Peter Brown, in The Body and Society, offers a detailed study of the place held by food in the hierarchy of ascetic abstinence. The examples upon which he bases his analysis, however, are drawn almost solely from hagiographical material (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).
a resolution not to drink anything.” Instead, when thirsty, he washed a vessel, filled it with water, and hung it before his eyes.\(^4\) Another “sometimes longed to eat a cucumber” but instead “took one and hung it before him where he could see it,” taming himself, and so “repent[ing] that he had wanted it at all.”\(^5\) A certain abba is delivered “one basket of bread” each year by a group of brothers. The latter eat “some of [this same] bread” when they bring the subsequent year’s basket.\(^6\) Another abba “drink[s] wine for the brothers’ sake.” However, for each cup he consumes, “go[es] without water for a whole day.”\(^7\)

Ironically, it is a measure of the literary and rhetorical acumen of late-ancient ‘hagiographers’ that in considering the role accorded ritual meals in shaping monastic identity, exaggerated depictions of ascetical prowess remain operative. Having sparked the imagination for well over a millennium, predictably, such accounts continue to catch the reader’s eye. Rhetorically, this is exactly the point. Painted in compelling shades, the exemplary practices of ascetic protagonists are intended to capture the reader/listener’s attention. There is, nonetheless, much to be gained by resisting their persuasive appeal. While long privileged as singularly authentic portrayals of monastic life and ritualized praxis, it is arguably only by placing narrative accounts in conversation with a broader spectrum of textual and contextual evidence that such ‘larger than life’ texts, come to life.


\(^5\) AP/Syst 4.60 (Ward).

\(^6\) AP/Alph Arsenius 17 (Ward); Abba Arsenius is likewise noted for observing a seasonal practice of “tasting a very little of each…[of] all the varieties of fruit [that were] ripe…just once, [while] giving thanks to God” (AP/Alph Arsenius 19).

\(^7\) AP/Syst 4.26 (Ward).
In seeking less caricatured depictions, extant monastic Rules offer an instructive counterpoint. Balancing, and at times challenging a rhetoric of harsh ascetic abstinence, discrete regulatory traditions refract the ritualized rhythms of monastic life in a literary form that has often escaped uniform scrutiny. Alternately idealized, and preserved in a range of guises, they offer a rich store of source material for exploring emergent monastic practice. In this, each invites further consideration of the degree to which proto-monastic meals, like their Graeco-Roman and proto-Christian counterparts, afforded contexts for “think[ing] about, experiment[ing] with and negotiat[ing]…social structures, personal relationships and identity formation.” Arguably unique to this environment, however, is an institutional setting where all of life is progressively infused with the meal’s tense, utopian, ritualized character.

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8 The question of what constitutes a “rule” at this early stage is a matter of some debate. The textual evidence suggests that nomenclature varies widely. The Rules treated in this essay are variously preserved as “admonitions,” “precepts,” “institutes,” and “canons.” Rules are likewise incorporated into larger documents, framed as Lives or Testaments. In the East, later collections come to be known as Typika, in the West, simply Regularae; Cf. John Thomas and Angela Constantinides Hero, Byzantine Monastic Foundation Documents (Washington, D. C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2000), 1-41.

9 Hal Taussig, In the Beginning was the Meal: Social Experimentation and Early Christian Identity (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 67-68.

EARLY MONASTIC RULES

While the “origins” of Christian monastic practice are as widely debated as the “origins” of Christianity, there is a measure of consensus in dating a cross-section of proto-monastic rules to the fourth through sixth centuries of the Common Era. In exploring the contours of monastic ritual practice, three tiers of generation are of particular interest (see figure below). The first tier is comprised of a foundational trio of rules that includes: (1) the Longer and Shorter Rules of Basil (Bas), founder of the Cappadocian strain of Christian monastic practice; (2) a set of Precepts linked to Pachomius (Pac), the founder of a burgeoning network of Egyptian Coenobitic establishments; and (3) the regulatory traditions attributed to Augustine (Aug), North African Bishop of Thagaste.

A second generation of legislation reflects both the preservation and melding of this content. Here the recently published Canons of Shenoute (not shown), name the Pachomian Praecepta as precedent in refracting the contours of later Egyptian practice. In turn, the Institutes and Conferences of John Cassian (Cas I) claim both the regulatory traditions of Basil and the Egyptian monks in shaping practice as it moves to the West. While Cassian’s directives are not explicitly designated a ‘rule’, his Institutes and Conferences mark a point of transition, authorized by precedent encapsulated in earlier regulatory norms.

A third generational tier is comprised of the elaborate Rule of the Master (Mag) and Benedict’s simpler Rule for Beginners (Ben). Both ground a longer trajectory of Western Rules, where recurrent ritual referent underscores the degree to which later

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11 In his useful compendium of foundational regulatory tradition, Les Règles Monastiques Anciennes (400-700) (Louvain: Brepols, 1985), Adelbert deVogue provides a provocative stema of early cross-pollinization.

12 De Vogüé addresses this dependence in his respective introductory discussions of the two rules. Thanks to Brian Møller Jensen of Stockholm University for pointing out that the council of Aachen in 816-17 made Benedict’s the sole Rule for monasteries across the Carolingian Empire.
mores have been shaped in conversation with foundational norms. In fact, across regulatory traditions often framed as disparate, degrees of common parlance highlight a broad spectrum of interconnected practice and sources. Each raises important questions about the ways in which interpretively inscribed, but largely uninterrogated demographic and geographic divides, have effectively effaced more complex configuration of the early monastic ritual practice.

**First Generation Rules**

In broad parlance, the popular contours that define monastic ritual practice can be traced to highly particularized readings of figures like Antony of Egypt and his storied counterparts, the ‘desert’ mothers and fathers. However, it is important to notice the degree to which this interpretive trajectory stands in tension with refraction captured in the earliest rules. Simultaneously, applying the lens of ritual practice to early documents lends interesting and unexpected weight to arguments for their foundational nature. Of these, among extant compendia, the rules attributed to Basil, Pachomius and Augustine appear patently primary.

