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## BEYOND THE CLERGY AND MONKS: PRELIMINARY OBSERVATIONS ON LAY RELIGIOSITY IN LATE ANTIQUE EGYPT

### Introduction

All scholars of ancient Church history are well aware that the sources for the study of the Church in Late Antiquity predominantly originate from the clergy and monks. Since clergymen and monastics were the primary organisers of Christian religious life and almost sole witnesses in writing to it, their viewpoints inherently reflected the limited perspectives of their respective circles.\* In the literary and papyrological evidence, clergy and monks are comparatively more visible and identifiable, whereas laypeople not only present a challenge in terms of recognisability but also demonstrate a significantly lesser presence compared to bishops, presbyters, or monks. Consequently, it is unsurprising that recent significant academic projects investigating the Late Antique Church have focused on the clergy and monastics.<sup>1</sup>

Meanwhile, both in antiquity and today, the majority of Christians consisted of laypeople. Consequently, research focusing on the lay piety provides insight into everyday Christianity in its most prevalent manifestations. Just as studying only Origen's fascinating ideas would not offer an accurate portrayal of typical third-century Christian beliefs and religious practices, a similar narrow focus on monks and clergy distorts our understanding of the religious life of ancient Christians.<sup>2</sup>

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\* This research was supported by the National Science Centre, Poland, under the project "Embodied Religion of Laypeople in Late Ancient Egypt" (grant no. 2020/39/D/HS1/00207). Self-focus and group identification are fundamental aspects of human cognition. These tendencies can be understood as the result of several cognitive biases, including the minimal group paradigm, the out-group homogeneity effect, the confirmation bias, and the professional bias.

<sup>1</sup> I primarily mean the National Science Centre (Poland) projects: "Presbyters in the Late Antique West" (leader: Robert Wiśniewski), "Monks and Monastic Communities in the Eastern Mediterranean (4th–8th c.)" (leader: Ewa Wipszycka-Bravo), and "Clergy in a Society: Presbyters, Deacons and the Lower Clergy within the Social and Economic Structures of Late Antique and Early Arab Egypt (4th–8th c.)" (leader: Joanna Wegner).

<sup>2</sup> Only relatively recently appeared publications dealing with laypeople in ancient Christianity, see esp. G. Frank, *Laitly Lives: Reclaiming a Non-Category*, "Studies in Late Antiquity" 2021, 5, pp. 119-127; L.K. Bailey, *The Religious Worlds of the Laitly in Late Antique Gaul*, London 2016. For Egypt, many insights may be drawn from the works of D. Frankfurter, although his focus is not specifically on lay religiosity; see especially D. Frankfurter, *Christianizing Egypt: Syncretism and Local Worlds in Late Antiquity*, Princeton 2018.

This brief contribution seeks to highlight key challenges and opportunities in the study of lay religiosity during Late Antiquity. Specifically, it addresses two central questions: Who were the laypeople, and in what sources can they be identified?

I focus this study specifically on Egypt for two main reasons. First, I am more familiar with this region than with other parts of the ancient world. Second, Egypt offers an exceptionally rich and diverse body of sources. Although Egypt was an integral part of the Roman Empire, it maintained distinct characteristics in terms of demographics, urbanisation, language, and ecclesiastical organisation. Nevertheless, it is also crucial to recognise that within this vast region, there existed significant local variations, from the broader contrasts between Alexandria and the *chora*, as well as between the Delta and the Nile Valley, to more localised differences at the level of dioceses, towns, or even individual families.

We should also bear in mind that the sources at our disposal span many centuries, from the fourth to the thirteenth, and often incorporate earlier traditions. Manuscripts were frequently rewritten and adapted to reflect contemporary practices. Consequently, the overall picture that emerges from this evidence is necessarily synthetic and unlikely to provide a comprehensive representation of Egypt at any single point in time.

### Who were laypeople?

In applying the terms ‘laypeople’ or ‘laity’, we are utilising categories that have evolved over many centuries. From the one hand, history of the word *laikos* shows that there is no universal meaning of the term, but it depends on given church-canonical, theological, social and other factors, always being contextualised.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, lexicographical concerns concerning Christian antiquity do not offer a definitive definition of ‘laity’ but rather trace the history of the term and (in some cases) socio-religious category as such.<sup>4</sup>

From the other hand, the category of ‘laity’ in different contexts may be denoted by various terms (*laikoi*, *kosmikoi* [lit. ‘those of the world’], *biōtikoi* etc.). Historically, ‘laypeople’ always were perceived and (sometimes) defined in a negative way, as non-clergy. Scholars of religion extend the use of the terms ‘laity’ and ‘clergy’ to the study of non-Christian religious traditions, employing them as neutral categories – what

<sup>3</sup> H.-M. Barth, *Laie II. Systematisch-theologisch*. In *Theologische Realenzyklopädie*, vol. 20, Berlin-New York 1990, p. 386.

<sup>4</sup> Y. Congar, *Laïc et laïcat*. In *Dictionnaire de spiritualité ascétique et mystique: doctrine et histoire*, vol. 9, Paris 1976, coll. 79-108; A.M. Ritter, *Laie I. Kirchengeschichtlich*, [in:] *Theologische Realenzyklopädie*, vol. 20, Berlin-New York 1990, pp. 378-385; P. Siniscalco, *Laico*, [in:] *Nuovo dizionario patristico e di antichità Cristiane*, ed. A. Di Berardino, Genoa-Milan 2007, coll. 2725-2731; A. Faivre, *Laie*. In *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum*, vol. 22, Stuttgart 2008, coll. 826-853.

anthropologists would term ‘etic’, external perspectives applied to a given culture.<sup>5</sup> In the present study, the terms ‘laypeople’ and ‘laity’ are likewise used as heuristic categories, aiding in the identification and categorisation of vast historical data drawn from sources.

