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# Monastic Landscape in Early Christianity – Case Studies from the Fourth Century

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**Abstract:** This article explores several case studies of key monastic foundations in both Eastern and Western Christianity in order to underline the symbolic significance of landscapes, such as deserts, gardens, and rivers, within monastic literature. The rhetoric surrounding these spaces often idealized isolation and spiritual retreat while simultaneously acknowledging the social and physical proximity of monasteries to urban centers and significant commercial routes.

**Key-words:** cenobitism, landscape, Pachomius, Basil of Caesarea, Paulinus of Nola.

Where were monastic communities located and how did written accounts represent the monastic landscape? The aim of this paper is to explore the rhetoric on landscape in which Late Antique monasteries were integrated and the underlying symbolism. In so doing, I will be referring to several instances of Late Antique monasteries founded in the fourth century in both Eastern and Western Christianity. Unlike other scholars, such as Darlene L. Brooks Hedstrom, who referred to “monastic archaeology,<sup>1</sup>” I will examine sources related to monasteries whose archaeological remains have not been explored, for several reasons: either they disappeared due to natural phenomena, or archaeological surveys have not been initiated. Thus, I will be using the definition of landscape provided by Jacob Ashkenazi in his study of Syrian monasticism based on a slightly later text: „landscape is both a medium and a process, as well as a text and a context, not merely a passive part of nature or a passive background to human activity.<sup>2</sup>” Since this article focuses on monastic communities, I will leave aside of the present investigation the problem of the anchorites and how sources reflect their use of landscape, problem that has been explored much more in scholarship.<sup>3</sup>

In the following, I will discuss about the sources referring to communities from both Eastern and Western Christianity. The monastery in Tabennesi (Upper Egypt) was founded in the first half of the fourth century by Pachomius (292-346). It initially included a male

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<sup>1</sup> Brooks Hedstrom 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Ashkenazi 2023, 75-105.

<sup>3</sup> See among others, Rapp 2016, 95-99.

monastery (joined, among others, for a while by his brother, John) and a female convent, built for his sister, Mary.<sup>4</sup> Almost at the same time, the pious household of Emmelia and her children in Annisa (Cappadocia) was transformed into monastery mainly due to the influence of her daughter, Macrina (c. 327 – 19 July 379), the elder sister of the famous Basil, Archbishop of Caesarea (329 – September 378), Naucratius (? – 357), and Gregory of Nyssa (ca. 335 – ca. 395).<sup>5</sup> In 390s, Paulinus (354 – 431) and his wife, Therasia, decided to renounce their impressive wealth and to found a monastery in Nola, which soon became a pilgrimage center.<sup>6</sup> The example of Paulinus might have influenced Sulpicius Severus (c. 360-c. 420) and his wife, whose name remains unknown.<sup>7</sup>

### **The Image of the „Desert”**

One of the most widely used image in association with early monasticism is that of the desert. Rhetoric on desert and the projection of the ascetic spaces as deserts have a significant role. Early monastic literature frequently referenced the dichotomy between the desert and the city. The desert was the perfect place for imitating on earth the angelic, contrasting with the bustling city filled with crowds. In this sense, Jerome of Stridon advises in a letter bishop Paulinus of Nola, who was seeking to spend his life in a monastery, to seek solitude away from cities, where most temptations might hinder his vocation. Thus, Jerome recommends him to retire to the countryside, and to pray in solitude:

„Be assured that, whether you dwell here or elsewhere, a like recompense is in store for your good works with our Lord. Indeed, ... as long as you live in the country one place is as good as another. Forsake cities and their crowds, live on a small patch of ground, seek Christ in solitude, pray on the mount alone with Jesus, keep near to holy places: keep out of cities, I say, and you will never lose your vocation. My advice concerns not bishops, presbyters, or the clergy, for these have a different duty. I am speaking only to a monk who having been a

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<sup>4</sup> See all the sources related to these foundations in *Pachomian Koinonia* 1980.

<sup>5</sup> See among others Elm, 1996, 79-105.

<sup>6</sup> Mratschek 2001, 514.

<sup>7</sup> Paulinus of Nola, 1966 *Letter* 5.6, 57.

Paulinus of Nola 1967, *Letter* 31.1, 125-126.