Basil (330 – 379 CE)

In his *Longer* and *Shorter Rules*, Basil of Caesarean describes the ritualized rhythms of Fourth-Century monastic life in intimate detail. While there is measured debate regarding the particular dating and provenance of respective segments of these collections, their singular importance in shaping subsequent monastic practice, both East and West, is undisputed. Basil’s *Rules* reflect life in the communities under his

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16 Most scholars have argued that the *Longer Rule* predates the *Shorter*, since the latter references the former, throughout. Anna Silvas’ recent study, *The Asketikon of St Basil the Great* (Oxford Early Christian Studies; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), offers the most detailed overview of the various layers that comprise the extant respective *Rules*. Her analysis underscores the progressive character of included regulation (1-18). Cf. Thomas and Hero, *Monastic Foundation Documents*, 22ff for an overview of the interpretive history that attaches to the broader cross-section of early *Rules*.

17 Traditionally, scholars have debated whether Basil began composing these collections following a tour of the monastic establishments of Egypt and Syria, or during the following decade, when he succeeded Eusebius as Bishop of Caesarea (370 CE), and over the course of nine years in this position, was said to have organized monastic life in and around the city. More recent scholarship registers an important caveat in this debate, noting the degree to which indigenous monastic expression throughout the Mediterranean was later effaced by the near universal appeal to an Egyptian ‘myth of origins.’
jurisdiction at a level of detail that is without parallel. However, like other compilers of regulatory instruction, Basil appears to have formulated this body of instruction as he went along.

Both Basil’s Rules and an attendant homily, “On Renunciation of the World,” offer a striking contrast to the austerities often associated with the monastic life. Countering ritualized practice premised in narrative portrayals defined by radical renunciation, Basil commends something of a progressive approach. He encourages his listeners to avoid accumulating a heavy burden of sin “by having too soft of a bed or the style of [one’s] garments, or shoes, or any other part of...dress; by variety in food, or a table too richly appointed for [one’s] stage of self-renunciation, by the way [one] stand[s] or sit[s], or by being negligent or too fastidious with regard to manual labor” (ἑαυτῷ δὲ φόρτον ἀμαρτημάτων ἐπισωφεύειν, μὴ ἐν στρωμνῇ ἀπαλωτέρᾳ, μὴ ἐν ἐνδύμασιν, ἡ ὑποδήμασιν, ἡ ἐτέρῳ τινι σχήματι, ἡ ἐν βρωμάτων παραλλαγῇ, ἡ τραπέζῃ ὑπὲρ τὸν τῆς ἀποταγῆς σου χρόνον, ἡ ἐν στάσει, ἡ ἐν καθέδρᾳ, ἡ ἐν ἐργοχείρῳ ἀναπαυτικωτέρῳ ἢ καθαρωτέρῳ). On every count, his address mirrors an audience, and a degree of discipline, at some remove from the harsh ‘asceticism’ encountered in more familiar, hagiographical, depictions of early monastic life.

The meal rituals captured in Basil’s Longer Rule appear to premise a similar, less than overtly ascetic frame. In responding to the query: “how one ought to conduct oneself with regard to sitting and reclining at the midday meal or at supper” (πῶς δεῖ περὶ τὰς καθέδρας καὶ τὰς κατακλίσεις ἐν τῷ καιρῷ τῶν ἀρίστων ἤ δείπνων ἔχειν), Basil frames his instruction in language that assumes and re-frames familiarity with the


22 For example, the more familiar portrayals of desert abbas and ammas included in the Apophthegmata Patrum (Sayings of the Desert Fathers [and Mothers]); Cf. Larsen, “Resisting a Reclining Culture,” 245-260.
rituals of a conventional convivial locus. Weaving a treatise on monastic humility (and respect for authority) into guidelines for maintaining appropriate demeanor at the community meal, he enjoins:

Since it is a precept of the Lord, who on all occasions habituates us to humility, that we should take the lowest place in reclining at meals (τὸ ἐν τοῖς ἀρίστοις κατακλινόµενοι τὸν ἐσχατὸν τόπον προκαταλαµβάνειν), he who strives to do all according to injunction must not neglect this precept (Luke 14.10). If any worldlings, therefore, should recline with us (ἀν μὲν οὖν κοσµικοὶ τινες ἡµῖν συγκατακλινώνται), it behooves us to be an example in this matter by not exalting ourselves above others or seeking to have the first place (τὸ φιλόπρωτον ἐπιζητεῖν). But when all who thus gather together are in pursuit of the same goal, each one, so that at every opportunity they may give proof of their humility, has an obligation of being [first] in taking the last place (προτοκαταλαµβάνειν τὸν ἐσχατὸν τόπον) according to the Lord’s command. To engage in rivalry and strife in this matter is unseemly, because it destroys good order and is a cause of tumult. Moreover, if we are not willing to yield to one another and conflict arises over it, we shall be classed with those who quarrel over the first places (ὁµοίους ἡµᾶς ποιήσει τοῖς περὶ πρωτείων φιλονεικοῦσι). In this sphere, also, prudently aware of and attentive to what befits us, we therefore should leave the order of seating to the one entrusted with this duty (ἐπιτρέπειν τῷ ὑποδεχοµένῳ καὶ τὴν τῆς κατακλίσεως τάξιν), as the Lord declared when he said that the arrangement of these matters pertains to the master of the house (Luke 14.10). In this way, we shall support one another in charity (Eph. 4.2), doing all things decently and according to order (I Cor. 14.40). Also, we will not give the impression, by stubborn and vigorous opposition, that we are trying to appear humble in order to impress the company or to win popular favor, but rather we will practice humility by being obedient. To engage in altercation, indeed, is a surer sign of pride than to accept the first place when directed to do so.23

In the Shorter Rule, responding to the query: “With what disposition and attention ought [one] listen to what is read…at meal times?” (µετὰ ποταπῆς διαθέσεως καὶ προσοχῆς ὀφείλοµεν ἀκούειν τῶν ἐν τῷ καιρῷ τῆς µεταλήψεως παραναγινοσκοµένων ἡµῖν), Basil identifies the communal table as a site for nourishing both body and soul. He

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23 RF 21 (Wagner, 280-81).
directs his audience to resist being distracted by bodily satisfaction, encouraging them rather to delight in the words of the Lord “[w]ith far greater pleasure than [they] eat and drink” (περισσοτέρως ἢ μεθ’ ὅιας ἠδονῆς ἐσθίομεν καὶ πίνομεν, ἵνα δειχθῇ ὁ νοῦς μὴ μετεωριζόμενος εἰς τὰς τοῦ σώματος ἠδονὰς). 24

