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**Getting Away From It All? (Masters and Disciples in the Desert of the Ascetics)**

Within the fourth- and fifth-century CE literature that documents the movement of Christian men out of the cities into the deserted places (the *ermos*) to live away from society, we have record of many homosocial relationships. There were solitary hermits (e.g. St. Paul in Palestine) and there were also large-scale monasteries (e.g. Pachomius's establishment). Within the context of either solitary withdrawal or residence in a monastic situation, an older man (called an Abba or *geron*) taught a disciple how to live the monastic life and to face up to the problems and temptations to which any monk was exposed. For the disciple the process of learning required self-disclosure, endurance, and obedience. But these attitudes were also required, in a different form, of the Abba, if he was to teach with the integrity and efficiency which the Desert Fathers demanded as an ideal. (Gould 1993: 27) The relationship between Abba and disciple was extraordinarily intimate and the disciple, in a position of virtual slavery, was hardly a *vir* at all.

In the paper, I discuss the general contours of the relationship between the Abba and his disciple and then pass to a discussion of a particular pairing: St. Anthony and his disciple, Paul the Simple (*Historia Monachorum* 25). Arguing from this pairing, I establish that there is a pervasive concern in the literature from the *ermos* to avoid creating the impression that there is anything sexual happening between the monks. Such efforts in a literature concerned with chastity and control of bodily appetites suggest that sexual behavior was of greater concern in the *ermos* than is sometimes asserted (e.g. Brown 1988). I further argue that the denial of same-sex desire also suggests that the transcendence toward which the monk labors has at its base a denial of same-sex desire and an (at times hysterical) heightening of desire for women. The denial of same-sex desire and the affirmation of normative desire route the subjectivity of a "proper" monk through his body most forcefully at just the point of his attempt at transcendence.

There was no other way, however; the persons with whom a monk, an adult male, would have the most dealings would have been other monks, likewise adult males. Homosocial environments sealed like this produce sexual feelings. The example of American prisons is suggestive in this regard (See, e.g., Bech 1997 [1987]: 20-25.). Sex in any form was discouraged in the *ermos* and sex between monks posed a special danger: entertainment and consummation of man's desire for man could render the virile frame of mind effeminate and lead to the "appalling" and/or "ridiculous" spectacle of the transcending *cinaedus*--in the case of one or both of the participants. Hence, there was a need to keep woman (and boys) as the explicit objects of lust against which monks battled. Complementary to this preservation of normative sexual objects was the erasure of man's desire for man into unspeakability. For all the novelty to the relationship between *geron* and disciple, a lot of baggage from the Roman sexual system back in the secular world traveled with the monks to the *eremos*.