

MONASTIC MEALS: RESISTING A RECLINING CULTURE?

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In their ongoing work on Greco-Roman meals, Mattias Klinghardt, Dennis Smith and Hal Taussig have identified “five key elements” as loci for particularly fruitful analysis. Summarized in Taussig’s recent volume, *In the Beginning was the Meal*, this list includes: 1) meal posture, 2) the ordering of respective meal components, 3) significant points of transition, 4) leadership, and 5) the spectrum of individuals present at the meal.¹ Even a cursory investigation raises striking questions about monastic practice with respect to each of these categories.² All but the first lies beyond the scope of this paper. Here I will explore solely the shifting discourse that attends the question of posture, and ‘reclining at meals’, in a sequence of monastic rules dated from the fourth through the sixth centuries. Still very much a work in progress, even the nascent stages of this analysis have afforded insight into particularly stubborn historical questions in new and rich ways.

HISTORY OF SCHOLARSHIP

Interpretive renderings have long viewed the mundane details of early monastic life through hagiographical lenses.³ Within this frame, the fragmentary nature of extant sources has

¹ Hal Taussig, *In the Beginning was the Meal: Social Experimentation and Early Christian Identity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 68-69.

² The amount of material encountered in just the bit of delving undertaken in preparing this paper suggests that a serious survey of the sources could easily extend to a book length monograph.

³ Discussions have particularly concentrated on the “originality” of the pedagogical and literary aspects of the *Apophthegmata Patrum*, a body of sayings and stories attributed to the ‘desert fathers’. Premising these early monks as “educational innovators”, the *Sayings* are framed as the embodiment of a unique spiritual and moral transmission

left ample room for far-ranging re-constructions. For any who would re-create a more realistic picture of life in the earliest monastic communities, the dismemberment and dispersal of monastic texts and artifacts into museum collections around the world presents a daunting challenge. In a recent discussion of re-assembling the material and manuscript evidence that derives from the White Monastery in upper Egypt, scholars Cornelia Römer and Stephen Emmel describe the work as akin to putting together “a large puzzle.”⁴ In discourse where demonology has proved decidedly more interesting than dining norms, without the corrective afforded by ancient material loci, almost every analysis is residually informed by scholarly trajectories that have construed proto-Monastic practice as uniformly distinctive.⁵ In fact, framing the habits of

that took place between master and student. Jean-Claude Guy describes the *AP* as the “expression of an altogether original method of spiritual education” (Jean-Claude Guy, “Educational Innovation in the Desert Fathers,” *Eastern Churches Review* 6 (1974) 44). Benedicta Ward names them “a remarkable new literary genre” (Benedicta Ward, SLG, tr. and ed., *Sayings of the Desert Fathers* (Mahwah: Paulist, 1975) xix). Douglas Burton-Christie suggests that “in the stark solitude of the desert a vibrant and original spirituality was born” (Douglas Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert* (New York: Oxford, 1993) 3). Each characterizes the pedagogical principles that link text and context as unprecedented.

While claims asserting singularity are seductive, the “ring” of this commentary is hauntingly familiar when placed alongside the “myth [of] a ‘uniquely’ pristine ‘original’ Christianity which suffered later ‘corruptions’” (Jonathan Z. Smith, *Drudgery Divine* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1990) 43). In fact, if we take a step back from the intricacies of scholarly debate, the erudite search for origins within and among the monastic sources bears remarkable resemblance to the parallel ‘quest’ for the origins of Christianity (Burton L. Mack, *Myth of Innocence* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988) 3). In an equation where legitimacy is linked to a naïve and natural simplicity, the idealized innocence of the earliest monks (or the earliest followers of Jesus), is framed as antithetical to the cosmopolitan complexity of literate culture. Often construed in moral terms, ‘authenticity’ is most clearly manifested in artless, ingenuous, and credulous textual expression. Borrowing—that is ‘syncretism’—stands in opposition to the purity of ‘authentic’ tradition (Karen King, “Mackinations on Myth and Origins” in *Re-imagining Christian Origins: A Colloquium Honoring Burton L. Mack* (Elizabeth A. Castelli and Hal Taussig, eds.; Valley Forge, PA.: Trinity Press International, 1996), 161). The perceived degree of ‘sophistication’ that characterizes a particular text becomes at once a measure of its artifice.

⁴ Stephen Emmel and Cornelia Römer, “The library of the White Monastery in Upper Egypt,” in *Spätantike Bibliotheken* (Vienna: Phoibos Verlag, 2008), 8; Scholars Emmel and Römer emphasize that in piecing together this complex nexus of texts and contexts, it is critical to keep in mind the competing economic and academic interests that have shaped modern preservation and dissemination of this material.

⁵ Wilhelm Bousset, *Studien zur Geschichte des ältesten Mönchtums* (Tübingen, 1923); Douglas Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Graham Gould, “A Note on the *Apophthegmata Patrum*,” *JTS* 37 (1986) 133-138; Jean-Claude Guy, *Les Apophthegmes des Pères: Collection Systematique* (SC 387; Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1993); Jean-Claude Guy, “Educational Innovation in the Desert Fathers,” *Eastern Churches Review* 6 (1974) 44-51; Jean-Claude Guy, “Note sur l’évolution du genre apophthegmatique,” *RAM* 32 (1956) 63-68; Lucien Regnault *Les Sentences des Pères du désert: Nouveau recueil* (2nd ed.; Solesmes, 1977); Benedicta Ward, SLG, tr., *Sayings of the Desert Fathers* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1975).

the earliest monks as unprecedented retains a stubborn influence on even the most critical approaches. While studies have grown decidedly more nuanced, larger than life constructs fueled by historically persuasive hagiography remain difficult to dismantle.