Within a broader frame, the question and answer format of Basil’s instruction likewise suggests conviviality. In fact, as he introduces the Shorter Rule, Basil contextualizes his directives within discourse that brings to mind a sympotic locus. Since God has brought us here together and we have great tranquility from outside disturbances (ἡσυχίᾳ πολλῇ ἀπὸ τῶν ἔξωθεν θορυβῶν ἐστι), let us not be diverted from any other task or yield our bodies again to sleep… and repose…but spend what is left of the night in concern for and examination of what is necessary, fulfilling what was said by the blessed David, ‘he shall meditate on the law of the Lord’ day and night (Ps. 1.2). 25

Basil’s letter to the philosopher Eustathius sketches a complementary scenario: 26

Were not your tachygrapher’s present with me as I dictated matters against the heresy? Were not the most earnest of your disciples in my presence the whole time? While visiting the communities and spending whole nights with them in the prayers, always speaking and listening on matters concerning God without contention, did I not furnish you with precise proofs of my own mind? 27

While in tenor, the letter reflects the tensions associated with communal practice, intimating that a previously close association has become somewhat tenuous. With respect to meal practice, its ritual character remains suggestive.

The monks under Basil’s tutelage may have competed for the last place at table, rather than the first. Their formative dialogue may have privileged the texts of Scripture, the Rule of the community, and questions pertaining to orthodoxy and heresy, alongside/or instead of the writings of Plato. However, there is little else to suggest that the rituals associated with convivial practice in the early Cappadocian establishments

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24 RBrev 180 (Clarke).
25 RBrev 9-11 (Clarke).

26 Homily 22 (PG 29.484); English translation by Sister Agnes Clare Way, The Exegetic Homilies (Fathers of the Church; Washington, D.C: Catholic University Press, 1963).
differed in any substantive way from customs and practice one might have encountered in a wider array of less ‘ascetic’ settings.\textsuperscript{28}

**PACHOMIUS (~292 – 346 CE)**

Like the admonitions of Basil, Pachomius’ *Rules* and *Precepts* trouble simplistic delineations that have imposed clear, but arguably artificial boundaries between respective strains of monastic practice. Interpretively depicted as the communal counterpart to less formally organized desert ‘ascetics’, Pachomius is widely credited with founding a federation of Coenobitic monasteries that serves as the alter-ego to more loosely structured, anachoritic engagement.\textsuperscript{29} Although Pachomius’ communities were located in Egypt, and the dates assigned the earliest communal configurations pre-date the regulatory traditions of Basil, the five sets of rules attributed to Pachomius and his successor, Horsiesius, are preserved only as early fifth-century translations. These are included among the writings of Jerome. At the outside, Jerome’s Latin transcriptions capture the tenor of life in the Pachomian monasteries circa 404 CE. While ostensibly a refraction of Egyptian praxis, the written accounts are of Palestinian provenance.\textsuperscript{30}

In light of the ethos of self-modulated progression captured in the rules attributed to Basil, the Pachomian *Praecepta* register a radical shift. Instructions mandate that diners “sit in order in [their] appointed places, and cover their heads” (*cum autem ad uescendum uenerint, sedebunt per ordinem statutis locis, et operient capita*).\textsuperscript{31} If anyone “speaks or laughs while eating,” it is recommended that “he…do penance and be rebuked…at once” (*quod si aliquis uel locutus fuerit, uel riserit in uescendo, aget paenitentiam et in eodem loco protinus increpabitur*).\textsuperscript{32} Monks are not to “look around at others eating” (*nec circumspicias uescentes alios*).\textsuperscript{33} When ordered by a superior “to pass from one table to another,” no protest is allowed (*statimque cum tibi a maiore fuerit imperatum ut de alia mensa ad aliam transire debeas, in nullo penitus contradices*).\textsuperscript{34}


\textsuperscript{29} See most recently, Wilken, *The First Thousand Years*, 99-108.


\textsuperscript{31} *Praec* 29 (Vielleux).

\textsuperscript{32} *Praec* 31 (Vielleux).

\textsuperscript{33} *Praec* 30 (Vielleux).

\textsuperscript{34} *Praec* 30 (Vielleux); Read in conversation with the meal practice reflected in the *Rules* attributed to Antony, Basil, and Evagrius, these more stringent directives may reflect the challenge of enforcing ascetic discipline in contexts increasingly characterized by greater economic and social diversity.
Whether these more stringent norms afford measured access to Egyptian praxis, or the lived experience of the earliest strata of Pachomian monks remains a question.\(^{35}\) A roughly contemporary document intimates the degree to which the guidelines articulated in the Pachomian corpus counter common practice. In the *Historia Lausiaca* (\(\sim 419-420\) CE), Palladius includes a ‘back-story’ for the Pachomian ‘rule of life’. He names this an “Angelical Rule” and claims the same as inspiration for Pachomius’ *Precepts*. Inscribed on a bronze tablet, per Palladius, this ‘rule’ was delivered to Pachomius by heavenly messenger, as he was sitting as a solitary in his cave (καθεζόµενῳ αὐτῷ ἐν τῷ σπηλαίῳ).

The “Angelical Rule” begins with a divine injunction to “call young monks together and dwell with them” (ἐξελθὼν συνάγαγε πάντας τοὺς νέους µοναχοὺς καὶ οἰκησον µετ’ αὐτῶν). Its directives instruct Pachomius to let “each one eat and drink as suits his strength” (συγχωρήσεις ἑκάστῳ κατὰ δύναµιν φαγεῖν καὶ πιεῖν), and to insure that meals “be taken by all in one house” (ἡ δὲ τροφὴ πάντων ὑπὸ ἕνα οἶκον ἔξεταξεσθο). Simultaneously, proscription of broader banqueting practice is explicit. Monks are “not to recline at full length” but rather “take their rest sitting down [with] their coverlets thrown over the backs of chairs” (καθευδέτωσαν δὲ µὴ ἀνακείµενοι, ἀλλὰ θρόνους οἰκοδοµητοὺς ὑπτιωτέρους πεποιηκότες καὶ θέντες αὐτῶν ἐκεῖ τὰ στρώµατα καθευδέτωσαν καθήµενοι). In a slight relaxation of discipline, “on Saturday and Sunday, they [may] loosen their girdles and go in with the hood only.”\(^{36}\)

Multiple, complementarily *Lives* of Pachomius situate the Pachomian regulatory traditions within a broader social and liturgical milieu.\(^{37}\) The *First Greek Life* reports that in the course of establishing his monasteries, Pachomius also built a church in the nearby village, so that both the “brothers” and common folk from the surrounding region “might assemble on Sunday and Saturday to hear the word of God.”\(^{38}\) Read within a dining frame, we might likewise wonder whether these occasions also involved celebration of the ἀγαπή.