As already said, late antique authors often refer to laypeople using various terms. Additionally, the sources had distinct perceptions of the structure and boundaries of the laity. In light of this, it becomes necessary to examine divisions within the Christian community from an ‘emic’ perspective as well: an internal viewpoint. The differentiation between emic and etic perspectives is crucial in studies on social phenomena in past centuries.

The easiest way to identify laypeople is to contrast them with clerics and monastics, employing a negative definition. As simple as it sounds, this approach becomes complicated when faced with sources. The theorisation of the Church as consisting of well-defined opposition of ‘laity’ and ‘clergy’ or three orders of ‘laity’, ‘monastics’, and ‘clergy’ (with the latter two often grouped together as ‘oratores’ in contrast to the laity) occurred only in Western Christianity during the Middle Ages.<sup>6</sup> Together with earlier monastic rules,<sup>7</sup> the treatises *De institutione laicali* by Jonas of Orléans, written between AD 818 and 829,<sup>8</sup> and *De institutione clericorum* by Hrabanus Maurus (AD 818)<sup>9</sup> constitute a milestone in the theoretisation of three *ordines*. The Gregorian reform of the eleventh and twelfth centuries together with systematisation of the canonical law at that time fixed draw a well-defined fundament for modern concept of laity in the Western Christianity.<sup>10</sup>

In the Eastern Christianities, a process of critical reflection on the nature of the laity did not take place. The very existence of laity was of course acknowledged,<sup>11</sup> but the nature and structure of this group remained blurred, leading to significant inconsistencies among authors, e.g. Pseudo-Basil (between the fifth and ninth centuries) distinguishes three groups of the people (λαος) of children of the Church (ὄνηρι

<sup>5</sup> F.L. Lusby, *Laity*. In *Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. 8, Farmington Hills, MI, 2005, pp. 5286-5291.

<sup>6</sup> H.-W. Goetz, *Social and Military Institutions*, [in:] *The New Cambridge Medieval History*, ed. R. McKitterick, Vol. 2: c. 700 – c. 900, 5th ed., Cambridge 2006, pp. 454-457. A very famous is an early distinction between ‘pastores’, ‘continentes’ and ‘coniugati’ made by Gregory the Great (*Moralia* 1.14.20, ed. M. Adriaen, vol. 1, p. 34) which led to the later idea of three *ordines*.

<sup>7</sup> Esp. the *Rule of St Benedict* and *De institutis monachorum* by John Cassian.

<sup>8</sup> Edition: Jonas d’Orléans, *Instruction des Laïcs*, 2 vols., ed. and transl. A. Dubreucq, Sources Chrétiennes 549-550, Paris 2012– 2013.

<sup>9</sup> M. Kieling, *Formacja duchownych w świetle De institutione clericorum Rabana Maura*, “Vox Patrum” 2006, 26, pp. 277-288.

<sup>10</sup> A.M. Ritter, *op. cit.*, p. 380.

<sup>11</sup> *Canones (Pseudo-)Athanasii* 93, ed. Riedel, transl. Riedel and Crum, p. 60: “And as for the laity, they likewise are the children of the church, whom Christ gat Him with His precious blood.”

ἡτρεκκλησια): virgins, encratics and the married.<sup>12</sup> The *Book of the Consecration of the Church of St Macarius* (late seventh century) distinguishes the noblemen of the city (ἡρογατ ντε τπολις) from the people (λαος / *laos*), and mentions the faithful noble women (ἡπιστη ντενριουμ νσνκλυτικος) as a special category.<sup>13</sup>

## Opposition of statuses in the sources

The Egyptian Christian elite conceptualised the Church as a structured entity comprising identifiable and distinct ranks (*tagmata*)<sup>14</sup> or orders (*takseis*)<sup>15</sup> arranged in a hierarchical order. These divisions often defy a straightforward bipartite or tripartite classification. An illustrative instance of such complexity is seen in the prayer for the deceased found within the *Great Euchologium* of the White Monastery (turn of the 10th and 11th centuries). This prayer enumerates groups within the Church as follows: ‘bishops, presbyters, deacons, subdeacons, readers, cantors, monks, janitors, zealous laics [*nlaikos nspoudaios*],<sup>16</sup> exorcists, encratics [literally: ‘those who control themselves’ (P.P.)], serving women [or deaconesses (P.P.)],<sup>17</sup> eunuchs, virgins, widows, orphans, laics (*nlaikos*), infants, those who are newly enlightened [i.e., newly baptised (P.P.)], our fathers and brothers, in word – man and woman’.<sup>18</sup>

However, laypeople often form a distinct group, complementary to other orders. Specifically, the references to clerics (*klerikos*) and laypeople (*laikos*) together represents the entirety of the Church in certain sources.<sup>19</sup> In many Egyptian texts, especially those of monastic provenance, the distinction is not between *klerikos* and *laikos*,

<sup>12</sup> Pseudo-Basil of Caesarea, *De arca diluuii*, ed. H. De Vis, p. 222. Pseudo-Basil clearly regarded monks (presumably only non-ordained) as a subset of laypeople.

