

# The Lives of the Desert Fathers



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# **The Lives of the Desert Fathers**

**Introduction by  
Sister Benedicta Ward SLG**

**Translated by  
Norman Russell**



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Dedicated to  
THE MOST REVEREND METROPOLITAN  
ANTHONY OF SOUROZH  
and  
PROFESSOR JOCELYN TOYNBEE

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors wish to acknowledge the help they have had from each other in the preparation of this book: it has been a joint enterprise in every part, and the product of discussion over several years. The translation of the Greek text is the work of Norman Russell and the introductory chapters are by Benedicta Ward. The notes and the translation of Rufinus have been shared between them. The map was drawn by Norman Russell, who also compiled the indexes.

Each wishes to apologize to the other for defects and at the same time to express gratitude for the work of the other. In dedicating this book to Metropolitan Anthony Bloom and Professor Jocelyn Toynbee, each acknowledges a debt beyond words for the encouragement they have received in discovering the *saecula sine fine ad requiescendum* of the desert tradition.

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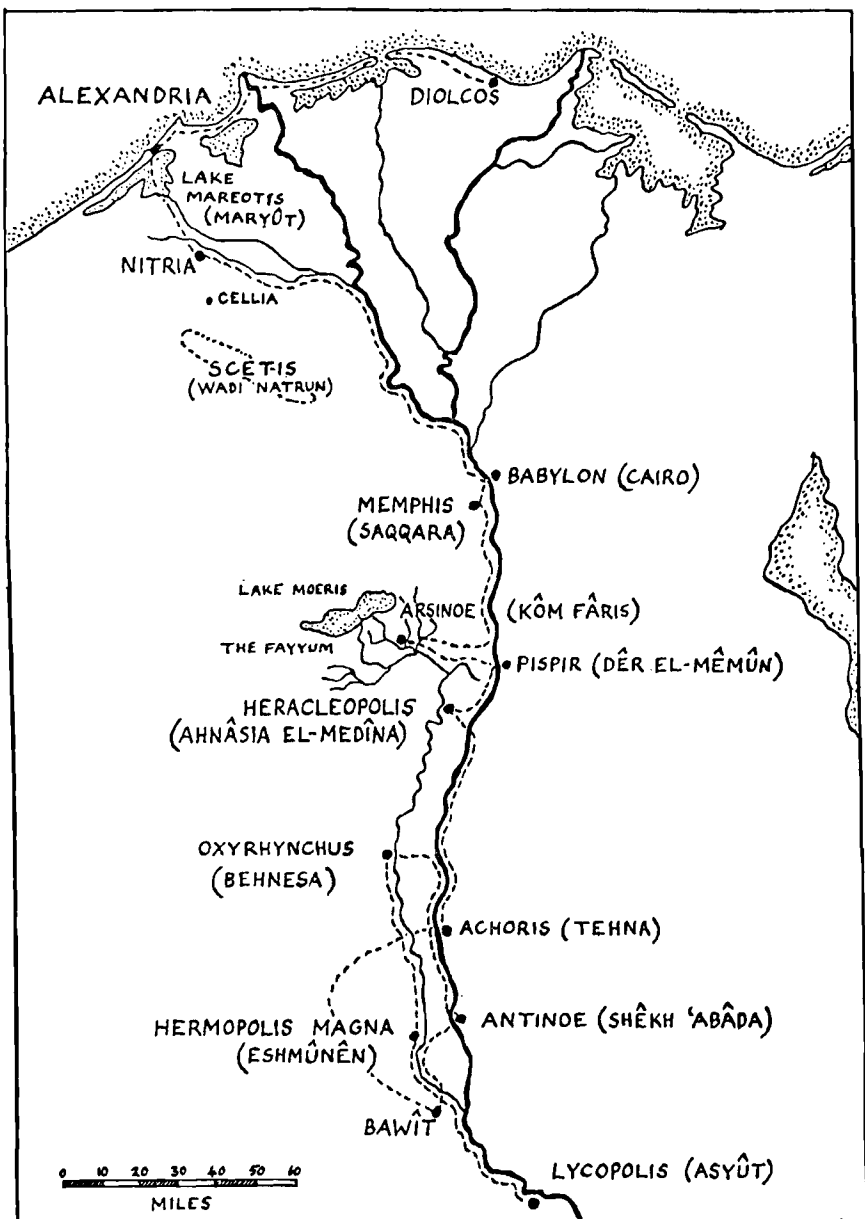
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## ABBREVIATIONS