Elsewhere, the meal is presented as a didactic locus. In one account, Pachomius and the brothers are pictured enjoying an evening meal as they sail the Nile. Seeing the

\(^{35}\) It is possible that only a small subset of this material registers normative practice within the earliest strata of the Pachomian communal constituencies.

\(^{36}\) Palladius, *HL* 32.2-3 (Meyer).

\(^{37}\) *Sancti Pachomii Vita Graeca (VPach G)¹*; Edited by F. Halkin, *Sancti Pachomii Vitae Graecae* (Subsidia Hagiographica 19; Brussels, 1932); English translation by Vielleux, *Pachomian Koininia 1: The Life of Saint Pachomius* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1996). The number of texts that purport to recount Pachomius’ *Vita* speaks to the narrative significance he plays in subsequent strains of monastic life. Armand Vielleux summarizes the reception history of this trajectory of *Lives* in his detailed introduction (1.1-21).

\(^{38}\) *VPach G¹* 28-29 (Villieux).
“great variety of food on the table: cheese, figs, olives, and many other things,” with exemplary abstinence, Pachomius chooses to eat only bread while the ‘brothers’ “indiscriminately [lay] hands on everything there.” On another occasion, while sitting “in the evening, [according to] their custom” Pachomius uses elements of the meal to teach a “spiritual lesson.” We are likewise told that as Pachomius “[spoke] the word of God,” as in the Basilian settings, some who loved him dearly wrote down his many “interpretations of scripture.” Relativizing the comprehensive character of this didactic frame, however, “if [Pachomius] ever had a vision or an apparition…he would tell it privately [only] to the great ones” (τοῖς µεγάλοις).

**Augustine (354 – 430 CE)**

While Augustine’s monastic rules are roughly contemporaneous with both the Basilian and Pachomian regulatory traditions, they are rarely considered within the same legislative trajectory. Nonetheless, a common thread of meal practice raises questions about the interpretive presuppositions that undergird such delineation. Like the broader cross-section of Rules, the Augustinian texts register a complex transmission history.

In introducing his exhaustive study of the manuscript tradition, George Lawless writes: “to unravel the entanglements of the textual labyrinth which constitutes the *Regula Sancti Augustini* requires the dexterity of a Theseus with the help of an Ariadne.” Reducing a corpus of two hundred and seventy-four manuscripts, containing three hundred and seventeen texts, Lawless identifies a core comprised of nine regulatory treatises. Judging four of the nine to be doublets, he assigns authoritative weight to a set of three documents. Of these, Lawless argues that Augustine’s eight chapters of “Monastic Regulation” stand closest to the structures that legislated lived experience in the communities under his direction. He observes that the musical rhythm and cadence of these texts, likewise underscore Augustine’s concluding injunction that “this little book…be read…once a week.” Subsequent practice suggests that such reading may well have taken place within a meal setting.

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39 VPach G¹ 55 (Villieux).
40 VPach G¹ 34 (Villieux).
41 VPach G¹ 99 (Villieux).
42 VPach G¹ 99 (Villieux).
45 This group includes the *Ordo Monasterii* (*Ord Mon*), the *Praecepta* (a longer Rule regarded by some as an elaboration of, or supplement to the foundational regulations included in the *Ordo Monasterii*), and the *Reprimand to Quarrelling Nuns* (a regulatory letter addressed to a community of women monastics); Cf. Lawless, *Augustine of Hippo*, 65-72.
46 Augustine, *Ord Mon* 8.2 (Lawless).
Elsewhere, Augustine’s communal frame is described in terms that add texture to details briefly noted in the respective Rules and Lives of Basil and Pachomius. Descriptions of Augustine’s living quarters at Hippo as variously the “bishop’s house” or a “monastery of clerics,” suggest that the establishment was comprised of two monasteries that existed side-by-side. One was explicitly designated for laymen (and women), the other for clergy. Narration included in Augustine’s Vita, presents the legislated meal practice within each community as variant. In the “lay monastery” of Hippo, reading and silence was prescribed for the entire duration of the meal. In the “monastery of clerics,” convivial rhythms of reading and conversation were apparently expected and encouraged.

SECOND GENERATION RULES

Traditionally, the lines of delineation that have interpretively rendered foundational monastic practice artificially discrete, have imposed as clear boundaries between respective strains of second generation ritual. However, it is important to notice the degree to which this interpretive trajectory stands in tension with refraction captured in emergent regulatory tradition. Here again, applying the lens of ritual practice lends interesting and unexpected weight to arguments for the common core that grounds evolving ritual. In this second generation, the regulatory traditions attributed to Shenoute and Cassian refract both common and emergent praxis.

SHENOUTE (385-465 CE)

Here the communal distinction, which governs the elaborate structures of life in Shenoute’s burgeoning, fifth-century monastic complex appear particularly striking. In assessing recently published documents which derive from this setting, Bentley Layton names the level of detail registered in the now more than five hundred ‘Shenoutan Rules’ on record, “sensational.” Layton posits that Shenoute’s ‘federation’ represents “a typical late-antique monastery,” suggesting that the Shenoutan corpus provides “the most extensive...first-hand evidence for how a Christian monastery actually worked in

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47 Basil, RFus 21; VPach G I 99.
48 Augustine, Sermo. 355.2; Cf. Lawless, Augustine of Hippo, 60-65
50 See most recently, Wilken, A New History of Christianity, 99-108.
the early centuries.”53 Given the array of monastic manifestations examined here, however, it is perhaps as useful to consider Shenoute’s federation as one point along a wider spectrum of practice. In fact, the distance that separates Shenoute’s highly stratified setting from the loosely formed convivial traditions encountered elsewhere, raises fascinating questions about the variety of late-antique configurations that may be envisioned under a broader ‘monastic’ umbrella, and/or even within a particular community. Shenoutan sources offer an exceptionally vivid register of life in one discrete, monastic nexus. Simultaneously, both common and distinctive details nuance pictures of monastic ‘convivium’ already encountered above.