<sup>13</sup> Pseudo-Agathon of Alexandria, *De consecratione ecclesiae Macarii*, ed. and transl. Coquin, pp. 82-83.

<sup>14</sup> E.g. Benjamin of Alexandria, *De nuptiis apud Canam*, ed. H. De Vis, p. 89; Pseudo-Euodius of Rome, *De passione* 2, ed. and transl. Chapman, pp. 80 (text), 84 (transl.).

<sup>15</sup> Pseudo-Athanasius, *De homicidiis* 17, ed. and transl. Saweros, pp. 24 (ed.), 19 (transl.).

<sup>16</sup> On *spoudaioi* and *philoponoï*, see E. Wipszycka, *Les confréries dans la vie religieuse de l'Égypte chrétienne*, [in:] E. Wipszycka, *Études sur le christianisme dans l'Égypte de l'Antiquité tardive*, *Studia Ephemeridis Augustinianum* 52, Roma 1996, pp. 257-278; J. Gascou, *Un nouveau document sur les confréries chrétiennes: P. Strasb. copte inv. K 41*, [in:] *Études coptes IX. Onzième journée d'études (Strasbourg, 12-14 juin 2003)*, eds. A. Boud'hors, J. Gascou, D. Vaillancourt, Cahiers de la Bibliothèque copte 14, Paris 2006, pp. 167-177; J.-L. Fournet, *P. Stras. V 318 complété: La grande philoponia d'Héracléopolis et les protocoles en cursive inclinée*, [in:] *Sixty-five Papyrological Texts Presented to Klaas A. Worp on the Occasion of His 65th Birthday*, eds. F.A.J. Hoogendijk, B.P. Muhs, *Papyrologica Lugduno-Batava* 33, Leiden-Boston 2008, pp. 243-253.

<sup>17</sup> This is a rare instance of a deaconess in Egypt; see U. Zanetti, *Y eut-il des diaconesses en Égypte?*, “*Vetera Christianorum*” 1990, 27, pp. 369-373; E. Wipszycka, *Les ordres mineurs dans l'Église d'Égypte du IVe au VIIIe siècle*, “*Journal of Juristic Papyrology*” 1993, 23, pp. 189-190.

<sup>18</sup> *Euchologium magnum*, ed. E. Lanne, p. 300-301 [36-37]; own translation.

<sup>19</sup> Benjamin of Alexandria, *De nuptiis apud Canam*, ed. H. De Vis, p. 89.

but rather between *monachos* and *kosmikos* (Arabic *mušṭarak*). Shenoute of Atripe, a prominent figure of Egyptian monasticism, a prolific writer, and a cornerstone of the Coptic literature, was portrayed in his life as a teacher to all, great and humble, monks as well as laics (ἵτε μοναχος ἵτε κοσμικος).<sup>20</sup> We find a similar phrase in the *Life of Longinus*, abbot of Enaton, who took care of both monks and laypeople (εἴτε μοναχος εἴτε κοςμικον).<sup>21</sup> Similarly, Pseudo-Agathonicus of Tarsus contraposes way of life of monks and *biōtikoi*.<sup>22</sup>

One might assume that the bipartite oppositions between *klerikos* and *laikos*, as well as between *monachos* and *kosmikos*, represent two distinct dimensions of Christian society. However, the situation is not so straightforward. Papyrological sources reveal heterogeneous and complex patterns.

document (date) <sup>23</sup>	text	translation	Document type
<i>O. Crum</i> 57, ll. 8-9	ἐν κληρικῶσι καὶ λαϊκοῖσι	From among clergy-men and laymen	Episcopal letter
<i>PCLT</i> 1, l. 83 (698)	εἴτε μοναχος εἴτε κοσμικον	Either monk or layman	Release from obligation
<i>PKRU</i> 67, ll. 122-123 (VI-VIII w.)	λααυ ἠρωμε νῆν ἐφρητταζις ντῆντοϋνῆν εἴτε ἐπισκοπος εἴτε πρεσβυτερος εἴτε διδκων εἴτε διηγιωστῆς εἴτε λαικος	Nobody with an order of priesthood, neither bishop, presbyter, deacon, reader, nor layman	Testament
<i>PKRU</i> 106, l. 177-178 (734)	εἴτε οϋνῆν εἴτε λαεικος εἴτε μοναχος λααυ	Neither priest, nor layman, nor any monk	Child donation
<i>P. Mon. Epiph.</i> 84, ll. 14-15 (600-630)	ἠαοϋσον ἠ ἠαοϋκοςμικον	To a brother or a layman	Agreement <sup>24</sup>

<sup>20</sup> (Pseudo-)Besa, *Vita Sinuthii* 173, ed. J. Leipoldt, W.E. Crum, p. 72; see also Shenoute, *Good is the Time for Launching the Boat to Sail*, [in:] *The Feast of the Desert of Apa Shenoute: A Liturgical Procession from the White Monastery in Upper Egypt*, eds. S.J. Davis, D. Schriever, M. Farag, *Corpus scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium* 681, *Scriptores Coptici* 52, Leuven 2020, p. 158 (Coptic and Arabic), 159 (transl.).

<sup>21</sup> *Vita Longini* 39, ed. T. Orlandi, pp. 90, 92. Longinus was active in the fifth century, but his *Life* was written much later.