MONASTIC ‘RULES’

In the shadow of the larger than life luminaries that dominate the hagiographical landscape of early monastic literature, there exists a complementary set of documents that more realistically refract the daily norms of monastic life. Various framed as “admonitions”, “precepts”, “institutes”, “canons”, and eventually, “rules”, these texts provide a record that has largely escaped uniform scrutiny. Differently idealized, these documents exist as the functional alter ego of literary and hagiographical sources. They invite us to examine the ‘refectory’ as a familiar locus of social experimentation, and link us to a concrete frame of reference in undertaking this work. Countering assessments that have historically read the distinctive aspects of monastic life as signaling a radical divide between monastic and Greco-Roman norms, here we meet routines that simultaneously emerge from, and actively resist wider conventions.

While the ‘origins’ of Christian monastic practice are as widely debated as the origins of Christianity, there is a measure of consensus in dating the earliest rules to the fourth century of the Common Era.⁶ With respect to meal practice, these fourth century instructions are of particular interest. The first, rather loose collection of directives is attributed to the acclaimed ‘father’ of *anachoretic* monasticism, Antony of Egypt. A second, more structured compilation is credited to Basil of Caesarea, founder of the Cappodocian strain of Christian monastic practice. A third, is linked to Pachomius, the Cenobitic counterpart of Antony, and founder of a

⁶ Nonetheless, the question of what constitutes ‘a rule’ at this early stage is a matter of ongoing debate.

burgeoning network of Egyptian communal establishments.⁷ Lending weight to argument for the foundational nature of these collections, with respect to meal practice, the tenor of the discourse captured in each is to some degree distinctive. A derivative collection of Rules, registers the trajectory of monastic practice as it moves to the West. The *Conferences* and *Institutes* of John Cassian serve as the conduit of this shift; the elaborate *Rule of the Master* and the simpler *Rule for Beginners* of Benedict, its outcome.

THE RULE OF ANTONY (PISPIR, EGYPT ~313 CE)

The attribution of an early body of ‘rules’ to Antony is contested. If authentic, the collection is thought to have been composed at a point when Antony removed himself from his public responsibility as leader of a nascent monastic community, and retired to the ‘inner desert’ in search of greater solitude.⁸ As Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria, recounts the story, Antony was the son of a prosperous Egyptian family. Left in charge of his parents’ household at a young age, he sold his belongings and gave the money to the poor. After consigning his sister, who was in his charge, to “respected and trusted virgins,” he retired from village life.⁹ A period of migration brought him to a place called Pispir. Here he lived in an abandoned fort, located on a ridge overlooking the eastern bank of the Nile River for some twenty years.¹⁰ It is thought that over time, he came to direct a community of monks that formed itself around him. Having followed him to this ‘outer mountain’, the group was informally comprised of individuals who had taken up residence in the vicinity of his retreat. His ‘rule’ is regarded by some to be addressed to this community.

⁷ Whether these attributions are actual or fictional, is also widely debated. Equally contested is the dating and provenance of these documents.

⁸ Athanasius, *Life of Antony* 49ff (Robert C. Gregg, tr.; Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1980).

⁹ Athanasius, *Life of Antony* 1-3.

¹⁰ Athanasius, *Life of Antony* 11-49.

It is striking that eleven of the fifty-seven admonitions included in this seemingly random collection of cryptic exhortations touch on some aspect of meal practice. A number of these directives articulate norms broadly echoed across the various disparate rule collections. For example, excepting Saturday and Sunday, Antony's monks are instructed to "fast every day until the ninth hour."¹¹ They are enjoined "never to eat meat,"¹² or in fact, anything "to satiation."¹³ More particular directives are unique to this body of admonitions. One precept enjoins: "Do not eat with someone who pays for you."¹⁴ Another commands: "Do not make a feast and do not go to a feast."¹⁵ A third mandates: "If you pay for an agape do not show yourself."¹⁶ A fourth instructs the one who "assists at an agape, [to] eat and give thanks to God."¹⁷

Traditionally, per the persuasive hagiography of Athanasius' *Vita Antonii*, both Antony and his community have been framed as illiterate rustics "taught only by God."¹⁸ Although a sustained counter-reading has argued for communal practice that replicates the norms of a philosophical school setting,¹⁹ it is this 'rustic' caricature of Antony and his followers that has shaped modern perceptions of early monastic life. The way in which the referenced meal practice troubles these waters makes them all the more intriguing. A final directive enjoining the

¹¹ *Rule of Antony* 3

¹² *Rule of Antony* 20

¹³ *Rule of Antony* 52

¹⁴ *Rule of Antony* 14

¹⁵ *Rule of Antony*

¹⁶ *Rule of Antony* 34

¹⁷ *Rule of Antony* 35.

¹⁸ *Life of Antony* 1.

¹⁹ Samuel Rubenson, *The Letters of Antony: Monasticism and the Making of a Saint* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995).

monks to: “Go among the ill and the feeble and fill their vases with water,”²⁰ suggests a monastic ideal that remains deeply rooted and pro-actively invested in negotiating social stratification both within and beyond the monastic community. However, the routine manner in which these admonitions suggest a wider meal setting situates this monastic community at the nexus of Greco-Roman and Early Christian practice. It suggests a precedent for later monastic meals that emerge directly from such a milieu. While no particular posture is noted, the absence of detail presumes a recognizable frame of reference. For the members of this community, meal practice adheres to well-established codes that require little elucidation.

THE LONGER AND SHORTER RULES OF BASIL (~370 CE)

A second, more developed, body of early rules is credited to Basil of Caesarea. His documents are the earliest to survive in Greek. Formulated as a *Longer* and *Shorter Rule*, the *Longer Rule* appears to have been assembled first. However, both include explicit instruction with regard to meal practice.²¹ Some scholars suggest that Basil composed his *Rules* following a tour of the monastic establishments of Egypt and Syria, and that they were intended to guide his early settlement in Pontus in the 360s. Others date the rules to the following decade when Basil succeeded Eusebius as Bishop of Caesarea (370 CE).²² Over the course of nine years in this position, he is said to have organized monastic life in and around the city, imposing a loose order and structure upon the monks of his jurisdiction.