As summarized by Layton, Shenoute’s canons outline an administrative structure of sobering proportions. The sole “father” of his community’s three “Congregations,” Shenoute stood at the apex of a seven-tiered hierarchy. In this leadership role, he was in turn immediately supported by a small number of trusted “advisors,” who assisted him in making financial decisions and providing spiritual oversight for the community. A similar hierarchy structures the chain of authority in each respective “congregation,” where a singular figure known as the “Eldest” was aided by a group of “God-fearing elders” in administering the body’s affairs. Likewise, within the communities that comprised each “congregation,” “congregational parents” and their “seconds” were responsible for more particular oversight of “ordinary” monks and nuns. 54 As in Augustine’s monasteries, additional delineations distinguish between ordained and lay. Additionally, within Shenoute’s establishments, varying degrees of ascetic commitment likewise govern the lifestyles of respective members.

Ongoing archaeological exploration of the Shenoutan complex adds provocative texture to the stark regulatory record of the norms that structured communal life. Peter Grossman’s 2004 report of excavation at the site calls attention to an unidentified peristyle building located west of the community’s basilica. The axis of the structure corresponds to that of the church, a position that represents a traditional location for the refectory in other Egyptian monasteries. In describing the space, Grossman notes that it “was apparently heavily used and repaired regularly.” While its interior is defined by a number of pillars circumscribing a rectangular space, “[t]he floor of the building consist[s] of a carefully set limestone pavement.” Given its distinctive features, Grossman affirms that the building must have functioned as a refectory. He expresses puzzlement, however, at the room’s relatively small size and the fact that the site bears no traces of the circular sitting rings common to other early monastic sites of the Nile

Valley. It is perhaps only by ‘reading’ this space in light of broader meal practice, and in conversation with the rhythms and communal distinctions encountered in the sources treated here, that an alternate picture emerges; that of a relatively intimate, private dining room, where ritualized convivial repast – among some subset of the community’s “elders”, presents surprisingly plausible purpose.

JOHN CASSIAN (360 – 435 CE)

A complementary set of regulatory instruction is narratively structured as a series of ‘first-hand’ recollections of years spent living under the tutelage of monasticism’s founding fathers. Traditionally viewed as conduits that brought ‘Eastern’ monastic practice to the ‘West,’ John Cassian’s Institutes are explicitly addressed to the “most blessed Pope Castor,” a bishop who is seeking to establish in his own province “the institutes of the Eastern and especially the Egyptian cenobia.” As Cassian sets out guidelines for “construct[ing] a true and spiritual temple for God not out of unfeeling stones but out of a community of holy men,” his message appears as readily directed towards an audience of young brothers, who are themselves beginning the monastic life.

In introducing the Institutes, Cassian suggests that while “the whole of [monastic life] consists in experience and practice alone,” and its disciplines cannot be “grasped and understood” without great “zeal and effort” unless instruction is likewise “continually discussed and refined by frequent conferences with spiritual [exemplars],” a young monk will “quickly slip back into oblivion due to mental neglect.” Citing his own teachers in authorizing this discursive model, Cassian explicitly blends Egyptian precedent with the example of “holy Basil…[who] when asked by the brothers about

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57 Cassian, Inst. Prol 2 (Ramsey); In her volume, Greetings in the Lord: Early Christians and the Oxyrhynchus Papyri (HTS 60; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), Anne Marie Luijendijk notes the use of similar terminology in a series of letters regarding catechumens, sundry members of a broader Christian network, apparently comprised of a dispersed group of both male and female travelers. Anos, a figure from the Heracleopolite congregation, is introduced as a “catechumen in Genesis.” He is traveling to meet Bishop Sotas in Oxyrhynchus “for building up” (εἰς οἰκοδομήν). The Heracleopolite “sister Taion” is traveling with Anos (122).


different institutes and questions, responded with testimony from Holy Scripture in language not only eloquent but abundant.”⁶⁰

As Cassian traces the lineage of norms “current” in his Gallic community, he situates present practice within this broader context.⁶¹ He likewise places Egyptian and Cappadocian ‘ideals’ in conversation, even as he holds them in tension:

We know...that the reading of sacred texts in the cenobia while the brothers are eating follows the model of the Cappadocians rather than that of the Egyptians (illud autem, ut reficientibus fratribus sacrae lectiones in coenobii recitentur, non de Aegyptiorum typo processisse, sed de Cappadocum nouerimus). There is no doubt that they wished to establish this not so much for the sake of spiritual discipline as in order to curb superfluous and vain chattering and especially arguments, which often arise during meals, seeing that they could not contain them among themselves otherwise (quos nulli dubium est non tam spiritalis exercitationis causa, quam compescendae superfluae otiosaeque confabulationis gratia et maxime contentionum, quae plerumque solent in conuiuiis generari, hoc statuere uoluisse, uidentes eas aliter apud se non posse cohiberi). For among the Egyptians, and in particular among the Tabennisiots, all are so silent that, even though a large number of brothers is seated together for the purpose of eating, no one dares even whisper apart from the one who is in charge of his own group of ten, who nonetheless indicates by a sound rather than by a word if he notices that something must either be brought to or removed from the table. And so great is the discipline of silence that is observed while they are eating, that with their hoods drawn lower than their eyebrows lest a free view facilitate a roving curiosity (tantaque vescentibus eis silentii huius disciplina seruatur, ut cucullis ultra oculorum palpebras demissis, ne scilicet liber aspectus habeat copiam curiosius euagandi), they can see nothing more than the table and the food that is put on it or taken off of it. The result of this is that no one notices how or how much another person is eating.⁶²

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⁶¹ Cassian concludes his preface with the following disclaimer: “I shall take it upon myself, however, to inject some moderation into this little work. Thus, what I discern in the rule of the Egyptians to be impossible or hard or arduous for this country, because of either a harsh climate or difficulty and diversity of behavior, I shall temper somewhat by recourse to the customs of the monasteries in Palestine and Mesopotamia, for, if reasonable possibilities are offered, the same perfection of observance may exist even where there is unequal capability (Inst., Prol 9; Ramsey).
⁶² Cassian, Inst 4.17 (Ramsey).
Like the structures reflected in a broader array of regulatory material, these directives arguably, at once, obscure and illuminate a more complex framework.