Sévère 1967b, 334-335.

man of note in the world has laid the price of his possessions at the apostles' feet."<sup>8</sup>

According to Jerome, the status of monk implies living in solitude. Since Paulinus has chosen the highest philosophy, he should follow the model of the ancient philosophers. Moreover, since he is also seeking Christ, he should imitate the prophets, the apostles, and the holy men of the desert:

„if you desire to be in deed what you are in name—a monk, that is, one who lives alone, what have you to do with cities which are the homes not of solitaries but of crowds? Every mode of life has its own exponents. For instance, let Roman generals imitate men like Camillus, Fabricius, Regulus, and Scipio. Let philosophers take for models Pythagoras, Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. Let poets strive to rival Homer, Virgil, Menander, and Terence. Let writers of history follow Thucydides, Sallust, Herodotus and Livy. Let orators find masters in Lysias, the Gracchi, Demosthenes, and Tully. And, to come to our own case, let bishops and presbyters take for their examples the apostles or their companions; and as they hold the rank which these once held, let them endeavour to exhibit the same excellence. And last of all let us monks take as the patterns which we are to follow the lives of Paul, of Antony, of Julian, of Hilarion, of the Macarii. And to go back to the authority of scripture, we have our masters in Elijah and Elisha, and our leaders in the sons of the prophets; who lived in fields and solitary places and made themselves tents by the waters of Jordan. The sons of Rechab too are of the number who drank neither wine nor strong drink and who abode in tents.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Jerome 1953, *Lettre* 58, 77-78.

<sup>9</sup> Jerome 1953, *Letter* 58, 78.

Through these examples, Jerome warns Paulinus that monks should live in the desert, while priests should live in the cities.<sup>10</sup> As he has chosen the highest philosophy, he can only be a monk and, hence, Nola's area is a spiritual desert.

Rooted in earlier sources, which used the same opposition in order to express by means of visual images the ethical contrast between goodness/truth and evilness/falsehood, the opposition desert/city became a widespread literary tool. The desert was also the place where an ascetic could fight the devil directly. In terms of location, the desert mentioned in monastic writings was not necessarily an arid, uninhabited place, but the term could symbolically designate a space located at a certain distance from the inhabited world. Nevertheless, in opposition to the earthly city, it became the symbol of the spiritual city.<sup>11</sup> The metaphor of the desert was spread in both Eastern and Western monastic literature.<sup>12</sup>

### **Monasteries – between Isolation and Connectivity**

Rhetoric on the ideal spots of the monasteries underlines the isolation of the communities. However, sources also suggest that, in spite of their integration into an isolated landscape, they were also accessible to diverse visitors. Indeed, monasteries had a significant social impact due to the relatively short distance between communities and cities found in their proximity.

Paulinus of Nola seems to have complied to Jerome's ideal living spot. In a letter describing his early ascetic retreat following the calumnious accusations against him for the death of his brother, he refers to the Classic commonplace of the country life, which offers him leisure and withdrawal from the everyday public activities:

„Finally, when I seemed to obtain rest from lying scandal and from wanderings, unbusied by public affairs and far from the din of the marketplace, I enjoyed the

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<sup>10</sup> One should take into consideration the fact that Jerome's rhetoric against monk-priests might have been influenced by his own negative experience. Although ordained, he has never managed to use his clerical status.

<sup>11</sup> Goehring 1993, 281-296.

<sup>12</sup> The volume of Dijkstra and Van Dijk 2006 groups papers dealing with the literary construct of the desert in the Western hagiographies. As the authors demonstrate, rhetorical praising of the ascetics for having chosen the harshness of the desert in order to pursue their vocation does not always indicate a factual true. Besides the metaphorical understanding of the „desert,” in some cases the spot where monasteries developed was not necessarily a choice of the ascetics, but represented the only available option for the pursuit of asceticism. In other words, the situations in which the desert metaphor was adapted to the pious aristocratic households were frequent.



leisure of country life and my religious duties, surrounded by pleasant peace in my withdrawn household.”<sup>13</sup>

This account reflects the literary representation of the country villa and its function, not only in Paulinus’ conversion to asceticism, but also for the surrounding inhabitants. Known as a *topos* of leisure, the villa and the garden became the place where Paulinus was able to escape his legal and social duties and to contemplate God freely. It is to this place that Paulinus invites his friend, Sulpicius Severus: “I shall set you in the monastery not merely as a lodger of the martyr who lies close by [i. e. Felix], but also as a husbandman in his garden.”<sup>14</sup>