In his homily “On the Renunciation of the World,” Basil commends a progressive approach to adopting the monastic life. Enjoining his audience to avoid accumulating a heavy

²⁰ *Rule of Antony* 55.

²¹ The *Shorter Rule* references the *Longer Rule* throughout.

²² John Thomas and Angela Constantinides Hero, *Byzantine Monastic Foundation Documents* (Washington, D. C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2000), 21

burden of sin “by having too soft of a bed or the style of [one’s] garments, or shoes, or any other part of...dress; by variety in food, or a table too richly appointed for [one’s] stage of self-renunciation, by the way [one] stand[s] or sit[s], or by being negligent or too fastidious with regard to manual labor,”²³ he introduces structures that ground an *idiorhythmic* approach to ascetic discipline that continues to guide Eastern monastic practice even today.

The twenty-first chapter of the *Longer Rule* weaves a treatise on monastic humility (and respect for authority) into guidelines for maintaining appropriate demeanor at the community meal. Responding to the query: “how one ought to conduct oneself with regard to sitting and reclining at the midday meal or at supper,”²⁴ Basil instructs:

Since it is a precept of the Lord, who on all occasions habituates us to humility, that we should take the lowest place in reclining at meals, he who strives to do all according to injunction must not neglect this precept (Luke 14.10). If any worldlings, therefore, should recline with us, it behooves us to be an example in this matter by not exalting ourselves above others or seeking to have the first place. But when all who thus gather together are in pursuit of the same goal, each one, so that at every opportunity they may give proof of their humility, has an obligation of being [first] in taking the last place according to the Lord’s command. To engage in rivalry and strife in this matter is unseemly, because it destroys good order and is a cause of tumult. Moreover, if we are not willing to yield to one another and conflict arises over it, we shall be classed with those who quarrel over the first places. In this sphere, also, prudently aware of and attentive to what befits us, we therefore should leave the order of seating to the one entrusted with this duty, as the Lord declared when he said that the arrangement of these matters pertains to the master of the house (Luke 14.10). In this way, we shall support one another in charity (Eph. 4.2), doing all things decently and according to order (I Cor. 14.40). Also, we will not give the impression, by stubborn and vigorous opposition, that we are trying to appear humble in order to

²³ Basil of Caesarea, “On the Renunciation of the World” (*Saint Basil: Ascetical Works* (M. Monica Wagner, C.S.C., tr.; New York: Fathers of the Church, 1950)), 21; Μὴ πειρασθῆς τι τῶν ἐν συνηθείᾳ τῆς ἀληθείας παραχαράξαι, καὶ τῇ οἰκείᾳ χαννότητι ὑποσκελίζειν μὲν τοὺς ἀγωνιζομένους, ἑαυτῷ δὲ φόρτον ἀμαρτη- (35)μάτων ἐπισωρεύειν, μὴ ἐν στρωμνῇ ἀπαλωτέρα, μὴ ἐν ἐνδύμασιν, ἢ ὑποδήμασιν, ἢ ἐτέρῳ τινὶ σχήματι, ἢ ἐν βρωμάτων παραλλαγῇ, ἢ τραπέζῃ ὑπὲρ τὸν τῆς ἀποταγῆς σου χρόνον, ἢ ἐν στάσει, ἢ ἐν καθέδρᾳ, ἢ ἐν ἐργοχείρῳ ἀναπαντικωτέρῳ, ἢ καθαριωτέρῳ. Ταῦτα (40) γὰρ πάντα, οὐ μόνον ὑπάρχοντά σοι, ἀλλὰ καὶ ἐπιζητούμενα, οὐκ ἀγαθὴν ἕξουσιν ἔκβασιν (PG 31.633.31-42).

²⁴ Basil, *Longer Rules* 21 (Wagner, 280); Πῶς δεῖ περὶ τὰς καθέδρας καὶ τὰς κατακλίσεις ἐν τῷ καιρῷ τῶν ἀριστῶν ἢ δεῖπνων ἔχειν (PG 31.976.15-17).

impress the company or to win popular favor, but rather we will practice humility by being obedient. To engage in altercation, indeed, is a surer sign of pride than to accept the first place when directed to do so.²⁵

Explicitly addressing the sexual temptations of the common life, he enjoins:

If you are youthful in body or mind, fly from intimate association with comrades of your own age and run away from them as from fire. The Enemy has, indeed, set many aflame through such means and consigned them to the eternal fire, casting them down into that loathsome pit of five cities (Gen. 10.19; Deut. 29.23) on the pretext of spiritual love. Even those who have come safely through every wind and tempest on the sea and are safe in port he has sent down into the deep, together with ship and crew. At meals take a seat far away from your young brother; in lying down to rest, let not your garments be neighbor to his; rather have an elderly brother lying between you. When a young brother converses with you or is opposite you in choir, make your response with your head bowed lest, perchance, by gazing fixedly into his face, the seed of desire be implanted in you by the wicked Sower and you reap sheaves of corruption and ruin.²⁶

