

Children and family in late antique Egyptian monasticism. By Caroline T. Schroeder. Pp. xiv + 255 incl. 10 figs. Cambridge–New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021. £75. 978 1 107 15687 6
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The general reader in the history of Christianity would be forgiven for being confused by this title. Does not monasticism mean leaving your children and stepping out of the world of procreation and family maintenance for good? Peter Brown once even attributed anchoritic asceticism to the confining pressures of family and marriage (*The making of late antiquity*, New Haven 1978, 81–7). So how do children even make sense in monasteries?

But in this clear and impressively researched volume Schroeder contributes to the burgeoning literature on childhood in antiquity by looking at the place of children in that powerful new late antique institution, the monastery. As one of the preeminent scholars of Shenoute of Atripe and his archive of sermons, Schroeder draws copiously on the evidence of this abbot's monastery in the fourth and fifth centuries, with adroit use of other monastic archives, the *apothegmata partum*, and monastic writings even further afield (John Cassian, Jerome and others).

As we have come to realise over the last several decades, monasteries were not moral redoubts sealed off in the desert but very much part of their village and regional worlds, receiving visitors, healing the sick, advising conflicts, shaping the local economy and even taking in refugees. Thus children came into the monastery not only in the train of fathers taking monastic vows but even – in one unusual case in Thebes – as donations by grateful villagers. While chapter ii discusses the language for children in monastic writings (which is occasionally ambiguous), chapter i addresses the range of contexts in which monks had to cope with children in their world and abbots had to account for children in their rules. And given the last few decades' clerical revelations, it should not be a surprise that one principal challenge that these abbots had to address was the sexual allure that children seem to have posed to some monks. Chapter iii (as well as chapter vii) confront the issue of boys' sexual desirability and exploitation as they come up in the sermons, rules and tales – an issue linked intrinsically to a voyeurism inevitable in the monastic environment and the disciplining of the monastic gaze. And yet it is clear that sexual exploitation was very much part of children's experiences in monasteries.

But how did monks, especially those who entered as fathers, train themselves to abandon paternal affection? Chapter iv, based on Schroeder's 2012 article in the *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, argues that a curious preoccupation in Egyptian monastic culture with stories of child-sacrifice (from the *Aqeda* to tales of monks' own acts) aimed not to inspire empathy with the defenceless victims but identification with the perpetrator himself, who kills his child out of devotion to God. The sacrifice ends up purifying the soul of the nascent monk. Other fantasies of infant sacrifice served (as in the western Middle Ages) to reveal the vitality of the eucharist.

Chapter v returns to the reciprocity between village and monastery, in which villagers brought sick children to the monks to be healed, or appealed for aid in maintaining their families, and even in the one case donated children to the monastery. As with the sangha in Theravada Buddhism, the monastery provided an

essential resource of supernatural and therapeutic powers, political intervention and family support.

Was the presence of children a resource for gaining new monks? Whereas, Schroeder observes, not all or even most children resident in monasteries could have aspired to ascetic life (or even have been wanted as monks), monasteries could not really imagine them in any other terms but as germinal ascetics. In chapters vi and vii she reviews evidence for the life that a child might face in a monastery: some education, regular work, subjection to discipline by special teachers and – as seems to come up in several sources – an adequate amount of food. But they were also regarded as physically vulnerable; and at death they would not get the full shrouding that adult monks earned for burial.

Chapter viii returns to the theme of chapter iv, the abandonment of paternal ties to children to gain a kind of ascetic purity, but now Schroeder focuses on the nature of the emotional connections that monks may have brought with them. How should a monk leave these residual feelings behind in order to emphasise his or her new spiritual ‘family’? Schroeder reviews several models of emotional attachment (from Aristotle and the Stoics to Cassian and Jerome) that may have contributed to the denigration of family ties and idealisation of the monastery as true family (and the abbot as true *paterfamilias*). But again it is Shenoute who, while haranguing his audiences to focus on their monastic vows, ends up acknowledging the real affective bonds that often consumed the monks and nuns: children left at home, mothers and sisters dying, and so on. Schroeder points out that much of this policing of family bonds and emotions is aimed at women, and especially around mourning. Still, after her review of Shenoute’s sermons criticising family emotions, which actually testify to the nuns’ frank expressions of grief, it is hard to take – in the next section – the saccharine mansplaining of Jerome’s letters to women.

The final chapter examines the notion of the monastery as a greater, spiritual family – both as a religious ideology of spiritual fatherhood and ‘eternal genealogy’ and in the context of disruptions in the patriarchal family occurring around the late antique world, such that the monastery becomes the equivalent of the landed estate. Much of this historical context is based on western European materials (and the work of Kate Cooper), and it is not clear that the world of Gallic and Italian estates maps easily onto the late antique Egyptian countryside. Schroeder means to be suggestive, but the comparison could have been fleshed out more.

This rich book offers innumerable directions for further thought about childhood, children and monasticism, both in the realm of social history and in areas of theology. Children here come off as vulnerable, abandoned and victimised (or else metaphorical); and so one might wonder whether a more rounded picture of children, their agency and their incipient religious lives might account for some of the stories of youth-inspired religious violence that come up in hagiographical texts like the *Lives* of Zachariah of Mitylene or of Porphyry of Gaza (and further afield, with the circumcellions of North Africa).

BOSTON UNIVERSITY

DAVID FRANKFURTER