<sup>22</sup> Pseudo-Agathonicus of Tarsus, *De providentia contra Stratonicum*, ed. Crum, pp. 37 (text), 93 (transl.). The work is currently dated to the early fifth century.

<sup>23</sup> Papyri abbreviations follow the conventions outlined in the *Checklist of Editions of Greek, Latin, Demotic, and Coptic Papyri, Ostraca, and Tablets* [access: 20.09.2024].

<sup>24</sup> This document represents an agreement between Severus, a presbyter of the Monastery of Apa John, and a camel herder. Severus specifies the categories of recipients to whom the camel herder may be dispatched. Notably, he does not differentiate clergy as a distinct group.

document (date) <sup>23</sup>	text	translation	Document type
<i>P.MoscowCopt.</i> 76, ll. 7-9 (turn of the 6th and 7th c.)	πΕΤΝΑΡ ΔΤΣΩΤῆ ΔΕ [ἸΣΩ]Κ ΖΗ ΝΚΛΗΡΙΚΟΣ Η ΝΔΑΪΚ[ΟC	Who will not obey you among clergy or laypeople	Letter to Deacon Paul from Bishop Abraham
<i>P.Pisentius</i> 56, ll. 5-6 (590-632)	ΖΩC ΜΟΝΑΧΗ ἸΠΕΝ(ΜΟΝΑCΤΗΡΙΟΝ ΔΝ) [---] ΑΛΛ ΖΩC ΚΟCΜΙΚΗ	Not as a nun of our m(onastery) [---] but as a laywoman.	Letter?

All passages above, with the exception of the last one, endeavour to encompass all Christians. Remarkably, in addition to the most prevalent dichotomy of *monachos* and *kosmikos*, there also emerges the pairing of *klerikos* and *kosmikos*, and even a tripartite division of priest (*oueeb*), *laikos*, and *monachos*. The majority of these documents serve a legal purpose. The lexical diversity across them indicates that there was no uniform consensus regarding the concept of the Church as a collection of fixed, distinct groups.

Up to this point, we observe that the delineation between the categories of clergy, laity, and monastics is somewhat indistinct. However, we might presume that the latter two groups are generally identifiable in the sources. While this assertion often holds, it must be acknowledged that there are numerous intermediate and ambiguous situations.

## Clergy

The distinction between clergy, who were responsible primarily for liturgy, preaching, and charitable duties, and the rest of the Christian community emerged no later than the middle of the third century AD. With the members of the clergy gaining privileges in the Christian empire, this distinction became an intrinsic element of the social and legal order.<sup>25</sup> While bishops, presbyters, and deacons formed an indisputable core of the clergy, the status of the so-called minor orders was ambiguous and disputed.<sup>26</sup> Beyond these ranks, there were also individuals of particular status, such as the church warden (*qayyim*), who was expected to remain celibate.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>25</sup> On lexical distinctions, see H. Pietras, *Klerykalizacja kapłaństwa w Kościele starożytnym, czyli przyczynek do historii języka religijnego*, [w:] *Sympozja Kazimierskie poświęcone kulturze świata późnego antyku i wczesnego chrześcijaństwa*, vol. 6: *Ofiara – kapłan – ołtarz w świecie późnego antyku*, eds. B. Iwaszkiewicz-Wronikowska, D. Próchniak, Lublin 2008, pp. 111-116. For discussion of the clergy's economic dependence on lay offerings, see G. Schöllgen, *Die Anfänge der Professionalisierung des Klerus und das kirchliche Amt in der Syrischen Didaskalie*, Münster 1998, pp. 52-100.

<sup>26</sup> E. Wipszycka, *Les ordres mineurs...*, pp. 181-215.

<sup>27</sup> *Tartīb al-kahanūt*, ed. J. Assfalg, pp. 16 (text), 86 (transl.).

The *Canons of (Pseudo-)Hippolytus*<sup>28</sup> address the ordination rites pertaining to bishops, presbyters, and deacons. Additionally, they discuss the roles of readers and subdeacons, albeit with the caveat that no imposition of hands occurs in institution rites.<sup>29</sup> In another canon, an exhortation to the observance of daily morning prayer, alongside all the people, includes the participation of presbyters, deacons, subdeacons, and readers, referring to them collectively as clergy (اكليس from Greek κληρος).<sup>30</sup> Clearly, within the framework of the *Canons of Hippolytus*, the clergy was structured into five ranks – comprising three higher and two lower orders – all of which are juxtaposed with the laity.

The author of the *Canons of (Pseudo-)Athanasius*<sup>31</sup> writes about seven perfects spirits who are in the Church, the figure that stand for bishops, presbyters, deacons, subdeacons, readers, cantors, and janitors. He calls them metaphorically seven pillars and seven eyes of God. He also applies more technical vocabulary, writing about seven ranks with words *ṭaḡmāt* (طغمات = τάγματα) and *rutba* (رتبة), denoting the levels of ordination.<sup>32</sup> Elsewhere in the text, the author once again reassures that janitors belong to clergy and acknowledges all seven ranks as priestly (*kahanūt* كهنوت)<sup>33</sup>, employing an Arabic term synonymous with *klerikos* found in extant Coptic fragments. It becomes evident that by the fourth century, at least two distinct conceptualisations of the clergy – and consequently, the laity – coexisted. Interestingly, neither Pseudo-Hippolytus' nor Pseudo-Athanasius' canons address the status of monks. Both collections likely regarded monastics as a category that transcends the conventional division between clergy and laity.