²⁵ Basil, *Longer Rules* 21 (Wagner, 280-281); Ἐπειδὴ πρόσταγμα ἐστὶ Κυρίου πανταχοῦ πρὸς τὴν ταπεινώσιν ἐθίζοντος ἡμᾶς τὸ καὶ ἐν τοῖς ἀρίστοις κατακλινομένους τὸν ἔσχατον τόπον προκαταλαμβάνειν, ἀνάγκη τὸν πάντα κατ' ἐντολὴν ποιεῖν ἐσπουδακότα μηδὲ τοῦτο παρορᾶν τὸ πρόσταγμα. Ἄν μὲν οὖν κοσμικοὶ τινες ἡμῖν συγκατακλίνωνται ὑπόδειγμα αὐτοῖς πρὸς τὸ μὴ υπεραίρεσθαι, μηδὲ τὸ φιλόπρωτον ἐπιζητεῖν, καὶ ἐκ τούτου τοῦ μέρους γίνεσθαι ἡμᾶς προσήκει. Ὅπου δὲ πάντες κατὰ τὸν ἴσον σκοπὸν συνέρχονται, ὥστε ἐν παντὶ καιρῷ τὴν δοκιμὴν τῆς ταπεινοφροσύνης ἑαυτῶν διδόναι, τὸ μὲν προκαταλαμβάνειν τὸν ἔσχατον τόπον κατὰ τὴν ἐντολὴν τοῦ Κυρίου ἐκάστω ἐπιβάλλον· τὸ γε μὴν πάλιν φιλονεικῶς περὶ τοῦτον συνωθεῖσθαι ἀδόκιμον, ὡς ἀναρετικὸν τῆς εὐταξίας καὶ θορύβου αἴτιον. Καὶ τὸ πρὸς ἀλλήλους δὲ ἀνεנדότως ἔχειν, καὶ ἡ περὶ τούτου μάχη, ὁμοίους ἡμᾶς ποιήσει τοῖς περὶ πρωτείων φιλονεικοῦσι. Διόπερ χρὴ καὶ ἐνταῦθα, τὸ πρέπον ἡμῖν περιεσκεμμένως γνωρίζοντας καὶ σπουδάζοντας, ἐπιτρέπειν τῷ ὑποδεχομένῳ καὶ τὴν τῆς κατακλίσεως τάξιν, καθὰ καὶ ὁ Κύριος ὑπέθετο, τῷ οἰκοδεσπότη προσήκειν εἰπὼν τὴν περὶ τούτων διαταγὴν. Οὕτω γὰρ καὶ ἀνεξομῆθα ἀλλήλων ἐν ἀγάπῃ, πάντα εὐσχημόνως καὶ κατὰ τάξιν ποιοῦντες· καὶ οὐ πρὸς ἐνδειξίν τῶν πολλῶν, οὔτε δημοκοπικῶς τὴν ταπεινοφροσύνην ἐπιτηδεύειν διὰ τῆς ἀνεנדότου καὶ σφοδρᾶς ἀντιλογίας δεῖξομεν· μάλλον δὲ διὰ τῆς εὐπειθείας τὸ ταπεινὸν κατορθώσομεν. Πλείων γὰρ ἐκ τῆς ἀντιλογίας ἢ τῆς ὑπερηφανίας ἔμφασις, ἢ ἐκ τῆς πρωτοκλισίας, ὅταν ἐκ προστάγματος αὐτῆν καταδεχόμεθα (PG 31.976.19-49).

²⁶ Basil, “On Renunciation of the World” (Wagner, 23-24); Νέος ὢν εἴτε τὴν σάρκα εἴτε τὸ φρόνημα, φεῦγε τὴν συνδιαγωγὴν τῶν ὁμηλικῶν, καὶ ἀποδίδρασκε ἀπ' αὐτῶν, ὡς ἀπὸ φλογός. Πολλοὺς γὰρ ἐμπρήσας δι' αὐτῶν ὁ ἐχθρὸς τῷ αἰωνίῳ πυρὶ παρέδωκε, πνευματικῇ δὴθεν ἀγάπῃ εἰς τὸ τῶν πενταπολιτῶν μισαρὸν βάραθρον ἐγκαταστρέψας αὐτούς. Καὶ τοὺς ἐν τῷ πελάγει καὶ παντὶ ἀνέμῳ καὶ κλύδωνι διασωθέντας, εἶσω τῶν λιμένων ἀμεριμνούντας, σὺν αὐτάνδρῳ τῷ σκάφει τῷ βυθῷ παρέδωκεν. Ἐν καθέδρᾳ πρὸ πολλοῦ καθέσθητι ἀπ' αὐτοῦ. Ἐν ἀνακλίσει ὕπνου μὴ γειτνιαζέτω σοι τὰ ἐνδύματα τοῖς ἐκείνου· μάλλον δὲ κέχρησο γέροντι μεσίτῃ. Ἦνίκα δὲ σοι διαλέγεται, ἢ ἀντιπρόσωπος ψάλλει, κάτω νεύων ἀντίφθεγξαι αὐτῷ, μήπως, τῇ εἰς τὰ πρόσωπα ἐνατενίσει σπέρμα ἐπιθυμίας ὑπὸ τοῦ ἐπισπορέως ἐχθροῦ δεξάμενος, δράγματα φθορᾶς καὶ ἀπωλείας καρποφορήσης. Ἐν οἴκῳ ἢ ἐν τόπῳ, οὐ οὐκ ἔστιν ὁ βλέπων τὰ ἔργα ὑμῶν, μὴ εὐρεθῆς μετ' αὐτοῦ, προφάσει μελέτης θεῶν λογίων, ἢ ἑτέρας ὁποιασοῦν καὶ ἀναγκαιοτάτης χρείας. Οὐδὲν γὰρ ἀναγκαιοτέρον ψυχῆς, ὑπὲρ ἧς Χριστὸς ἀπέθανεν. Μὴ πιστεue δολουργῶ λογισμῶ ὑποτιθεμένῳ σοι τὸ ἀσκανδάλιστον εἶναι· αὐτὸ τοῦτο σκάνδαλον εἶναι πληροφορούμενος πολλῇ τῇ πείρᾳ τῶν πεπνωκότων προφανῆ σοι ταῦτα παρασχόμενον (PG 31.627.20-45).

Although the monks in Basil's community may well have competed for the *last place* at the table, rather than the first, there is little else to suggest that meal practice in the earliest Cappadocian establishments differed in any significant way from what one might encounter in a wider Mediterranean setting. In the derivative *Shorter Rule*, banqueting language is again employed, this time to promote the meal as a site for nourishing both body and soul. In response to the query: "With what disposition and attention ought [one] listen to what is read...at meal times?"²⁷ Basil directs his monastic constituents to attend "[w]ith far greater pleasure than [they] eat and drink, that the mind may be shown not to be distracted by the pleasures of the body, but delighting in the words of the Lord, in fashion like unto him who said: 'Sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb' (Ps. 19.10)."²⁸

THE PRECEPTS OF PACHOMIUS (340-404 CE)

The various documents attributed to Pachomius, the 'father' of Egyptian cenobitic monasticism are among the most widely recognized of the early monastic rules. While the dates assigned the earliest communities are roughly contemporary with those ascribed to Antony, the five sets of rules attributed to Pachomius and his successor, Horsiesius, are preserved only as early fifth century translations included among the writings of Jerome. At best, these Latin transcriptions capture the tenor of life in the Pachomian monasteries circa 404 CE, some sixty years after the original communities were formed. It is generally assumed, that only a small subset of this material registers practice within the earliest communities.