<i>Acta SS</i>	<i>Acta Sanctorum</i> , ed. the Bollandists, Antwerp and Brussels, 1643 ff., in progress.
<i>ACW</i>	<i>Ancient Christian Writers</i> , ed. J. Quasten and J. C. Plumpe, Westminster, Maryland and London.
<i>Anal. Boll.</i>	<i>Analecta Bollandiana</i> , Paris and Brussels, 1882 ff.
<i>DACL</i>	<i>Dictionnaire d'archéologie chrétienne et de liturgie</i> , ed. F. Cabrol and H. Leclercq, Paris, 1907-53.
<i>DS</i>	<i>Dictionnaire de spiritualité</i> , ed. M. Viller, F. Cavallera and J. de Guibert, Paris, 1937 ff., in progress.
<i>HM</i>	<i>Historia Monachorum in Aegypto</i> , ed. A.-J. Festugière, Brussels, 1961 and 1971.
<i>HM (Fr.)</i>	French translation by A.-J. Festugière, <i>Les moines d'Orient IV/1, Enquête sur les moines d'Égypte</i> , Brussels, 1964 and 1971.
<i>Lausiac History</i>	Palladius, <i>Lausiac History</i> , ed. C. Butler, <i>Texts and Studies</i> 6, Cambridge, 1898-1904.
<i>Life of St Antony</i>	Athanasius, <i>Vita S. Antonii</i> , PG. 26, cols 835-976; trans. R. Meyer, <i>ACW</i> 10, 1950.
<i>LSJ</i>	<i>A Greek-English Lexicon</i> , ed. H. Liddell, R. Scott and H. Jones, Oxford, 1977.
Milne	J. G. Milne, <i>Egypt under Roman Rule</i> , London, 1924.
<i>OCA</i>	<i>Orientalia Christiana Analecta</i> , Rome, 1923 ff.
<i>PG</i>	Migne, <i>Patrologiae cursus completus. Ser. graeco-latina</i> , Paris, 1857-66.
<i>PGL</i>	<i>A Patristic Greek Lexicon</i> , ed. G. W. H. Lampe, Oxford, 1961.
<i>Philotheos</i>	Theodoret, <i>Histoire des moines de Syrie</i> , SC 234, Paris, 1977.
<i>PL</i>	Migne, <i>Patrologiae cursus completus. Ser. latina</i> , Paris, 1844-55.
<i>Pitra</i>	<i>Juris Ecclesiastici Graecorum, Historia et Monumenta</i> , ed. J. B. Pitra, 2 vols, Rome, 1864.
Rufinus	Rufinus, <i>Historia Monachorum in Aegypto</i> , PL. 21, cols 387-462.
<i>SC</i>	<i>Sources chrétiennes</i> , Paris, 1942 ff.
Veilleux	A. Veilleux, <i>La Liturgie dans le cénobitisme pachômien au quatrième siècle</i> , <i>Studia Anselmiana</i> 57, Rome, 1968.
White	H. G. Evelyn White, <i>The Monasteries of the Wadi'n Natrun: Part II, The History of the Monasteries of Nitria and Scetis</i> , New York, 1932-3.



MAP OF THE JOURNEY INTO EGYPT

## INTRODUCTION



## CHAPTER I

### THE *HISTORIA MONACHORUM IN AEGYPTO*: TEXT AND SOURCES

'I hear that you are penetrating the hidden places of Egypt, visiting the bands of monks and going the round of heaven's family on earth . . . at last the full weight of truth has burst upon me: Rufinus is in Nitria and has reached the blessed Macarius.'<sup>1</sup> Thus Jerome in Antioch in 375 wrote to his friend Rufinus, and many years later Rufinus himself records this visit to Egypt with nostalgia: 'When we were drawing near this place they were aware that foreign brethren were approaching, and at once they poured out of their cells like a swarm of bees. With joyful speed and glad haste they ran to meet us;' and of the last stage of the journey to Scetis he wrote, 'This is the utter desert where each monk remains alone in his cell. . . . There is a huge silence and a great quiet there.'<sup>2</sup>