In the Nola complex, Paulinus made efforts to incorporate elements of pre-existing beliefs in the area, with the aim of attracting a large number of believers and convince them to embrace Christianity. Thus, he included customs that had long been linked to secular religious needs. A close reading of Paulinus’ texts reveals not only his pastoral concern to understand, explain, and, in a sense, legitimize these new cultic forms, but also the growing role of saint veneration, which, during Paulinus’ time, was undergoing significant development. This was the function of the pilgrimage to the tomb of Saint Felix, in Nola.<sup>15</sup>

Besides the accessibility for pilgrims, the ascetic dwelling in Nola had an even broader communal context. Paulinus transformed Nola not only into a center of asceticism, but also into one of Christian hospitality. This gradual transformation was facilitated by a network of hospitality that allowed Nola to evolve from the initial rural sanctuary into a prominent cultural and ascetic center in the region.<sup>16</sup>

Classical literature tended to idealize two spots. The garden and the pasture had been ideal places for one’s peaceful retreat from society. Late antique sources coming from the monastic *milieu* tended to ascribe the same roles to the space, which the authors called a „desert”, be it a real arid place, or rather a symbolical desert. Apart from deserts, in some

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<sup>13</sup> Paulinus of Nola 1966, *Letter* 5.4, 56: „Postea denique ut a calumniis et peregrinationibus requiem capere uisus sum, nec rebus publicis occupatus et a fori strepitu remotus ruris otium et ecclesiae cultum placita in secretis domesticis tranquillitate celebraui.”

<sup>14</sup> Paulinus of Nola 1966, *Letter* 5.15, 64.

“Tum ego te non in monasterio tantum uicini martyris inquilinum, sed etiam in horto eiusdem colonum locabo.”

<sup>15</sup> Aulisa and Carnevale 2005, 120-121.

<sup>16</sup> See a thorough study on this transformation in Mratschek 2001, 511-553.

instances, monastic founders identified their places of retreat with gardens. Their descriptions are not always realistic; instead, they rather offer ideal representations.

Sulpicius Severus placed the dialog with his monastic *amici*, Gallus and Postumianus, in the garden of the monastic-villa at Primuliacum.<sup>17</sup> The setting of this dialog reminded the readers of the Classical, Ciceronian dialog in the gardens of his villa.

Writing to his friend, Gregory of Nazianzus, Basil of Caesarea describes the remote ascetic dwelling on the estate of his own family, in Annisa. His account is full with Classical motifs used in the description of an ideal place in which he would be able to fully dedicate himself to what he calls „philosophy,” which, in fact, is the representation of the monastic life:

„There, God has opened on me a spot exactly answering to my taste, so that I actually see before my eyes what I have often pictured to my mind in idle fancy. There is a lofty mountain covered with thick woods, watered towards the north with cool and transparent streams. A plain lies beneath, enriched by the waters which are ever draining off from it; and skirted by a spontaneous profusion of trees almost thick enough to be a fence; so as even to surpass Calypso's Island, which Homer seems to have considered the most beautiful spot on the earth. Indeed, it is like an island, enclosed as it is on all sides; for deep hollows cut off two sides of it; the river, which has lately fallen down a precipice, runs all along the front and is impassable as a wall; while the mountain extending itself behind, and meeting the hollows in a crescent, stops up the path at its roots. There is but one pass, and I am master of it. Behind my abode there is another gorge, rising into a ledge up above, so as to command the extent of the plains and the stream which bounds it, which is not less beautiful, to my taste, than the Strymon as seen from Amphipolis. For while the latter flows leisurely, and swells into a lake almost, and is too still to be a river, the former is the most rapid stream I know, and somewhat turbid, too, from the rocks just above; from which, shooting down, and eddying in a deep pool, it forms a most pleasant scene for myself or anyone else.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Sévère 2006, 1, 1, 2, 102.

<sup>18</sup> Basil of Caesarea 1926, *Ep.* 14, 2, 107-109.

For Basil, the quietness of life (ἡσυχία – the Greek equivalent of the Latin *otium*<sup>19</sup>) and isolation of this place are essential for his commitment to asceticism. Even more, the ideal landscape for ascetic communities seems to be, for Basil, one that fosters both individual spiritual growth and communal responsibility, as Basil emphasizes several times in his *Asketikon*,<sup>20</sup> a collection of questions and answers on ascetic life, which soon became a reference for monks and nuns in Cappadocia and beyond.