²⁷ Basil, *Shorter Rules* 180 (*The Ascetic Works of Saint Basil* (W. K. L. Clarke, tr.; New York and Toronto: The Macmillan Company, 1925), 296); Μετά ποταπῆς διαθέσεως καὶ προσοχῆς ὀφείλομεν ἀκούειν τῶν ἐν τῷ καιρῷ τῆς μεταλήψεως παραναγινωσκομένων ἡμῖν (PG 31.1204.6-8).

²⁸ *Shorter Rules* 180 (Clarke, 296-7); Περισσότερος ἢ μεθ' οἴας ἡδονῆς ἐσθίομεν καὶ πίνομεν, ἵνα δειχθῇ ὁ νοῦς μὴ μετεωριζόμενος εἰς τὰς τοῦ σώματος ἡδονάς· ἐνευφραϊνόμενος δὲ πλέον τοῖς τοῦ Κυρίου ῥήμασι, κατὰ τὴν διάθεσιν τοῦ εἰπόντος· Καὶ γλυκύτερα ὑπὲρ μέλι καὶ κηρίον (PG 31.1204.10-15).

The directives included among the Pachomian corpora, reflect the challenge of enforcing ascetic discipline across a burgeoning network of communal establishments. Registering a tensive resistance to wider norms, these guidelines mandate that diners “sit in order in [their] appointed places, and cover their heads;”²⁹ that if anyone “speaks or laughs (out of impulsiveness)...he shall do penance and be rebuked...at once;”³⁰ that the monks are not to “look around at others eating;”³¹ that when ordered by a superior “to pass from one table to another,” no protest is allowed.³² Read in conversation with the meal practice reflected in the Rules attributed to Antony and Basil, the tenor of these late fourth/early fifth century injunctions registers a radical departure from a prior vision of self-modulated progression. They are perhaps best understood as the culmination of a series of ‘innovative adjustments’ that address and negotiate the challenges of community formation in burgeoning establishments comprised of increasingly diverse populations.

However, if these more stringent norms afford measured access to the lived experience of the Pachomian monks, and the organizational strategies adopted by their leaders, a roughly contemporary document underscores the degree to which they counter common practice. As the monastic *Historia Lausiaca* (419-420 CE) recounts the story, a more ancient document precedes even the earliest strata of Pachomian regulation. Its author, Palladius, reports that the norms governing communal life in the Pachomian establishments were ordained by angelic dispensation. At a point when Pachomius was directed to “call young monks together and dwell

²⁹ Pachomius, *Precepts 29 (Pachomian Chronicles and Rules)* (Armand Vielleux, tr.; *Pachomian Koinonia 2*; Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1980), 150).

³⁰ *Precepts 31* (Vielleux, 150).

³¹ *Precepts 30* (Vielleux, 150).

³² *Precepts 30* (Vielleux, 150).

with them,” he received a “bronze tablet” on which was inscribed an “Angelic Rule.” According to Palladius, the tablet was delivered to Pachomius as he was sitting as a solitary in his cave, and was engraved with the following directives:³³

You will let each one eat and drink as suits his strength; and divide up their tasks in accord with their respective strengths, and not hinder anyone from fasting or eating. Assign the more difficult tasks to the strong ones who eat and assign lesser tasks to those who are weak and more ascetic. Make separate cells in the cloister and let there not be three monks to a cell. Meals, however, should be taken by all in one house.

Let them not recline at full length, but let them take their rest sitting down on their coverlets thrown over the backs of chairs. At night they may wear lebitons. Let each one have a coat of goatskin; they may not eat without it. On Saturday and Sunday, they may loosen their girdles and go in with the hood only.³⁴

It is striking that, like the loose injunctions attributed to Antony, a significant portion of the “Angelic Rule” concerns itself with meal practice. One cannot help but wonder whether the innovations introduced into the meal setting by Pachomius were so radical that they required divine authorization.

THE *CONFERENCES AND INSTITUTES* OF CASSIAN (GAUL 425-430 CE)

It is John Cassian who is traditionally credited with bringing ‘Eastern’ monastic practice to the ‘West’. He is simultaneously the only ‘Western’ figure whose teachings are included

³³ Palladius, *Historia Lausiaca* 32.1 (*The Lausiaca History* (Robert T. Meyer, tr.; *Ancient Christian Writers* 34; Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1964), 92); Καὶ ἐπέδωκεν αὐτῷ δέλτον χαλκῆν ἐν ἣ ἐγγράπτο ταῦτα· (G.J.M. Bartelink, *Palladio. La storia Lausiaca* (Verona: Fondazione Lorenzo Valla, 1974)).

³⁴ Palladius, *Historia Lausiaca* 32.2-3 (Meyer, 92): Συγχωρήσεις ἐκάστῳ κατὰ δύναμιν φαγεῖν καὶ πιεῖν· καὶ πρὸς τὰς δυνάμεις τῶν ἐσθιόντων ἀνάλογα καὶ τὰ ἔργα αὐτοῖς ἐγγείρισον· καὶ μήτε νηστεῦσαι κωλύσης μήτε φαγεῖν. Οὕτω μέντοι τὰ ἰσχυρὰ τοῖς ἰσχυροτέροις καὶ ἐσθίουσι, καὶ τὰ ἄτονα τοῖς ἀτονωτέροις καὶ ἀσκη-τικωτέροις ἐγγείριζε ἔργα. Ποίησον δὲ κέλλας διαφόρους ἐν τῇ αὐλῇ, καὶ τρεῖς κατὰ κέλλαν μενέτωσαν. Ἡ δὲ τροφή πάντων ὑπὸ ἓνα οἶκον ἐξεταζέσθω.