From the 4th century onward, the number of clerical orders stabilised at seven, though the specific composition of the list varied over time. Over the centuries, the clerical status of certain minor orders diminished, and their members assimilated into

<sup>28</sup> The *Canons of (Pseudo-)Hippolytus* date to approximately the mid-fourth century AD, these canons were originally composed in Greek but are extant solely in Arabic; see P. Bradshaw, *The Canons of Hippolytus*, Piscataway, NJ, 2010, p. 7.

<sup>29</sup> *Canones (Pseudo-)Hippolyti* 7, ed. Coquin, pp. 358 [90], 360 [92], transl. Bebawi, pp. 15-16.

<sup>30</sup> *Canones (Pseudo-)Hippolyti* 21 ed. Coquin, p. 386 [118], transl. Bebawi, p. 26.

<sup>31</sup> The *Canons of (Pseudo-)Athanasius* constitute a corpus of regulations attributed to an unidentified bishop. Subsequently, these directives underwent a process of reorganisation into numbered canons. The work originated at the turn of the fourth and fifth centuries, with the earliest surviving manuscript fragment dating to the sixth or seventh century. Complete collection of the canons exists solely in their Arabic translation. The introduction to the *Canons* as a historical source is E. Wipszycka, *A Certain Bishop and a Certain Diocese in Egypt at the Turn of the Fourth and Fifth Centuries: The Testimony of the Canons of Athanasius*, “U Schyłku Starożytności – Studia Źródłoznawcze” 2022, 17-18, pp. 91-115.

<sup>32</sup> *Canones (Pseudo-)Athanasii* 10, ed. Riedel, transl. Riedel/Crum, p. 20-21; G. Graf, *Verzeichnis arabischer kirchlicher Termini*, Corpus scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium 147, Subsidia 8, Leuven 1954, pp. 51, 74.

<sup>33</sup> *Canones (Pseudo-)Athanasii* 53, ed. Riedel, transl. Riedel/Crum, p. 37.

the ranks of the laity.<sup>34</sup> Around 1350, the Coptic encyclopedist Ibn Sabbā‘ enumerated seven ecclesiastical ranks (*rutab*), listing them as follows: reader, subdeacon, deacon, archdeacon, presbyter, hegumenos, and bishop.<sup>35</sup>

## Monks

Asceticism has been a significant aspect of the Christianity since its inception. Among laypeople, there were always individuals inclined to choose celibacy or engage in forms of self-mortification. However, monasticism was a new phenomenon that emerged in the East around the turn of the third and fourth centuries, complicating the traditional twofold distinction between laity and clergy. Monasticism emerged as a movement among laypeople. Monastic heroes, such as Anthony or Pachomius, were not ordained, and the sole desire for ordination was unwelcome among early monastics. Monasteries benefited from services performed by external clergy or limited the number of ordained brothers. In the coenobia, presbyters were dependent on non-ordained abbots.<sup>36</sup>

Monks were held in greater reverence among the common folk than presbyters and deacons who lived among laypeople. In Egypt, however, the episcopacy shortly became the domain of monks since they were commonly perceived as closer to God than non-monastic clergy. They were also seen as more loyal and dependent on the patriarch than bishops from local noble families rooted in the local networks of power and wealth. The monasticisation of the episcopacy fused monks and clerics to some extent and pitted these groups against other Christians. Even non-ordained monks gained a distinct identity.

The first attestation of the term *monachos* appears in documentary papyri from 323 and 324.<sup>37</sup> Notably, in a document from 324, the term *monachos* was used by a non-Christian, which indicates that at least in the local context of Karanis (in the Fayyum), the word was commonly used to denote a Christian of some specific kind. However, we cannot be sure that they were the same Christians whom Athanasius called *monachoi* in his *Life of Anthony*, written in the fifth or sixth decade of the fourth century.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>34</sup> E. Wipszycka, *Les ordres mineurs...*, p. 211.

<sup>35</sup> *Tartīb al-kahanūt*, ed. J. Assfalg, pp. 4 (text), 70 (transl.); Ibn Sabbā‘, *Pretiosa margarita*, ed. J. Périer, pp. 740-746 [150-156].

<sup>36</sup> On an attitude of early monasticism toward clergy, see E. Wipszycka, *Moines et communautés monastiques en Égypte (IVe - VIIIe siècles)*, Journal of Juristic Papyrology Supplement 11, Warsaw 2009, pp. 437-469.

<sup>37</sup> *P.Col.* VII 171; *P. Neph.* 48; E.A Judge, *The Earliest Use of Monachos for ‘Monk’ (P.Coll.Youtie 77) and the Origins of Monasticism*, “Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum” 1977, 20, pp. 72-89.

<sup>38</sup> Athanasius of Alexandria, *Vita Antonii* 41, ed. Bartelink, p. 246.

