

The project focuses on monastic communities of the Christian East (Asia Minor, Northern Mesopotamia, Syria, Palestine, Egypt) in late antiquity (4th–8th century). The research revolves around both individual monks and various forms of monastic communal life (clusters of hermitages—the so-called *lauras*—coenobitic monasteries, and congregations). Late antique monasticism is an extremely broad domain; only very large institutes would be capable of investigating all its aspects simultaneously. The director of the project decided to limit this vast research field to several groups of clearly defined problems concerning both practical and spiritual facets of monastic life. The choice was made according to the following criteria:

1. the existence of numerous, reliable, and varied sources (literary works; normative texts: rulings of synods and councils, imperial constitutions; documents; letters written by and addressed to monks) preserved in different languages (chiefly Greek, but also Coptic and Syriac);
2. state of the art which justifies undertaking the scientific work in fields that have not yet been properly investigated or whose treatment in the previous scholarship requires verification.

After a preliminary assessment of the state of the sources and research possibilities, five problem groups have emerged that constitute the core of the programme:

1. Monks and hierarchical Church. This section is defined by two major groups of questions:

- a) how often did charismatic groups such as monks (or at least a major part of them) clash with the hierarchical Church in the fourth century (the formative period of the monastic movement) and in the subsequent history of monasticism (5th–8th century)?
- b) how far-reaching was the control of the hierarchs over the functioning of monasteries, especially the small ones?

This section focuses on various sources: texts created in Egypt or relating Egyptian events, as well as texts from Constantinople, Asia Minor, Syria, and Palestine.

2. Relations of monastic communities with lay society. The second section, based chiefly on Egyptian documentary sources supplemented, e.g. with texts from the Shenoutean dossier, embraces practical aspects of the monks' functioning in the society. Its aim is to explore the contexts and intensity of interactions with laymen, as well as the possible impact that these interactions had on their counterparties. It addresses such issues as the meaning of familial bonds in the monastic milieu, monastic charity, relations with officials and landlords analysed in terms of patronage, conflict, and collaboration, and everyday interactions with traders and craftsmen.

3. Monastic spirituality as reflected in private correspondence of monks from small communities of Egypt and Palestine. The originality of this section lies in the idea of investigating the subject through the prism of documentary texts which are free from distortions caused by literary conventions; thanks to such texts we are able to hear the voice of the monks and approach directly the world of their thought and belief. The decision to focus on small communities results from the fact that—as we learn from our experience in reading monastic texts—the larger the community, the bigger the communal pressure which renders individuals prone to uniformisation. The private correspondence of monks has never been explored from the proposed point of view, as the questions of spirituality used to be studied on the basis of ascetic treatises or hagiographic writings.

4. Legal aspects of monasticism. The starting point of this section is a confrontation of the rulings of Justinianic codification with the decisions of episcopal gatherings concerning monasticism. The second stage of research will consist in a comparison of normative regulations with documents of economic and pastoral practice. The sources allowing for such treatment are unfortunately limited to Egypt, but their quality makes up for geographical limitations.

5. Monks in temples of Egypt. This section aims at creating a catalogue of monastic installations in Egyptian temples, defining their architectural forms, analysing wall inscriptions found therein, and determining the geographical and settlement context of monastic dwellings in order to gain a better understanding of the place occupied by monks living in former pagan temples in the everyday life of local communities. Apart from archaeological data, this section will draw also upon literary accounts.