Καθευδέτωσαν δὲ μὴ ἀνακείμενοι, ἀλλὰ θρόνους οἰκοδομητοὺς ὑπιωτέρους πεπονηκότες καὶ θέντες αὐτῶν ἐκεῖ τὰ στρώματα καθευδέτωσαν καθήμενοι. Φορεῖτωσαν δὲ ἐν ταῖς νυξὶ λεβιτώνας λινοὺς ἐξωσμένοι. Ἐκαστος αὐτῶν ἐχέτω μηλωτὴν αἰγίαν εἰργασμένην, ἧς ἄνευ μὴ ἐσθιέτωσαν. Απιόντες δὲ εἰς τὴν κοινωσίαν κατὰ σάββατον καὶ κυριακὴν τὰς ζώνας λυέτωσαν, τὴν μηλωτὴν ἀποτιθέσθωσαν, καὶ μετὰ κουκουλίου μόνου εἰσιέτωσαν (Bartolink).

among the various collections of *Apophthegmata Patrum*, a body of sayings and stories ascribed to the ‘Eastern’ desert monks.³⁵ While his teachings are not formulated as a formal rule, his *Conferences* and *Institutes* are formulated to offer direction to the Gallic monks under his jurisdiction.

As Cassian traces the lineage of ‘current’ monastic norms, he claims both Egyptian and Cappadocian precedent in discussing meal practice. Easily placing the two loci in conversation, he simultaneously holds them in tension.

We know...that the reading of sacred texts in the cenobia while the brothers are eating follows the model of the Cappadocians rather than that of the Egyptians. There is no doubt that they wished to establish this not so much for the sake of spiritual discipline as in order to curb superfluous and vain chattering and especially arguments, which often arise during meals, seeing that they could not contain them among themselves otherwise. For among the Egyptians, and in particular among the Tabennisians, all are so silent that, even though a large number of brothers is seated together for the purpose of eating, no one dares even whisper apart from the one who is in charge of his own group of ten, who nonetheless indicates by a sound rather than by a word if he notices that something must either be brought to or removed from the table. And so great is the discipline of silence that is observed while they are eating that, with their hoods drawn lower than their eyebrows lest a free view facilitate a roving curiosity, they can see nothing more than the table and the food that is put on it or taken off of it. The result of this is that no one notices how or how much another person is eating.³⁶

Here, the question of meal posture surfaces only implicitly. However, it is clear that Cassian’s nomenclature is residually informed by, and resistant to, the norms of wider banqueting culture. Simultaneously, underscoring and obscuring prior tensions, in this new monastic locus, the focus has shifted to defining appropriate table demeanor around questions of ‘conviviality’, re-framed as a continuum of silence and/or speech.

³⁵ The various compilations of sayings and stories are still read in Eastern (and some Western) monastic communities today.

³⁶ Cassian, *Institutes* 4.17. (*John Cassian: The Institutes* (Boniface Ramsey, tr.; *Ancient Christian Writers* 58; Mahwah, NJ: Newman Press, 2000), 86-7).

The writings of Cassian, to some degree, mark the point at which the paths of Eastern and Western monastic development begin to diverge. In the East, the idea of a rule is preserved in the loosely organized *Typika* that define life in a particular monastic setting. While these norms remain rooted in Basil's *Longer* and *Shorter Rules*, there is no uniform rubric that governs the shape of derivative mores. As Cassian's interpretations of Eastern practice gained a foothold in the West, the result was, in some sense, opposite. Here the traditions of the Cappadocians, "who introduced the plan that the holy Lessons should be read in the Coenobia while the brethren are eating", as well as the Egyptians, who kept "strict silence," became fixed elements in a burgeoning roster of monastic rules. Of these, the elaborate *Rule of the Master*, and the derivative *Rule of Benedict* are among the most significant.

THE RULE OF THE MASTER (ROME 475-525 CE)

The anonymous *Rule of the Master*, thought to reflect the life of a Roman monastic community during the late fifth or early sixth century, devotes a series of chapters to meal practice. An in depth analysis of this material lies beyond the scope of this paper. However, bringing our conversation full circle, with the exception of reclining, these guideline describe the monastic meal setting in terms not unlike those used to characterize the banqueting hall of an aristocratic household.

When the whole community along with its shepherd has come from the oratory, after the verses and prayer the abbot seats himself in his chair at table. The whole community immediately answers, 'Thanks be to God,' and while all remain standing at their tables the basket hanging over the abbot's table is lowered with the pulley cord, to give the impression that the provisions of God's workmen are coming down from heaven. As soon as the basket has come down, the abbot makes a sign of the cross over the bread, breaks it, and takes first his own portion, which as he raises his hand will be blessed by the Lord; he sets out the portions for those who are standing before him at his table and who will eat with him,

distributes it to them. Upon receiving it they kiss the abbot's hand and sit down in silence.

Then he calls up the deans of the tables and gives them the portions for their whole table. After these have been dismissed he calls up the others and gives them theirs. If, by the grace of God, the community is numerous he does the same for all the tables. Upon receiving the portions for themselves and their brothers, the deans kiss the abbot's hands to give honor to the superior. Likewise when they themselves make distribution to the brothers at their tables, their hands are kissed by the brothers as a sign of humility, and after each one has received his portion he sits down in silence. After all are seated, the weekly reader at table rises and receives his portion, kisses the hand of the one giving it, then hands it over to the cellarer, the weekly kitchen servers enter, receive their portions from their deans and kiss their hands. Meanwhile the cellarer, since he belongs to no deanery, receives his portions from the hand of the abbot. When he receives it he too kisses the hand of the giver and places [the bread] on his table.³⁷

The seemingly incidental details that describe the commencement of this monastic meal are particularly striking. Read in isolation, the basket of bread lowered through a hole in the ceiling appears to be a dramatic re-enactment of Scripture. Placed within a Greco-Roman meal setting, the “provisions of God's workmen...coming down from heaven” re-frames an established system of delivering food to the host of the banquet in an aristocratic household. In a precedent that maps the sequence described above, once the basket was lowered by slaves into the *triclinium*, the food was dispersed to other slaves who, in turn served the guests.³⁸

The *Rule of the Master's* description of the place of the “Weekly Reader in the Refectory” elaborates on these realities in great detail.