Significantly, the term *monachos* in the Kellis Account Book, a record of income and expenditures discovered in the Dakhla Oasis of the Western Desert, likely denotes a Manichaean.<sup>39</sup> Ascetics were also referred to as *apotaktikoi*, *anachoretai*, *eremita*, all of which are synonymous with *monachoi* in most contexts.<sup>40</sup> Irrespective of the label used, determining who was and who was not a monk in the fourth century was a challenging endeavour, particularly because formal criteria for monastic status, such as a specific uniform, tonsure, monastic vows and novitiate, remained undefined for a long period. Monasticism, in the early period, was predominantly practised as a way of life not an legal status. Individuals could leave that way or be excluded from it.<sup>41</sup>

In some cases, there remains uncertainty as to whether an individual should be classified as a monk, particularly in certain contexts. Regarding instances of ambiguous status, the *Life of Sauef of Kalamun* offers a good example. The work was composed at the end of the ninth century, but recounts events from the seventh century: ‘Then the holy Apa Samuel ... assembled all the brothers who were on the mountain of Neklone: they numbered two hundred lay [literally: ‘worldly brothers’ (P.P.)] brothers and one hundred and twenty monks. (εγείρε ἡσνάχ ἡωε ἡσον ἡκωσμηκον ἡἡωε χογωτ ἡμοναχος).’<sup>42</sup> The inquiry naturally arises: who were the lay brothers – a terminological amalgam combining elements specific to both monks and laypeople? Historians have proposed various interpretations, yet the resolution remains far from unequivocal.<sup>43</sup>

In certain circumstances, the ambiguity surrounding an individual’s status is indicative of a departure from conventional usage of terms typically reserved for addressing monks and clergymen. While such terminology can serve as a useful marker of clerical

<sup>39</sup> P. Kell. Gr. 96, ll. 975-976, see P. Piowarczyk, *Monastycyzm manichejski w Egipcie*, “U Schyłku Starożytności – Studia Źródłoznawcze” 2015, 15, pp. 50-57.

<sup>40</sup> M. Choat, *The Development and Usage of Terms for ‘Monk’ in Late Antique Egypt*, “Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum” 2002, 45, pp. 5-23; on the term ‘monks’, see E. Wipszycka, *Moines et communautés...*, p. 292-294; on the term ‘apotaktikos’, see a recent survey E. Wipszycka, *Apotaktikoi – apotaktitai: Étude sur la terminologie monastique (Égypte – Jérusalem – Asie Mineure)*, “Journal of Juristic Papyrology” 2023, 53, pp. 193-229.

<sup>41</sup> For discussion on monastic status and its indicators, see E. Wipszycka, *Moines et communautés...*, pp. 365-381. For details on specific monastic garment, refer to M. Mossakowska-Gaubert, *Le vêtement monastique en Égypte (IVe-VIIIe siècle)*, Bibliothèque de l’Études Coptes 28, Cairo 2023, esp. pp. 157-158 on the origins of monastic costume.

<sup>42</sup> Isaac of Kalamun, *Vita Samuelis archimandrita* 9, ed. Alcock, pp. 9 (text), 83-84 (transl.).

<sup>43</sup> Alcock translates this term as ‘lay brothers’, though he acknowledges that he has found no other attestations of it. Wipszycka, on the other hand, interprets the mention in the *Vita Samuelis* as referring to the *pistoi* as “des laïcs vivant en permanence au monastère (pour différentes raisons) ou vivant à l’extérieur mais en lien direct avec l’établissement” (E. Wipszycka, *Moines et communautés...*, p. 383). In a new study, Thomas Laver (“Hundreds and Thousands – Questions of Monastic Population at Balā’izah and Beyond”, in J.-L. Fournet (ed.), *Actes du XXXe Congrès international de papyrologie*, *Studia Papyrologica et Aegyptiaca Parisina* 7, Paris 2025, p. 424) sees here lay servants and perhaps visitors to the monastery. The term *pistoi* is also used to refer to laypeople in contrast to monks. In certain contexts, it may technically refer to novices, though this is not a consistent usage.

or monastic standing in documentary letters, it may also engender misunderstanding. The designation ‘apa’ provides a salient illustration of this phenomenon. Although commonly employed to denote clerical or monastic affiliation, it is occasionally extended to prominent lay figures as a mark of respect in certain documentary texts. Consequently, the lack of wide context within a single letter often makes impossible definitive determination of the precise status of an individual identified as ‘apa’. The best-known layman bearing the title ‘apa’ is Apollos of Aphrodito, the father of the renowned Dioscorus of Aphrodito (died 585). Apollos was the founder of the ‘Monastery of Apa Apollos,’ and in various letters and legal documents, he was addressed with the honorifics ‘apa’ and ‘your holiness.’ While it is conceivable that he resided within the monastery, he did not adopt a monastic lifestyle characterised by seclusion and the renunciation of worldly activities. This is evidenced by the simultaneous use of titles such as ‘apa’ and ‘revered brother’ in conjunction with his roles as the leader of the village (*protokometes*) and administrator (*dioiketes*) of a large estate.<sup>44</sup>

### Sources for the Study of Laypeople in Late Antique Egypt

In the research on laypeople, I concentrate on four clusters of sources that have shown promise in investigating the religious activities of laypeople in late antique Egypt.

The first cluster encompasses canonical sources, for which I have already provided illustrative examples.<sup>45</sup> Church canons endeavoured to delineate the structure and practices of the Church in a methodical manner. Conceived primarily as an idealised agenda rather than empirical field reports reflecting the current state of affairs, canonical collections offer a comprehensive portrayal of the Church, even if only in local dimension. They focus primarily on proper participation in the liturgy, particularly regarding behavior in church and maintaining ritual purity. By studying canons, we can reconstruct a conception of the ‘laity’, particularly in terms of a ‘lay body’, in such abstract outlines that it may serve as a heuristic device applicable beyond the specific context of any given canonical text.