Cassian’s complementary compendium, the *Conferences*, purports to record conversations that were held in different locations, and at different times, with the Egyptian desert monks.”⁶³ Organized as a series of discourses involving a young Cassian, and his fellow traveler Germanus, the narrative introductions that contextualize each treatise are richly laced with seemingly incidental dining ritual. For example, a *Conf.* on “divine gifts” begins with the preface:

> After the evening synaxis we sat down/[reclined?] together on the mats as usual, eager for the promised conference. And when we had kept silence for a little while out of respect for the old man, he anticipated our reverent stillness with words of this sort....⁶⁴

A discourse on maintaining an appropriate balance between feasting and fasting concludes:

> At just such a banquet, with two courses of instruction, did the holy Moses fill us. He demonstrated not only the grace and virtue of discretion in words of manifest learning but also, in the discussion that took place previously, the reasoning behind renunciation and the goal and end of our chosen orientation.⁶⁵

As interesting, however, is a vignette that depicts a less intimate meal locus, which brings a complementary monastic landscape into sharp relief.

Echoing the distinctions rendered explicit in Augustine’s descriptive prose, in ‘setting the stage’ for a *Conf.* addressing the lifestyles of “cenobites and hermits,” Cassian describes arriving at the cenobium of one Abba Paul. Along with the two-hundred individuals already in residence, here, he and Germanus encountered an “immense throng of monks from other cenobia...[who] had come together for the sake of the rite which was taking place....” This was to observe and honor “the anniversary of the death of a former abba who had been in charge of...[the] same cenobium.”⁶⁶

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⁶⁴ Cassian, *Conf.* 15.1.1 (Ramsey).
⁶⁵ Cassian, *Conf.* 2.26 (Ramsey).
⁶⁶ Cassian, *Conf.* 19.1 (Ramsey); Cf. AP/Alph Arsenius 39.
(2) …As the multitude of monks…was sitting in a large open court in separate circles of twelve, and one of the brothers was a little late in bringing around the serving dish that he had received…Abba Paul, who was running about anxiously among the crowds of brothers who were waiting on table, saw this and gave him such a slap with his outstretched hand in the sight of all that the sound of his striking palm even echoed in the ears of those who had their backs turned or who were sitting at a distance.

Refracting monastic meal practice that alternately affirms the endurance of long-lived ritual and household praxis, this troubling ‘teaching moment’ raises provocative questions about the degree to which interpretive ideals, have effectively effaced and/or over-simplified the complex meal and household roles and rituals that continue to define monastic life and practice.67

**THIRD GENERATION**

The anonymous *Rule of the Master* is thought to reflect life in an Italian monastic community during the late fifth or early sixth century. Included within this lengthy document is a series of chapters devoted to meal etiquette. The Master’s monastic guidelines, in some sense bring conversation full circle. With the exception of reclining, they address a meal setting not unlike that which one might expect to encounter in the banqueting hall of an aristocratic household:

When the whole community along with its shepherd has come from the oratory, after the verses and prayer the abbot seats himself in his chair at table. The whole community immediately answers, ‘Thanks be to God,’ and while all remain standing at their tables the basket hanging over the abbot’s table is lowered with the pulley cord, to give the impression that the provisions of God’s workmen are coming down from heaven (*mox omnis congregatio respondeat “Deo gratias”, et omnibus adhuc ad suas mensas stantibus, canister supra mensam abbatis pendens trocleae fune descendat, ut a caelo uidetur operariis Dei annona descendere*). As soon as the basket has come down, the abbot makes a sign of the cross over the bread, breaks it, and takes first his own portion, which as he raises his hand will be blessed by the Lord; he sets out the portions for those who are standing before him at his table and who will eat with him, distributes it to them. Upon receiving it they kiss the abbot’s hand and sit down in silence.

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Then he calls up the deans of the tables and gives them the portions for their whole table. After these have been dismissed he calls up the others and gives them theirs. If, by the grace of God, the community is numerous he does the same for all the tables. Upon receiving the portions for themselves and their brothers, the deans kiss the abbot’s hands to give honor to the superior. Likewise when they themselves make distribution to the brothers at their tables, their hands are kissed by the brothers as a sign of humility, and after each one has received his portion he sits down in silence (item cum ipsi in suis mensis fratribus suis erogant, pro humilitate manus eis a fratribus osculentur, et postquam quis acceperit, sedeat tacitus).

After all are seated, the weekly reader at table rises and receives his portion, kisses the hand of the one giving it, then hands it over to the cellarer, the weekly kitchen servers enter, receive their portions from their deans and kiss their hands. Meanwhile the cellarer, since he belongs to no deanery, receives his portions from the hand of the abbot. When he receives it he too kisses the hand of the giver and places [the bread] on his table (Reg. Mag. 23.1-14).

The rich detail that attends the ritualized character of this monastic meal is particularly multivalent.

Read in isolation, the basket of bread lowered through an opening in the ceiling appears to be a dramatic re-enactment of Scripture. Placed within a Graeco-Roman meal setting, the same re-configures an established system for delivering food to the banquet host in an aristocratic household.\textsuperscript{68} Such baskets were lowered by slaves into the \textit{triclinium}. The food was here dispersed to other slaves, who in turn, served the guests. In the “Master’s” dining room these functions are assigned to various strata of monks; among them “weekly servers” who facilitate distribution of the “provisions of God’s workmen…coming down from heaven.”\textsuperscript{69}

The \textit{Rule’s} description of the place of the “Weekly Reader in the Refectory” registers the resolution of Cassian’s dilemma. Conventions that adjudicate the place of conversation at the meal are fluidly re-framed to address the needs of a new historical setting and moment:

\textsuperscript{68} Thanks to Sabine Jäger-Wersonig, director of the Austrian Archeological Excavation, for responding to my query about a ceiling transept above the presiding table in the \textit{triclinium} of a reconstructed Ephesian Terrace House. Here an example of the dining room/refectory arrangement depicted in the \textit{Regula Magistri} remains \textit{in situ}.