The 'huge silence', *silentium ingens*, *quies magna* of the desert was frequently invaded at the end of the fourth century by such visitors as Rufinus. Half a century earlier various monastic experiments had begun in the deserts of Egypt; they had flourished to such an extent that by 394 travellers reported that the population of the desert equalled that of the towns. *Anachoresis* was in the air and rumour of it spread throughout the Christian world. The central record of the early monks is to be found in the various collections of *Sayings of the Fathers*<sup>3</sup> which were compiled and circulated among the monks themselves. These anthologies of sayings attributed to the first monks of Egypt have a kind of authenticity which is unique. They are neither accounts of the way of life of the monks nor records of their teaching, but glimpses of them as they were known to their disciples; there is little literary artifice about such material: it is as rough and craggy as the landscape of Antinoë, 'that rugged desert in the mountain.' But these were followed by more sophisticated works. Antony the Great died in 356; within a year, Athanasius began to write an account of his life.<sup>4</sup> He had known Antony well, having spent some time with him as a young man, and Antony had visited him in Alexandria. The account was written in Greek and it was soon widely read in the Greek-speaking world; some years later Evagrius of Antioch translated the *Life* into Latin for 'the brethren from overseas'

(*fratres peregrinos*) who were asking urgently for some account of the father of monasticism, because 'you have it in mind to model your lives after his life of zeal'. The *Life of St Antony* by Athanasius, and the Latin version by Evagrius,<sup>5</sup> is the first literary account of life in the deserts of Egypt in the fourth century. Its influence on monastic life and on hagiography was immense.

In addition to this encomium of Antony the Great, however, there are various accounts written by the visitors who came to the desert during the fourth and fifth centuries. Travellers through Egypt had told of the monasticism they saw there; the *Life of St Antony* confirmed their wonder; and fired with enthusiasm visitors began to undertake the journey into Egypt in order to learn from the monks at first hand; Basil the Great came, then Rufinus, Melania, Jerome, Palladius, and John Cassian with Germanus. It is from their accounts that a picture of life in the desert can be formed. It is a picture seen, of course, by outsiders, dependent on what they observed during brief visits and on what they were told. Moreover, these accounts are meant for the edification of a very different audience from the Coptic monks; they were primarily for the monks of the West, eager to follow the same spiritual path though under new physical and mental conditions. When visitors such as these came to Egypt they were received by the monks; they observed the life of the fathers and also shared in their conversations. There were others, however, the tourists of the desert, and with these the monks were more elusive: polite, but definitely not at home. One monk, for instance, had instructed his servant, with the diplomacy of the East, to distinguish when announcing two kinds of visitors; if he said to the old man, 'There are visitors here from Jerusalem,' he would welcome them and talk with them for as long as they wished to stay; but if the servant said, 'There are visitors from Egypt,' they would be given some food and sent away.

One of the journeys through Egypt at the end of the fourth century produced the account in Greek called the *Historia Monachorum in Aegypto*,<sup>6</sup> which has been translated here (pp. 49-119) and which I have chosen as the basis of this account of Egyptian monastic life. Despite the doubts of some modern scholars,<sup>7</sup> I am confident that the *Historia Monachorum* describes a real journey. Eighty years ago Dom Cuthbert Butler came to the same conclusion, and his chief reasons for doing so are still compelling. They are (1) that the eleven certain and two conjectural fixed localities follow, with the exception of Oxyrhynchus, an accurate south to north geographical order, which would have been impossible for anyone who had not been over the ground; (2) that the approximate ages of the chief solitaries are accurate for

394-5, the date of the journey; (3) that the dangers enumerated in the Epilogue have a circumstantial freshness about them.<sup>8</sup>

One problem for Butler was the odd position of Oxyrhynchus in the list of chapters, well attested in both the Greek and Latin versions, which appears to place this city too far to the south. If the author is describing a real journey, however, the position of Oxyrhynchus can be accounted for. The towns on the left bank of the Nile lie some way from the river. About forty miles below Lycopolis the Nile branches to the left. This subsidiary waterway, the Bahr Yûsuf, runs parallel to the Nile, passing Hermopolis Magna, Oxyrhynchus and Heracleopolis before flowing into Lake Moeris in the Fayyum. The travellers would appear to have descended the valley by the Bahr Yûsuf for the first part of their journey. The named places are therefore in an intelligible order and enable the journey to be reconstructed in some detail with plausible opportunities for the adventures mentioned in the Epilogue.