³⁷ *Rule of the Master* 23.1-14 (*The Rule of the Master* (Luke Eberle, tr.; Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publishing, 1977), 173-4.

³⁸ Thanks to Sabine Jäger-Wersonig, director of the Austrian Archeological Excavation for providing access and explanation of the presence of a trap door in the *triclinium* ceiling of an Ephesian Terrace House where an example of such an arrangement remains *in situ*; The overlap this presents with topics taken up in last year's discussion of the intersection between slaves and monks in attending the needs of meal goers/the community is provocative. Adding interesting nuance to speculation about monks assuming the duties of household slaves in the context of monastic meals, both in lowering the basket and distributing food, the “weekly servers” in attendance here explicitly duplicate the roles that were filled by slaves in a more conventional setting

In both summer and winter, whether the meal is at the sixth or the ninth hour, each of the deans of all the deaneries will do the reading at table for a week at a time. But a dean is not to read if the other dean of the group of ten is occupied in the kitchen service, lest while one is doing the reading and the other the cooking, there will be not one present to correct the faults of their brothers at table. When these deans have finished taking their turns reading at table a week apiece, they will appoint literate brothers to read for a week at a time, so that everyone in each deanery who is literate may read in turn. And after all the brothers have finished their weeks of reading, the deans will start over again one after the other. In this way divine food will never be wanting at a carnal meal; as the Scripture says: 'Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word of God', and the brothers' meal will be doubly when they eat through the mouth and are nourished through the ears.

Entry into each one's week is to take place as follows: on Sunday, the same day the kitchen servers enter upon their week, at the meal at the sixth hour, after the verse and prayer at table, when the abbot is seated on his chair, before the basket with the customary bread has come down by the pulley cord, this brother who is to read presents himself by saying aloud: 'Please my lords, pray for me because I am entering upon my week of reading at table'. Then the abbot rises with the entire community, and kneeling down they pray for him. And after they have risen, the new reader for the weeks says this verse: 'O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth shall proclaim your praise', and all respond together. As soon as this verse has been said and the abbot has finished, he gives the sign of peace first to the abbot, then to everyone. Then he provides a seat for himself in the center of the refectory, and after all are seated at table he asks a blessing and likewise sits down at his place with the book. After the abbot and all the others have received the first unmixed wine of the meal, he too in like manner receives his unmixed wine to prevent spitting out the sacrament, and then he begins to read.

Every day he reads this Rule, marking the place to which he reads day after day, so that it is read in daily sequence yet in its entirety, and thus in successive weeks of the reading of it can be finished and started over again. When the respective reader has finished his week of reading, he shows his successor the mark where he left off, and the one starting his week continues from there. He in like manner, perhaps finishing and beginning anew, shows the mark to his successor at the end of his week.

Let him read distinctly, not rapidly, so that the hearers while occupied may clearly understand what they must put into practice, and so that, should there be anything ambiguous or obscure that the brothers do not fully comprehend, the abbot may give explanations either on being questioned by the brother or by his own initiative.

If non-monks happen to come to the monastic meal, to avoid defamation afterwards in the world should a worldly learn the secrets of God, let the

reading be taken from some other book, if the abbot so please, so that the secret of the monastery and the established norms for leading a life of sanctity many not be learned by scoffers. In this case let him read another text, first making a mark in the Rule. If the non-monk admitted to the monastic meal is such that the abbot is certain he not only is capable of appreciating the divine ordinances but is even so religious that he could follow this manner of life and could be drawn to godly ways, when such a one comes to the table the reader will continue the Rule. For those who are capable of observing it as it should be [observed] should hear the Rule of the monastery.

The Rule is to be read in the refectory at mealtime, the entire community having been brought together for the meal, so that the reading of what is to be observed and amended then may enable all the hearers to put it into practice rightly and without excuse. In this way all will hear the Rule in its entirety and no one will miss anything, so that all must actually do what they have heard.

While the brother is engaged in this duty during his week, the waiters will take for him platefuls from all the courses served at his table, and the cellarer will reserve his portion of bread and the customary number of drinks, so that after all rise his himself may, after asking a blessing, take his meal....³⁹

In both frame and content, the *Rule of the Master* reflects a setting at once removed from and intimately linked to the discursive negotiation that frames the meal in its broader Greco-Roman, and prior monastic, setting. The only thing missing from this description of a group of monks reclining ‘at table’ is the element of reclining. Yet, even as the question of whether those in attendance are sitting or reclining has been obscured, the tensive lines that link egalitarian ideals and an emergent monastic hierarchy could hardly be more vivid.

THE BENEDICTINE RULE (MONTE CASSINO, ITALY ~540 CE)

As Basil’s Rules grounded the emergent genre of Eastern *Typika*, the Rule of Benedict, over time, became the dominant monastic code not only for the community at Monte Cassino, but for all of Western Europe. The Rule is, to some degree, a simplification of the complex codifications of the *Rule of the Master*. However, as with earlier monastic rules, it is supposed that Benedict composed the original portions, “as he went along.” Adding directives from year

³⁹ *The Rule of the Master*, 24.1-30 (Eberle, 177-180)

to year, he incorporated the wisdom gained from lived experience, as well as material gleaned from other extant rules. While this Rule, as a distinct entity, is dated to the years immediately preceding Benedict's death (530-540 CE), it is first mentioned by Pope Gregory the Great, fifty years later.⁴⁰

Traditionally, the teachings of Basil, Pachomius and Cassian have been credited with exerting particular influence on Benedict's thought. However, the common themes that link Benedict's Rule to the *Rule of the Master* suggest that the latter may have served as a more immediate source. In succinct prose, Benedict's instructions for the "Weekly Reader" simplify the protocol outlined in the *Rule of the Master*, but do not include any significant new directives:

Reading must not be wanting at the table of the brethren when they are eating. Neither let anyone who may chance to take up the book venture to read there; but let him who is to read for the whole week enter upon that office on Sunday. After Mass and Communion let him ask all to pray for him that God may ward off from him the spirit of pride. And let the following verse be said three times by all in the oratory, he beginning it: "Domine, labia mea aperies, et os meum annuntiabit laudem tuam" (Ps 50[51]:17), and thus having received the blessing let him enter upon the reading.