Entry into each one’s week is to take place as follows: on Sunday, the same day the kitchen servers enter upon their week, at the meal at the sixth hour, after the verse and prayer at table, when the abbot is seated on his chair, before the basket with the customary bread has come down by the pulley cord, this brother who is to read presents himself by saying aloud: ‘Please my lords, pray for me because I am entering upon my week of reading at table’. Then the abbot rises with the entire community, and kneeling down they pray for him. And after they have risen, the new reader for the weeks says this verse: ‘O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth shall proclaim your praise’, and all respond together. As soon as this verse has been said and the abbot has finished, he gives the sign of peace first to the abbot, then to everyone. Then he provides a seat for himself in the center of the refectory, and after all are seated at table he asks a blessing and likewise sits down at his place with the book (deinde in medio omnium mensarum sibi ordinet sellam et post omnium sessionem ad mensas petita benedictione sedeat et ipse in sella cum codice). After the abbot and all the others have received the first unmixed wine of the meal, he too in like manner receives his unmixed wine to prevent spitting out the sacrament (et cum primum mensae abbas cum omnibus acceperit merum, et ipse similiter et suum merum propter sputum sacramenti accipiat et sic incipiát legere), and then he begins to read (Reg. Mag. 24.6-14).

As with the distribution of food, elaborate ritual attends the reader’s role within the meal. This protocol insures that “divine food will never be wanting at a carnal meal” (ut numquam desit carnali refectioni et esca diuina) and that the brothers will be “doubly fed when they eat through the mouth and are nourished through the ears” (Reg. Mag. 24.4-5).

The task of reading the Rule, once finished, simply commenced again. Over successive weeks, and “in daily sequence” the entire Rule was:

…read distinctly, not rapidly, so that the hearers while occupied [might] clearly understand what they must put into practice, and so that, should there be anything ambiguous or obscure that the brothers [did] not fully comprehend, the abbot [might] give explanations either on being questioned by the brother or by his own initiative (et ut, si qua sunt
The ritualized ‘mastication’ of the Rule, as articulated here, appears to preclude all discourse. However, read within the context of broader meal practice, the generative potential of questions and explanations that address points of “ambiguity” or “obscurity” is suggestive. Similarly, a recurrent pattern of effectively continuing and re-working broader banqueting norms invites further consideration.

Both in frame and content, the Rule of the Master reflects a milieu at once removed from and intimately linked to the discursive negotiation that attends the meal setting in its broader Graeco-Roman, and Early Christian manifestations. Whether some portion of the literature that derives from an early monastic frame may be linked to attendant discourse focused on digesting the “divine food” of the Rule, is a question that merits further thought. One might argue that the only thing obviously missing from this description of monks reclining ‘at table’ is the element of reclining. Simultaneously, the distinctions between clergy and lay monks apparent already in the earliest layers of emergent ritual practice remain provocative.

As the duties that attend meal service are framed as a venue for “practicing humility” (Reg. Mag. 18.8), the ‘disciplines’ associated with slavery are presented as ritualized aspects of monastic life. In rotation, the “brothers” who comprise the Master’s community, “serve in the kitchen for periods of seven days” (Reg. Mag. 18.1). Not only are they responsible for the community meals, “these brothers... [also] take care of the monastery’s household affairs” (Reg. Mag. 19.19):

They take off the shoes of all the brothers...and also repair them...

During the same week they clean the monastery, wash the rest places, chop the wood, bring water for the face. They pour the water on the

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70 Reg. Mag. 24.18-19; Further instruction addresses the question of non-community members at the meal: “If non-monks (laici) happen to come to the monastic meal, to avoid defamation afterwards in the world should a worldling learn the secrets of God (cum secreta Dei saecularis agnouerit), let the reading be taken from some other book, if the abbot so please, so that the secret of the monastery and the established norms for leading a life of sanctity many not be learned by scoffers. In this case let him read another text, first making a mark in the Rule. If the non-monk admitted to the monastic meal is such that the abbot is certain he not only is capable of appreciating the divine ordinances but is even so religious that he could follow this manner of life and could be drawn to godly ways, when such a one comes to the table the reader will continue the Rule. For those who are capable of observing it as it should be [observed] should hear the Rule of the monastery” (Reg. Mag. 24.20-25).

71 Cf. Smith, From Symposium to Eucharist, 47-65; Taussig, In the Beginning was the Meal.
hands of the brothers as they go in for Communion. They wash the table napkins, bath towels, face towels and the brothers’ soiled laundry during the time not devoted to cooking. Every day they ignite and extinguish the monastery’s lamps trimmed by the cellarer (Reg. Mag. 18.9).

However, even as the Master’s Rule ritualizes long standing household roles, it registers keen awareness of the relative status implicit to community members’ engagement in various roles. Monks are barred from “heavy labor.” In fact, their involvement in manual occupation is limited to activities conducive to spiritual progress. The Rule enjoins that agricultural lands should be “owned under someone else’s management…and crafts alone together with the garden suffice as work in the monastery” (Reg. Mag. 86).

THE RULE OF BENEDICT (MONTE CASSINO, ITALY ~540 CE)

While it lies beyond the purview of the present essay, over time the detailed Basilian Rules serve expressly to ground a broad compendium of Eastern Typika. As patent, however, is the degree to which the comprehensive Rule of the Master grounds the more tightly structured Rule of Benedict. Simplifying the complex codification of the Master’s instruction, Benedict’s rule became the dominant monastic code not only for the community under his immediate jurisdiction at Monte Cassino, but over time, for all of Western Europe. Like his predecessors, it is supposed that Benedict composed the original portions of his Rule “as he went along.” The directives added from year to year, incorporated not only the wisdom gained from lived experience, but material gleaned from other sources and rules. While the Rule, as a distinct entity, is dated to the years immediately preceding Benedict’s death (530-540 CE), it is first explicitly and independently referenced in the writings of Pope Gregory the Great, some fifty years later.72

Traditionally, the teachings of Basil, Pachomius, Augustine and Cassian have been credited with exerting particular influence on Benedict’s thought. However, the common themes that link Benedict’s Regulations to the Rule of the Master suggest that the latter may have served as a more immediate source. Benedict’s instructions for the “Weekly Reader” succinctly simplify the protocol outlined in the Rule of the Master. As with previous progressions, Benedict’s changes are, at once, subtle and significant:

Reading must not be wanting at the table of the brethren when they are eating (mensis fratrum lectio deesse non debet). Neither let anyone who may chance to take up the book venture to read there; but let him who is to

72 In his Dialogues, Gregory the Great recounts the Life of Benedict. Within this frame, he also tells the story of “how Benedict wrote a rule for his monks” (2.36).
read for the whole week enter upon that office on Sunday. After Mass and Communion let him ask all to pray for him that God may ward off from him the spirit of pride. And let the following verse be said three times by all in the oratory, he beginning it: “Domine, labia mea aperies, et os meum adnuntiabit laudem tuam” (Ps 50[51]:17), and thus having received the blessing let him enter upon the reading.