Even though he hints to the remoteness of the ascetic retreat, Basil immediately refers to the people from the nearby villages, who come to the river and to the lake, attracted by its multitude of fish.<sup>21</sup> This detail seems to be accurate, since Gregory of Nazianzus also mentions the river and fishing. In some of his epigrams, he refers to the death of Basil's brother, Naucratus, who was living as a monk in the same spot.<sup>22</sup>

„156. – Om Naucratus, the Brother of Basil the Great  
Naucratus was once freeing his fishing-net from a  
sunken rock in the roaring eddies of the river. The  
net he did not free, but was caught himself. Tell  
me, O Word, how the net landed the fisherman,  
Naucratus, an example of pure life, instead of fish.  
As I conjecture, both grace and death came to him  
from the water.”

„157. – On the Same  
Naucratus died in the eddy of the envious river,  
entangled in the toils of his sunken net, so that,  
mortal, thou mayst know the tricks of this life, from  
which this fleet-footed colt was removed.”

The river he describes is the river Iris and the episode is also referred to in the *Life of Saint Macrina*, written by Gregory of Nyssa, brother of Basil and Naucratus.<sup>23</sup>

Basil's letter quoted above received three replies from his friend, Gregory of Nazianzus. In his fourth letter, Gregory of Nazianzus uses extensive rhetorical figures in admiration of

<sup>19</sup> Rousseau 1994, 71-72.

<sup>20</sup> See *Asketikon* 2005 and the thorough introductory study by Anna M. Silvas.

<sup>21</sup> Basil of Caesarea 1926, *Ep.* 14, 1, 106-107.

<sup>22</sup> Gregory of Nazianzus 1919, *Epigrams* 156; 157; 158, 468-469.

<sup>23</sup> Grégoire de Nysse 1971, 9, 168-172.

Basil's ascetic retreat. Just as Basil's previous epistle, this one is also quoting Classical motives (such as the „Pontic darkness", or the „Augean dunghill"):

„For my part, I'll admire your Pontus and Pontic burrow as an abode fit for exile, what with the ridges that loom overhead; the beasts that put to the test your trust in the location; the isolated spot that lies down below, even if it is a mousehole with the august appellations of thinkery [Aristophanes, *Nubes* 91–104], monastery, and school; the thickets of wild flora and the wreath of rugged mountains that puts shackles on you, not a crown; the mediocre climate and the longed-for sun, which you can make out only as if through smoke, O Pontic and Sunless Cimmerians [*Odysseus*, 11.13–19], sentenced not only to a six-month-long night (which, in fact, people say is the case) but also to not having even one unshaded part of being alive, the whole of life being one long night and truly the shadow of death [*Psalms* 22(23):4] [...]. Shall I praise the road, both narrow and treacherous [*Matthew* 7:14]? Whether it leads to the Kingdom or to Hell, I don't know; for your sake, may it lead to the Kingdom! As to the region in between, what do you want? Should I falsely call it an Eden and the fount that was divided into the four sources from which the whole world takes drink [*Genesis* 2:10–14], or a dry and waterless desert that some Moses will make habitable once he uses his staff to make a stone gush forth [*Exodus* 17:1–6]? For whatever escaped the rocks became dried-up gullies, and whatever escaped the gullies became thornbushes, and what loomed over the thornbushes became a cliff. The road on top is also steep and dangerous on either side; it focuses the mind of travelers and trains them for safety. The river rages down below; to you, O Grandiloquent One and Maker of New Names, it must seem like the tranquil Strymon of Amphipolis, but it is no richer in fish than in stones, and it feeds into no lake but rushes down into the deep. For it is great and fearful, and it drowns out the psalmodies of those who stand over it. Compared to this, the cataracts and the catadupes are nothing! That's how loudly it inveighs against you day and night. Rugged and impassible, muddy and undrinkable—its only beneficial aspect is that it doesn't sweep away your abode when the torrents and storms drive you

crazy. That's what I think about those Islands of the Blessed, if you are in fact blessed. Go ahead, admire the crescent-shaped bends that choke off, rather than fortify, access to your foothill, the ridges that hang overhead—making for you a life like Tantalus's [cf. *Odysseus* 11.582–92]—and the drafts of cold air and the earth's ventholes that refresh you when you're worn out, and the songbirds that do indeed sing, but about hunger, and do indeed fly, but over the desert. You say that no one comes for a visit except to go hunting, but you should also add, except to gaze upon you dead folk."<sup>24</sup>

Gregory continues with the same tone in his fifth letter, in which he refers to the time when he and Basil had spent together on the same spot.