After visiting John at Lycopolis (Asyût) (I 1), the party sailed down the Nile until they came to the Bahr Yûsuf, which brought them to Ammon's monastery near Hermopolis Magna (Eshmûnen) (III 1).<sup>9</sup> At some point en route they stopped to see Abba Or. From Hermopolis they continued down the Bahr Yûsuf to Oxyrhynchus (Behnesa) (V 1), calling on Abba Bes on the way. Not far from Oxyrhynchus they saw Theon. Then they cut across country back to the Nile, at this point ten miles to the east. Their experiences in the marshy ground and the swamp (Epil. 5-6) could have occurred at this stage. On reaching the Nile they sailed back upstream to Antinoë (Shêkh 'Abâda), passing by Achoris (Tehna) without stopping. From Antinoë they made an expedition to see Elias (VII 1).

At this point the party split up. Perhaps the journey into 'the terrible desert' to see Elias has been too much for some of the brethren. The author with only two companions (VIII 48) set out for Apollo's monastery at Bawit (VIII 1),<sup>10</sup> another twenty five miles back up the Nile and then five miles or so to the west of the river. After a week with Apollo they set off into the desert with guides to see other fathers. Almost by chance they met Copres, who must have detained them with his stories for nearly as long as Apollo had done with his spiritual discourses. Finally they arrived at Achoris (Tehna) (XIII 1), which lies forty five miles north of Bawit in a direct line. It may be at this stage that, dispensing with guides after seeing Copres, they lost their way and spent their five days and nights in the desert (Epil. 4). At Achoris, where they saw Apelles, they may have rejoined the other members of the party, who had sensibly taken the easy route down the Nile from Antinoë.

From Achoris the party continued a further seventy miles down the Nile to Heracleopolis (Akhnasia el-Medina) (xiv 1) to visit Paphnutius's retreat. They then walked or sailed another twenty miles or so downstream to Pispir (Der el-Memun)<sup>11</sup> (xv 1), where they listened to Pityrion on the discernment of spirits. From Pispir they made their way overland to Arsinoë (Kôm Fâris) (xviii 1), which lies twenty five miles west of Pispir in the Fayyum. The wading through water for three days is likely to have happened at this stage (Epil.7). The next places to be mentioned are Babylon (near Cairo) and Memphis (Saqqara) (xviii 3). The direct route from Arsinoë lies forty five miles north-east across the desert. If the party took this route they could well have got lost (Epil.4). But perhaps they went back to the river, especially if they had already learnt their lesson about desert travel.

Babylon and Memphis mark the beginning of the delta. The party continued their journey by water, taking the left branch of the Nile and then the canal known as the Lycus,<sup>12</sup> before disembarking near the village of Nitria (El Barnugi) (xx 5). It was on their way to Nitria that they encountered the crocodiles (Epil.11). While the party was in this area the author seems to have made a journey on his own to the Cells (xx 9). From Nitria the travellers crossed Lake Mareotis (Epil.10) and no doubt visited Alexandria, which lies on the opposite shore. On leaving Alexandria they made their way along the shore to Diolcos (xxvi), meeting with robbers en route (Epil.8). From there they probably took ship for a Palestinian port.

The places mentioned in the narrative fit in so well in the order in which they occur with the topography of Egypt that it is difficult to believe that the author's journey was a literary convention.<sup>13</sup>

The Latin text of the *Historia Monachorum* has always been regarded as the work of Rufinus of Aquileia. Jerome thought it was an original work by Rufinus though that was not the case. It is apparent from internal evidence that Rufinus did not make the journey described, though he had visited those parts of Egypt earlier and mentions several of the monks elsewhere in his writings. The *Historia Monachorum* in Latin is well known and is printed in *Patrologia Latina*, volume 21, cols 387-462. The Greek text is very similar to the Latin account and is earlier than the work of Rufinus. It seems probable that Rufinus used this as the basis of his account of Egypt, though with the additions and alterations appropriate to a man who had seen the places and people for himself and regarded the experience as the most treasured of his life. The Greek text was once thought to be part of the *Lausiac History* of Palladius,<sup>14</sup> but it has been shown to be an independent account through Butier's work. Père A.-J. Festugière has recently edited the text of the