<sup>44</sup> L. Vanderheyden, *The Figure of Apollos, Father of Dioscorus, in the Light of Coptic Letters From Sixth-Century Aphrodito*, [in:] *Living the End of Antiquity: Individual Histories from Byzantine to Islamic Egypt*, eds. S.E. Huebner et al., Millennium-Studien zu Kultur und Geschichte des ersten Jahrtausends n. Chr. 84, Berlin- Boston 2020, pp. 119-128. See also E. Wipszycka, T. Derda, *L'emploi des titres abba, apa et papas dans l'Égypte byzantine*, “Journal of Juristic Papyrology” 1994, 24, pp. 23-56.

<sup>45</sup> For canonical literature in Egypt in general, see W. Riedel, *Die Kirchenrechtsquellen des Patriarchats Alexandrien*, Leipzig 1900; H. Kaufhold, *Sources of Canon Law in the Eastern Churches*, [in:] W. Hartmann, K. Pennington, *The History of Byzantine and Eastern Canon Law to 1500*, Washington, D.C., 2012, pp. 263-287; T. Orlandi, *Coptic Texts Relating to the Church Canons: An Overview*, Roma 2016.

The presumed Apostolic or patristic authority of canon collections was likely to have influenced episcopal practices beyond merely providing an ideological framework. However, the purported antiquity of these collections did not preclude the reshaping and updating of canonical material through additions and interpolations (deletions were less frequent). This process often led to internal contradictions and anachronisms within the canons. Resolving such issues typically fell within the purview of the local bishop. Documentary papyri, which occasionally reference canons, served as a means to some extent for checking the actual implementation of canonical norms.

Secondly, a rich, largely unexplored source of evidence lies in the homiletic texts preserved in Coptic, which were directed at lay audiences. Reproaches against the behavior of the people are scattered through many homiletical pieces. We may expect that the performative nature of such works assumes interactions between the preacher and the gathered faithful.<sup>46</sup> However, in Egyptian churches of late antiquity, sermons composed for a specific occasion were rarely delivered. More often, existing compositions were read aloud.<sup>47</sup> Although these texts contain phrases and references to the behavior of the faithful, they are usually generalisations, which – similar to ecclesiastical legal texts – are based more on an assumed concept of the lay faithful rather than the reality of a specific community. Nevertheless, some texts with localised historical grounding have survived. Among these is the homily commemorating St Onuphrius, delivered by Bishop Pisentius in the saint's sanctuary in Tsinti, on the western bank of the Nile opposite Coptus. Pisentius died in 632, so the homily dates from the first decades of the seventh century. It contains numerous admonitions directed at the faithful, which reflect the actual behaviors observed at the sanctuary, such as follows:

Moreover, let the women not walk with a haughty look, or shamelessly gaze with their eyes into any man's face, or walk with their faces uncovered, not only here in church, but also on the streets of your village [...]. Very carefully watch yourself when you are approaching the altar, with great circumspection; do not be in haste as you walk, but walk in an orderly manner [...]. Furthermore, do not leave the church to sit by the door and speak vain and empty words to one another in whispered conversation.<sup>48</sup>

The third, underutilised source cluster consists of collections of miracles from several sanctuaries in Egypt. The most valuable to us are the collections from two centres

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<sup>46</sup> See A. Olivar, *Sobre las ovaciones tributadas a los antiguos predicadores cristianos*, "Didaskalia" 1982, 12, pp. 13-43. Olivar provides several examples relating to Greek preaching in Egypt.

<sup>47</sup> On homilies in Egypt, see R.A. Greer, *Introduction*, [in:] *Homiletica from the Pierpont Morgan Library: Seven Coptic Homilies Attributed to Basil the Great, John Chrysostom, and Euodius of Rome*, ed. L. Depuydt, *Corpus scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium 525 Scriptores Coptici*, 44, Leuven 1991, pp. V-XI; T. Orlandi, *Cycles*, [in:] *Coptic Encyclopedia*, ed. A.S. Atiya, vol. 3, New York 1991, pp. 666-668.

<sup>48</sup> Pisentius of Coptus, *In Onnophrium*, ed. W.E. Crum, pp. 49, 51-52; transl. T. Vivian, pp. 180, 182-183.

located near Alexandria: the sanctuary of St Menas in Abu Mina and that of Sts Cyrus and John in Menuthis. Miracle collections have survived in Greek, Coptic, and Arabic.<sup>49</sup> It is widely accepted that these collections were created by the clergy of the respective sanctuaries, who aimed to promote the cult. However, it seems that the reasons for compiling such collections were more complex. The most extensive is the Greek collection of miracles created by Sophronius of Jerusalem in the second decade of the seventh century.<sup>50</sup> It contains seventy accounts of healings that took place at the sanctuary of Sts Cyrus and John. This is the only collection for which we can say more precisely about the author and the time of its creation. Nevertheless, all the collections primarily recount stories concerning lay pilgrims. Although some of the narratives are stereotypical in nature, the activities of the faithful at the sanctuaries reflect actual practices, as these stories were meant to serve as a narrative guide to proper ritual behavior. Many stories also criticise inappropriate actions, giving us insight into activities that were disapproved of by the sanctuary staff. These are excellent sources for studying the practices of vows and offerings, incubation, and the veneration of icons.