Let the deepest silence be maintained that no whispering or voice be heard except that of the reader alone (et summum fiat silentium, ut nullius musitatio uel uox nisi solius legentis ibi audiatur). But let the brethren so help each other to what is needed for eating and drinking, that no one need ask for anything. If, however, anything should be wanted, let it be asked for by means of a sign of any kind rather than a sound. And let no one presume to ask any questions there, either about the book or anything else, in order that no cause to speak be given [to the devil] (Eph 4:27; 1 Tm 5:14), unless, perchance, the Superior wish[es] to say a few words for edification (nec praesumat ibi aliquis de ipsa lectione aut aliunde quicquam requirere, ne detur occasio; nisi forte prior pro aedificatione volluerit aliquid breuiter dicere).

Let the brother who is reader for the week take a little bread and wine before he begin[s] to read, on account of Holy Communion, and lest it should be too hard for him to fast so long. Afterward, however, let him take his meal in the kitchen with the weekly servers and the waiters. The brethren, however, will not read or sing in order, but only those who edify their hearers (Reg. Ben. 38).

For both the Master and Benedict, reading the Rule – in the context of the meal, appears to serve as a pedagogical device, aimed at governing the community through shaping individual behavior. Read out loud, Benedict’s precepts were inculcated into the lives of the monks, day by day, and over the length of a lifetime.

Benedict, like the Master, is explicit in removing any hint of spontaneous discourse from the meal setting. However, after the evening meal, Benedict commends further reading that complements the teachings of the Rule – in particular, Cassian’s Conferences and the Lives of the [Egyptian] Fathers (Reg. Ben. 42).73 Such “post-meal” readings also appear to afford opportunity for further conversation. In fact, viewed in

73 In introducing Colm Luibhead’s English translation of John Cassian’s Conferences, Owen Chadwick suggests that over the course of five centuries, Cassian’s “ideas could hardly be escaped by the monks of the Western world,” 29.
light of broader banqueting practice, attendant ritual suggests a rather mild-mannered symposium.

**CONCLUSION**

The texts treated here suggest that, like their Graeco-Roman and proto-Christian counterparts, emergent monastic meals provided ritual contexts for “think[ing] about, experiment[ing] with and negotiat[ing]…social structures, personal relationships and identity formation.”74 Arguably unique to this environment, however, is an institutional setting in which a monk’s lived experience is itself infused with the utopian ideals of the meal locus. This makes the monastic meal a particularly rich register for exploring the shifts and continuities that define Christian ritual practice – in space and over time. Just as early work on meals has served to elucidate the spectrum of tensive negotiation that shaped the rhythms of proto-Christian life, so this longer trajectory of monastic tradition invites closer consideration of commensal expression in a newly Christianized Roman Empire.

Here, regularized ritual elements counter interpretive designation of emergent monasticism as the point when broader banqueting practice has fallen out of vogue.75 Instead, across this spectrum of sources, persistent patterns register the degree to which particular dining norms correspond to the relative size, social status, economic resources, geographical settings, and administrative strata of respective constituencies. The persistent thread of practice that links Basil’s detailed meal instructions, with Pachomius’ injunctions of an ‘angelic rule’ (alongside allusions to consultation with “τοῖς µεγάλοις”), and Augustine’s “Monastery of Clerics”, is difficult to ignore. The idiosyncratic, but well-used smaller refectory of Shenoute’s complex, offers a material setting that textures the regulations and narratives attributed to Cassian. Similarly, the detailed ritual included in the *Rule of the Master*, adds descriptive depth to the cryptic protocol encountered in the *Rule of Benedict*.

In establishments where burgeoning populations are reported to have approached a scale of five thousand monks, we encounter a corresponding, constriction of the ritual aspects of the meal. However, to what degree (and in what settings), conventional conviviality has disappeared, remains a real question. Like a ‘no fishing’ sign that invariably signals fine fishing, for the newly minted monk (and even his/her illustrious elders), the temptations of the table were implicit.76 However, recurrent

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74 Taussig, *In the Beginning was the Meal*, 67-68.
76 Antoinette Wire uses the example of ‘No Fishing’ signs as a hermeneutical metaphor in exploring proto-Christian arguments against women’s involvement in leadership of the earliest
narrative detail that pictures the meal as a didactic locus is suggestive. It is not difficult to imagine that as a young monk reached maturity, and/or attained a certain status or stature within the community, he (or she) likewise moved from the ‘kids table’/refectory to the more intimate and convivial gatherings enjoyed by illustrious elders. Whether the lines between these respective loci grew more or less permeable over time seems, at once, to be a function of the leadership and character of the particular community in question, and more existential tenets related to resources, education and politics.

In turn, the demographic texture that seeps through the wider hagiographical record offers its own argument for the narratives that link these settings. Gathered at table are the wealthy and poor, elite and rustic, literate and illiterate, young and old, self-indulgent and spartan, cosmopolitan and agrarian, hospitable and solitary, propertied and orphan, clergy and lay, runaway and recruit, peripatetic and indigenous, Greek, Palestinian, Egyptian, and Ethiopian. Like Pachomius, exercising restraint at a shipboard feast, each protagonist’s exemplary demeanor registers ritualized investment in an inherently civic enterprise of morphosis.77

Envisioning such a mirror, invites reading more familiar monastic caricature – the idealized Life of Antony, and/or narrative portrayals of the ‘desert abbas and ammas’ – as the record of ritual re-shaping and re-formulation of enduring practice.78 This is captured in the eminently respectable, and respectful youth, who leaves home and family to be tutored and formed by his (or her) illustrious ‘elders’. Crafted in radically ascetic nomenclature, he (or she) effectively counters an alter-ego that arguably proved far less tractable. As the quintessential dinner guest is re-scripted, re-deployed, and re-imagined, the ideal banqueter is no longer a civic figure, or a recently baptized follower of ‘the way’. In this alternately ritualized milieu, he (or she) is a diffident novice, a restrained elder, and with maturity, perhaps the next abbot (or abbess).

Christian communities; Cf. Wire, Corinthian Women Prophets (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 72.