Let the deepest silence be maintained that no whispering or voice be heard except that of the reader alone. But let the brethren so help each other to what is needed for eating and drinking, that no one need ask for anything. If, however, anything should be wanted, let it be asked for by means of a sign of any kind rather than a sound. And let no one presume to ask any questions there, either about the book or anything else, in order that no cause to speak be given [to the devil] (Eph 4:27; 1 Tm 5:14), unless, perchance, the Superior wish[es] to say a few words for edification.

Let the brother who is reader for the week take a little bread and wine before he begin[s] to read, on account of Holy Communion, and lest it should be too hard for him to fast so long. Afterward, however, let him take his meal in the kitchen with

⁴⁰ Gregory, *Dialogues* 11.36.

the weekly servers and the waiters. The brethren, however, will not read or sing in order, but only those who edify their hearers.⁴¹

In both settings, reading the Rule in the context of the meal, served not only in governing the monastic way of life, but also as a pedagogical device, bent on shaping individual behavior as it was lived within this setting. Read out loud, ostensibly for the sake of the novices, three times each year, Benedict's precepts, like the instructions 'of the Master', were inculcated into the lives of the monks, day by day, and over the length of a lifetime. Re-attaching Western practice to its Eastern roots, after the evening meal, Benedict recommends readings that complement the teachings of the Rule, in particular, Cassian's *Conferences* or the *Lives of the [Egyptian] Fathers*.⁴²

CONCLUSION

Whereas this essay has focused on the question of posture at meals, a broader analysis of monastic rules could fruitfully extend this preliminary work into engaging the locus of monastic meals by exploring dynamics and questions of class, the economic make-up of a given

⁴¹ *Rule of Benedict* 38; Mensis fratrum lectio deesse non debet, nec fortuito casu qui arripuerit codicem legere ibi, sed lecturus tota ebdomada dominica ingrediatur. Qui ingrediens post missas et communionem petat ab omnibus pro se orari, ut avertat ab ipso Deus spiritum elationis, et dicatur hic versus in oratorio tertio ab omnibus, ipso tamen incipiente: Domine, labia mea aperies, et os meum adnuntiabit laudem tuam; et sic accepta benedictione ingrediatur ad legendum.

Et summum fiat silentium, ut nullius mussitatio vel vox nisi solius legentis ibi audiatur. Quae vero necessaria sunt comedentibus et bibentibus sic sibi vicissim ministrent fratres ut nullus indigeat petere aliquid; si quid tamen opus fuerit, sonitu cuiuscumque signi potius petatur quam voce. Nec praesumat ibi aliquis de ipsa lectione aut aliunde quicquam requirere, ne detur occasio; nisi forte prior pro aedificatione voluerit aliquid breviter dicere.

Frater autem lector ebdomadarius accipiat mixtum priusquam incipiat legere, propter communionem sanctam, et ne forte grave sit ei ieiunium sustinere. Postea autem cum coquinae ebdomadarii et servitoribus reficiat. Fratres autem non per ordinem legant aut cantent, sed qui aedificant audientes (*The Rule of St. Benedict according to the important manuscript from St. Gall Library, Switzerland* (Ignasi M. Fossas, et al.; Subsidia Monastica 21; Barcelona: Publicacions de l'Abadia de Montserrat, 1997)).

⁴² *Rule of Benedict* 42; In the words of Owen Chadwick, over the course of the next five centuries, Cassian's "ideas could hardly be escaped by the monks of the Western world" (Introduction to *John Cassian: Conferences* (Colm Uibhead, tr; *Classics of Western Spirituality*; Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1985), 29).

community, and/or the felt effect of diverse geographical settings on the shape of monastic practice. Even a cursory overview of this cross-section of variables underscores the manner in which the meal remains a locus of negotiation, a site “where social stratification and social equality” is simultaneously affirmed and challenged. It is clear that like their Greco-Roman, and proto-Christian counterparts, proto-Monastic meals afforded contexts for “think[ing] about, experiment[ing] with and negotiat[ing]...social structures, personal relationships and identity formation.”⁴³ Arguably unique to this environment, however, is an institutional setting that contextualizes such practice within a larger frame, situating all of life within a ‘utopian’ worldview. In their consideration of *Utopian Thought in the Western World*, Frank and Mitzie Manuel suggest that the ideals of the monastic context are best rendered as something of a hybrid plant, “born of the crossing of a paradisiacal, other-worldly belief of Judeo-Christian religion with the Hellenic myth of an ideal city on earth.”⁴⁴ The selections examined above offer a striking record of monastic communities that, like their Greco-Roman and proto-Christian counterparts, continue to negotiate an articulation of this vision in a meal setting. This challenge, however, is simultaneously an invitation. What has been discovered, at minimum, is the amount of work that remains to be done. Without question, appropriating the lens of meal practice in examining early monastic life retains rich and relatively untapped potential for any who care to move beyond reading hagiography as history, and begin, instead, to bring the larger than life to life.

⁴³ Taussig, *In the Beginning was the Meal*, 67-68.

⁴⁴ Frank E. Manuel and Fritzie P. Manuel, *Utopian Thought in the Western World* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1979) 15.