

The history of the period covered by Herrin's book was first written by a bishop of Ravenna, Agnellus, in the ninth century. His primary interest was in the bishops of the city, including their building activities and dealings with emperors and other leaders. Herrin, as anyone who has written about Ravenna during this period, is very dependent on Agnellus. More than a simple recounting of his text, Herrin uses it as a starting point, bringing in a wealth of other sources to enrich and contextualize his accounts with fresh observations. One important aspect of the ecclesiastical history of this period is how the primacy of Rome was growing in the West. With support of the Byzantine emperor, Ravenna fought to maintain its independence from that hegemony but ultimately came to acknowledge the bishop of Rome as the leader of the church.

In giving equal weight to both political and ecclesiastical history, Herrin presents a full picture of this key city and its place in this transformative world. The writing is clear and engaging, full of new insights and new observations. Her style is such that the non-expert will have no trouble following her narrative; meanwhile, the scholar specialist will find her insights and arguments, with their detailed documentation, a valuable contribution to the study of Ravenna and its role in this period. This is an in-depth study, richly illustrated with color photographs.

Herrin also makes use of the city's monuments to help tell her story, though in a limited fashion. Dealing with art and architectural history sometimes leaves her text on shaky ground. To cite two examples: the church of San Vitale may have been started by Bishop Ecclesius, but very little work had been done before the Byzantine conquest of the city in 540, as shown by the metrology of the building, which is based on a Byzantine foot measurement, as well as by the placement of monograms of Bishop Victor on architectural elements that would have gone in early in the building process. Therefore, an opportunity to examine the church in its role as part of the religious and political policies of the Byzantines towards the city is missed. In linking the design of San Vitale to Hagia Sophia in Constantinople, Herrin states that the span of its dome, one of the great achievements of late antique architecture, was surpassed only centuries later by Michelangelo's dome at St. Peter's, somehow forgetting that his design was based on that of Brunelleschi's dome at the cathedral of Florence, which was done more than a century earlier and was even larger than that of the church in Rome. Herrin's book does offer a very good historical contextualization of Ravenna's buildings, but the reader interested in them should also consult other, more focused studies.

In summary, whatever one's particular interest is, be it political history, church history, or art history, all will find Herrin's book a valuable study of one of the most important cities of this period that will remain the standard for many years to come.

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***An Introduction to the Desert Fathers.* By John Wortley. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019. xxiv + 190 pp. \$23.99. paper.**

Jean-Claude Guy once likened the proliferation and dissemination of sayings and stories of the early desert monks of Egypt to a blizzard. He was referring primarily to the

complexity and diversity of versions, language traditions, and textual variants through which the early desert material emerged and changed over time and the immense interpretive challenges this brought with it. Still, beginning with Peter Brown's groundbreaking study, "The Rise and Function of the Holy Many in Late Antiquity" (*The Journal of Roman Studies* 61 [1971]: 80–101), those interested in the world of early Christian monasticism found themselves immersed in another blizzard, this time consisting of an astonishing body of critical scholarship on early Christian asceticism and monasticism, by scholars such as Elizabeth Clark, Columba Stewart, David Brakke, Susanna Elm, John Chryssavgis, Georgia Frank, James Goehring, Samuel Rubenson, and Caroline Schroeder, among others. Their work helped render the world of early Christian monasticism both more visible and more highly textured than it had been before. But it also raised many new questions about the meaning of this world that we are still struggling to absorb and interpret today.

It is against this backdrop of vigorous, critical debate about the meaning and significance of early Christian monasticism within its social, political, and cultural milieu that the recently deceased John Wortley's *An Introduction to the Desert Fathers* should be situated. Although Wortley's work makes only passing reference to the scholarship noted above, it pursues its subject with a sophistication and depth that I suspect would not have been possible without this sustained scholarly work. Even so, Wortley declares, at the outset, that "this little book is mainly intended for anybody who knows next-to-nothing about the Desert Fathers and would like to know more" (xi). There are no footnotes. But there is considerable learning and perceptive analysis in these pages, making it both a valuable introduction and something more: a critical synthesis of the origins and development of early Christian monasticism that could well prove to have value even for those who are familiar with this tradition. Much of this value, I would suggest, consists of Wortley's astute interpretation of texts from the tradition that he so often puts into new and illuminating contexts. And this gives the book both depth and substance.