Finally, the fourth group of sources is of a completely different nature—these are legal documents and documentary letters preserved on papyrus and ostraca. These documents were written by concrete individuals, even if we do not know their identities. They are embedded in specific interpersonal relationships. We have few episcopal letters by Bishop Abraham of Hermonthis and Pesynthius of Coptus with decisions concerning laypeople who committed transgressions resulting in excommunication.<sup>51</sup> In the private, non-literary letters, ancient people rarely expressed direct opinions on religious matters. Thus, correspondence is suitable for studying lay religiosity only in certain specific aspects, primarily concepts of holiness, sin, and the notions and prac-

<sup>49</sup> For the miracles of St Menas, see the recent volume M. Wysocki and P. Piwowarczyk (eds.), *The Miracles of St Menas in the Traditions of the Christian East*, “Vox Patrum” 2025, 94. There is, as yet, no comprehensive study of Egyptian miracle collections, nor even of those in Coptic alone. For a concise introduction, see G. Schenke, *Das koptisch hagiographische Dossier des Heiligen Kolluthos, Arzt, Märtyrer und Wunderheiler*, Corpus scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium 650, Subsidia 132, Leuven 2013, pp. 193-204.

<sup>50</sup> *Los ‘Thaumata’ de Sofronio: Contribucion al estudio de la ‘incubatio’ Cristiana*, ed. N. Fernández Marcos, Madrid 1975. A valuable resource for studying the *Miracles* is the annotated translation: Sophrone de Jérusalem, *Miracles des saints Cyr et Jean (BHG I 477-479)*. *Traduction commentée*, ed. and transl. J. Gascou, Paris 2006.

<sup>51</sup> G. Schmelz, *Kirchliche Amtsträger im spätantiken Ägypten: nach den Aussagen der griechischen und koptischen Papyri und Ostraka*, Archiv für Papyrusforschung und verwandte Gebiete 13, München-Leipzig 2002, pp. 130-133; R. Dekker, *Episcopal Networks and Authority in Late Antique Egypt: Bishops of the Theban Region at Work*, Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta, Leuven 2018, pp. 190-193, 256-260. The transgressions punished by Abraham include offences committed in church (probably theft), acts of violence against clergy, and illicit marital relations. The cases dealt with by Pesynthius are more varied, extending also to the improper performance of religious duties.

tices of prayer and blessing, which is how I have used it.<sup>52</sup> Such themes are primarily present in letters addressed to monks (and quite a few of these have survived). They are expressed not only explicitly but also through the choice of vocabulary and metaphors. One might argue that epistolary language is simply part of the cultural baggage, replicated as an inseparable element of the medium of the letter itself. However, we must not forget that the relationship between language and consciousness is reciprocal, and meanings always function within a broader cultural context.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, and in response to the questions posed in the introduction, it can be stated that in late antique Egypt, the laity constituted a social group within the Christian community that stood in contrast to the clergy and monks, but whose identity was often ambiguous and fluid. This identity had to be defined in relation to specific sources or groups of sources.

Regarding the second question, we do indeed have extensive corpora of sources that can be used to study lay religiosity. However, given the significant limitations of these sources due to their genre characteristics or social contexts, any conclusions drawn from them must be cross-referenced in order to achieve a picture that more closely aligns with historical reality

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<sup>52</sup> P. Piwowarczyk, *Monastic Microtheologies: Religious Expressions and Imagery in the Monastic Letters from Western Thebes*, Journal of Juristic Papyrology Supplement 42, Warsaw 2022.

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## NIE TYLKO KLER I MNISI: UWAGI WSTĘPNE NA TEMAT RELIGIJNOŚCI ŚWIECKICH W PÓŹNOANTYCZNYM EGIPCIE

### Streszczenie

Artykuł stanowi wprowadzenie do badań nad religijnością świeckich chrześcijan w Egipcie późnoantycznym i średniowiecznym, koncentrując się na określeniach i statusie osób świeckich od IV wieku. Świeccy przedstawiani są jako kategoria niestabilna i płynna, definiowana przede wszystkim w opozycji do duchowieństwa i mnichów. Status świeckich był jednak często niejednoznaczny, ponieważ występowały kategorie przejściowe między klerem a świeckimi (np. niższy kler, a w nim lektorzy czy odźwierni) oraz pomiędzy świeckimi a mnichami (np. „bracia świeccy”). Artykuł wyróżnia także cztery główne grupy źródeł do badań nad religijnością świeckich: kanony kościelne, homilie, kolekcje cudów oraz papirusy dokumentowe. Każda z tych grup została krótko omówiona, ze wskazaniem jej znaczenia dla studiów nad praktykami religijnymi chrześcijan świeckich.

**Słowa kluczowe:** chrześcijaństwo egipskie, chrześcijaństwo koptyjskie, pobożność świeckich, kanony kościelne

BEYOND THE CLERGY AND MONKS:  
PRELIMINARY OBSERVATIONS ON LAY RELIGIOSITY IN LATE ANTIQUE EGYPT

S u m m a r y

This article provides an introduction to the study of lay Christian religiosity in late antique and medieval Egypt, focusing on the designations and status of laypeople from the fourth century onward. The laity is presented as an unstable and fluid category, defined primarily in opposition to clergy and monks. However, the lay status of individuals was often ambiguous, as there were overlapping identities between the clergy and laity (e.g., those in 'minor orders') and between the laity and monks (e.g., 'the lay brothers'). The article identifies four major clusters of sources for studying lay religiosity: church canons, homilies, miracle collections, and documentary papyri. A brief overview of each cluster is provided, highlighting their relevance to the study of lay Christian practices.

**Keywords:** Egyptian Christianity, Coptic Christianity, lay piety, church canons