„How could I pass by those vegetableless gardens that don't deserve the name? And the pile of Augean manure [cf. Apollodorus, *Bibliotheca*. 2.5.5] that we cleared out of the house and used to fill the gardens after I, a vintner, and you, a glutton, dragged the dung-bearing wagon with these necks and these hands that still bear the scars of the toils—O Earth, Sun, Air, and Virtue [cf. Aeschines, *In Ctesiphontem*. 260; D., Or. 18.127?]?! (for I can write in a tragic style too)—not to bridge the Hellespont [Herodotus, *Histories* 7.33–36] but to flatten out a riverbank?"<sup>25</sup>

This ascetic retreat, situated in a serene and isolated location facilitated not only contemplation and spiritual growth, according to the ideals expressed by Basil and Gregory of Nazianzus. In addition, it was accessible to the community nearby, as testified by several episodes recounted in the *Life of Saint Macrina*.<sup>26</sup>

Other accounts of monastic foundations refer to the choice of a certain landscape for the settlement of an ascetic community. The same motifs of the desert and the rivers appear in the accounts. For example, for the foundation of the monastery in Tabennesi, Pachomius chose a

<sup>24</sup> Gregory of Nazianzus 2019, *Ep.* 4, 59–60.

<sup>25</sup> Gregory of Nazianzus, *Ep.* 5.

<sup>26</sup> In addition, Anna. M. Silvas actually explored the place. She found the most probable site where Naucratus' accident took place. See for details Silvas 2007, 73–95.

„deserted village” surrounded by very fertile land, easily accessible through the Nile River from the nearby cities and through well-known roads from the surrounding villages: „Led by the spirit, he covered a distance of some ten miles and came to a desert village on the river’s shore called Tabennesi.”<sup>27</sup> All the *Lives* of Pachomius mention the „desert village” in all accounts, which is an indication of the fact that Pachomius and the first monks who followed him found there standing buildings or ruins, which they could relatively easily repair or adapt for their own community.<sup>28</sup>

### Conclusions

The monastery in Anissa, mentioned above where Basil and Naucratiu lived, was in the proximity of the old Via Pontica, which made it easily reachable. In the West, Nola and Primuliacum were situated at crossroads of circulated routes. The written accounts about Primuliacum reveal that it was not far from Toulouse and Narbonne.<sup>29</sup>

The sites of monasteries were represented as ideal spots, continuing the ancient tradition of the philosophers’ retreat at villa or at the *otium*. At the same time, the monasteries themselves were perceived as enclaves, able to ensure the ascetics’ withdrawal from society.<sup>30</sup> Far from being merely descriptions of ideal places for ascetic devotion, the passages quoted above offer symbolic representations of diverse aspects related to the ascetic life practiced inside communities.

Desert was represented, rhetorically, as both a physical and symbolic space. As demonstrated in this study, the desert was often portrayed as the ideal location for asceticism, offering ascetics an opportunity for spiritual purification and at the same time a retreat from the distractions of urban life. This image of the desert was not always a literal one, but rather a symbolical representation of isolation that allowed for deep contemplation and ascetic practices. The rhetorical common places of the desert as a space of divine encounter and spiritual warfare were not confined to Eastern monasticism but were also pervasive in the West, where figures such as Jerome and Paulinus of Nola echoed similar themes.

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<sup>27</sup> *Pachomian Koinonia* 1980, Bohairic *Life* 17, 39-40.

*Pachomian Koinonia* 1980, G1 12, 305.

<sup>28</sup> Brooks Hedstrom 2017, 159-160.

<sup>29</sup> Sévère 1967a, 32-38.

<sup>30</sup> Dey 2004, 357-371.

On the other hand, while the rhetoric often idealized the desert as a remote space, it is clear that monastic communities were not entirely isolated from the surrounding world and were not necessarily placed at a long distance from it. The strategic placement of monasteries near cities or along major trade routes allowed for both spiritual retreat and engagement with the broader community. Written accounts, in fact, reveal a dual aspect of „monastic geography” – both removed from the world and yet tightly connected to it. The monasteries served not only as centers of personal salvation but also as *loci* of social influence.

The case studies presented in this article, including the monastic foundations of charismatic characters such as Pachomius, Basil of Caesarea, and Paulinus of Nola, reveal the interplay between geography, ascetic practice, and religious rhetoric. These founders’ choices of landscape were not arbitrary, but were infused with deeper theological meanings, aiming to shape the spiritual lives of those who inhabited these spaces. In the symbolic geography of early monasticism, the idealization of the desert, gardens, and rivers reflected broader cultural values and the aspirations of the monastic movement to separate itself from the secular world while still remaining connected to it.

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