He pursues his subject across thirteen chapters, the first seven of which deal, broadly speaking, with what has often been referred to as the "spirituality" of the desert tradition—including the meaning of salvation, the practice of solitude, obedience, impediments to progress, silence, and prayer. These opening seven chapters are excellent, describing and analyzing the deeper aspirations that so often lay at the heart of the monks' lives, as well as the struggles that beset them as they sought to enter more deeply into this life. Wortley does not idealize the monks' spiritual aspirations or suggest that they can be understood without reference to the social, material elements of their lives. In this sense, he reflects an integrative sensibility that has become part of much contemporary scholarship on the desert tradition, taking seriously the language of spiritual longing that underlies almost all their stories but also seeking to situate that longing within the social, political, and cultural tensions that shaped so much of their existence. Signs of what Peter Brown memorably described as a "crisis of human relations" among the early Christian monks is not in great evidence in Wortley's book. But the spirit of Brown's insistence on reimagining the lives of the early Christian monks through the lens of their complex social-material reality is everywhere apparent in these pages.

Wortley takes a more descriptive and less theoretical approach to these questions than Brown did, but his chapters dealing with work, eating and drinking, and hospitality are refreshing in their emphasis on the concrete particularity of the monks' lives. Wortley presents something close to what Lucien Regnault did so effectively in his *La Vie quotidienne des pères du désert en Égypte au IV^e siècle* (Hachette, 1990): careful

attention to the mundane specificity of what the monks ate and drank, the physical work that occupied their lives, tensions and differences surrounding the question of what it meant to practice hospitality to visitors, and the place of literacy and book use and ownership. It is easy to miss these humble elements of everyday life when reading the *Sayings* primarily for spiritual nourishment or philosophical insight. And yet they provide the very ground out of which the spiritual thought and practice of the monks emerged and the material reality that continuously shaped their searched for meaning. Wortley notices and makes visible these elements of the monks' lives, resulting in a more full-bodied reading of this tradition than we have often been offered previously.

Still, there are limits to Wortley's approach. This is especially noticeable in the chapter he devotes to "Women in the Desert." Here, we learn of monks who visited women, women who visited monks, women as demons, women disguised as monks, and what Wortley calls, in a surprising euphemism, "less-respectable visitors" (118). This chapter is almost completely descriptive in character, in keeping with the author's stated intention to offer a dispassionate but historically and literarily accurate account of the lives of the ascetics who inhabited the desert during this period. However, given the extraordinary scholarly work that has been done on women's experience in the ancient desert tradition by Elizabeth Clark, Susanna Elm, Rebecca Krawiec, and Virginia Burrus, among others, one feels more acutely the limits of this somewhat flat and uncritical account of women's experience. The introductory character of the book perhaps excuses the author from the obligation to respond seriously to this scholarship. Still, the account given here hardly begins to touch on or explicate the complex, subtle, and often contentious place of women in early Christian monasticism.

In spite of this shortcoming, this is an admirable and helpful book. I have been reading these texts for over thirty years and am broadly familiar with their main themes and questions. Even so, I found myself continuously surprised and often delighted at the texts Wortley incorporated into his analysis and his perceptive interpretations of them. His own deep familiarity with these texts and his long experience as a translator means that his readings and interpretations are often illuminating, surprising, or both. This is a fine introduction to the literature of the desert fathers and mothers and will serve both newcomers and those familiar with this tradition well.

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The Coptic Life of Aaron: Critical Edition, Translation, and Commentary. Edited by Jitse Dijkstra and Jacques van der Vliet. Supplements to *Vigiliae Christianae* 155. Leiden: Brill, 2020. xvi + 327 pp. €138.00 hardcover.

This is a re-edition of an important Coptic text from Upper Egypt—a monastic travelogue in which a visitor, Paphnoutios, hears a number of stories from a monk, Pseleusius, about the earliest monks near Syene; Paphnutius travels further south with him to meet another monk, Isaac, on an island in the First Nile Cataract; Isaac