*Historia Monachorum* as a separate work, which, despite some criticisms, remains the definitive version and is the text translated here. The author of the Greek work remains anonymous; Butler tentatively suggested Timotheus, archdeacon of Alexandria c. 412, as 'the merest conjecture to which I attach no importance';<sup>15</sup> Fr Derwas Chitty repeats Sozomen's suggestion with perhaps more weight than Dom Butler lent to the matter.<sup>16</sup> It seems, however, vain speculation to go beyond the fact that the Greek text claims to have been written by a monk from the monastery at Jerusalem on the Mount of Olives which was founded by Rufinus. He says he is describing a journey actually undertaken by himself and a party of six other monks from Palestine. The author's personality shows in at least two places where he uses the first person singular instead of the usual first person plural: that is, when he consults Apollo privately about the details of ancient Egyptian pagan religion, and when he goes by himself to inspect 'Joseph's granaries'—according to Rufinus, the pyramids. He also makes a separate expedition alone to see Ammonius, at a place perhaps to be identified as Cellia, or the Cells. Of an independent and inquiring mind, he seems to have been the guiding spirit behind the expedition as well as its recorder later.

The Latin version by Rufinus draws on his visit to Nitria in 375. Butler has discussed its relationship to the Greek text and also to the much shorter Greek version by Sozomen, which he concludes was an abbreviation of the Latin.<sup>17</sup> At the end of chapter xxix in the Latin version (cf. p. 154) Rufinus refers to the eleventh book of his own *Ecclesiastical History* for further information about Macarius, which was not written before 400. Since Rufinus died in 410, the account can be dated within ten years. As Butler has shown, certain passages in the Latin were added after Rufinus, notably the antiphon for the feast of St Cecilia, which is used in the first part of chapter I (John of Lycopolis), and the homily on the will of Christ attached to the name of Paul the Simple, but with its roots in the *Rule of St Benedict*. In the Latin version of Rufinus, however, the differences from the Greek are generally in accord with his manner of translation, which is to paraphrase and to introduce material which expands or clarifies the text. Like Evagrius with his Latin version of the *Life of St Antony*, Rufinus did not consider himself bound by a word for word rendering of the Greek: 'direct word for word translation from one language to another darkens the sense and strangles it,'<sup>18</sup> which in this case proves an acceptable procedure in fact if not in theory. The additions in particular of Rufinus are of value in themselves, and while they are distinguished from the Greek by a more polished style and literary sense, they contain insights otherwise lacking. The main additions, where they add to the text, have therefore been

translated here. Particularly valuable is Rufinus's extra material on Nitria and Scetis, which is the main source for the topography of these monastic sites.

Let us now return to the experiences recorded in 394. It was not an easy journey into Egypt, and when John of Lycopolis congratulated the travelers with ponderous amusement on their determination to visit the desert there is a note of real admiration behind it:

And what remarkable thing did you expect to find, my dearest children, that you have undertaken such a long journey with so much labour in your desire to visit some poor simple men who possess nothing worth seeing or admiring? . . . I marvel at your zeal, how taking no account of so many dangers you have come to us to be edified, while we from laziness do not even wish to come out of our cave.

They had come, they said, in order to learn about monastic life from the Egyptian monks, and they were to do so partly by conversation but even more by observation.

We have come to you from Jerusalem for the good of our souls, so that what we have heard with our ears we may perceive with our eyes—for the ears are naturally less reliable than the eyes—and because very often forgetfulness follows what we hear, whereas the memory of what we have seen is not easily erased but remains imprinted on our minds like a picture.

The visitors were there both to observe and to listen. There seems to have been, surprisingly, no language problem in communicating with the monks. The party was composed of monks from Palestine from the Mount of Olives who spoke Greek and also Latin, but not, it seems, Coptic; they needed interpreters at several points where the old men knew no Greek. Among themselves it seems they spoke Latin, but mostly they were able to find someone who could understand Greek. The cosmopolitan state of community life in the desert is emphasised by the ease with which they managed to communicate. They found there men speaking a language they knew, as well as the Egyptian dialects. This had been the case from the beginning in Egypt when the monks had been joined by such men as the Roman Arsenius, an official in the palace of Theodosius.<sup>19</sup> Thus the way was opened for the visitors to hear and understand the teaching of the monks.

On the other hand, the monks themselves required a certain honesty among the visitors. When the party arrived at Lycopolis, one of the monks from Palestine who was a deacon seems to have disguised the fact in a slightly

shame-faced manner as if he expected that lay life would be the norm for the monks they were visiting. John of Lycopolis immediately rebuked him for this innocent deceit:

Do not spurn the grace of God, my child, and do not lie by denying the gift of Christ. For a lie is something alien regardless of whether its matter is grave or light.

It was a kind of tour undertaken by others. Jerome's friend and enemy Rufinus, as has already been said, visited Egypt in the company of Melania,<sup>20</sup> a young, wealthy and pious Roman widow who was escorted to Nitria by Isidore, a monk of Nitria and bishop of Damanhur. Melania spent six months there and visited several of the hermits, among them Pambo and Macarius the Alexandrian. She went back with Isidore to Palestine when the death of Athanasius placed an Arian on the episcopal throne in Alexandria and many of the monks fled from Egypt. Rufinus stayed longer, for six years, at first as a disciple of Didymus the Blind. Finally he also went to Palestine and set up a community for men on the Mount of Olives, near the convent for women established by Melania.

Another visitor to Egypt was Evagrius, famous as a disciple of Origen and for his own mystical and ascetical writings. In 382 Evagrius came under the influence of Melania, when he fled from an unfortunate love affair in Constantinople. After six months of illness under the care of Melania on the Mount of Olives he decided that he would become a monk and, cured, he did so. He went to Nitria for two years and then on to the Cells, where he became one of the greatest of the monks.

In 385 Jerome himself came to Egypt through Palestine from Syria, where he met and joined company with the Roman lady Paula and her daughter Eustochium.<sup>21</sup> They stayed at Nitria and visited the old men before settling in Bethlehem in the following year. By that time the bitter quarrel between himself and Rufinus had disillusioned the admirers of this great example of antique *amicitia*.

Three years later Palladius came to Egypt and was received by Isidore, the friend of Melania, who made him a disciple of Dorotheus near Alexandria.<sup>22</sup> After a brief period under the extreme rigour of this old ascetic. Palladius's health broke down and he returned to Alexandria. Later he set out again for Nitria and after a year there he went to the Cells and finally stayed with Evagrius as his disciple and friend until the death of Evagrius in 399. Never ready to stay in one place, Palladius paid many visits to the ascetics during this time, including one to John of Lycopolis, whose insight proved devastatingly accurate. Palladius wrote an account of the

monks he had met for the benefit of Lausus, and this forms a companion document to the *Historia Monachorum*.

Finally, the most famous of the tourists of Egypt were John Cassian and his friend Germanus. They came from a monastery in Bethlehem where they had met Pinufius, a famous Egyptian monk who had anonymously shared their cell there for a time. About the year 385 they set out for Egypt, the home of sanctity. They returned about the year 400, having gone home only for a brief visit in the interval. Their experiences in Egypt formed the basis for Cassian's *Institutes* and *Conferences*<sup>23</sup> which were written in Latin between 420 and 430 for a monastery in Marseilles. These works circulated widely and were eagerly absorbed among the monks of the West, but the *Institutes* and *Conferences* are not verbatim accounts of conversations with the monks of Egypt; they are a carefully constructed interpretation of the aims and methods of monastic Egypt for the use of the monks of the West, and they are also shaped by the theological and ethical ideas of John Cassian. While they remain an authoritative presentation of the early ascetic life in Egypt which Cassian knew at first hand, their aim was to show men how to understand that life and adapt it to different conditions.

After the primitive sources of the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers* and before the sophisticated reinterpretation of Cassian took over there is an intermediate stage, the travellers' accounts, in which the actions and words of the monks were seen and recorded by those who were eager to imitate them. These accounts also contained stories which were told and passed around as oral tradition in the desert besides what the visitors themselves had seen. This is what exists in the *Historia Monachorum*. It is a text which contains much of interest in itself but it also needs to be placed beside other early monastic texts, and this has been indicated to some extent in what follows.

#### NOTES TO CHAPTER I

1. *Letters of Jerome*, translated by T. C. Lawler, *ACW*, London, 1963, Letter 3, p 31.
2. Rufinus, *Historia Monachorum in Aegypto*, PL 21, 443C, 444C.
3. *Apophthegmata Patrum, Alphabetical Collection*, PG 65, 71-440. English translation by Benedicta Ward, *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, London & Oxford, 1975.
4. Athanasius, *Vita S. Antonii*, PG 26, 835-976. English translation by R. T. Meyer, *The Life of Saint Antony*, *ACW*, London, 1950.
5. Evagrius, *Vita S. Antonii*, PG 26, 833-976.