

The characterization of Egyptian monasticism as a desert movement arises primarily from the success of certain fourth century literary texts circulated outside of Egypt (e.g., *HM*, *HL*, *VA*). Yet, recent research has demonstrated a whole range of choices for ascetic dwelling in late antique Egypt; men and women might practice their discipline in households in cities and towns, in abandoned villages, in the outer or inner desert. Archaeological (including papyrological and epigraphical) sources witness another widely practiced option, which has been surprisingly under-recognized by scholars of early Christianity: tomb habitation. In this context, it is crucial to recognize that both Greek *oros* and Coptic *toou* can mean not only “mountain” and “desert,” but also “cemetery” and “monastery.”

Some of Egypt's best-preserved late antique monasteries developed out of cemeteries inhabited by monks. For example, the Monastery of Jeremias (Sakkara) and Deir Anba Hadra (Aswan) both underwent a process of centralization and enclosure, until the tombs were overwhelmed with built structures such as churches, refectories, cells, work areas and stables. Often, however, tomb-habitation is documented in individual archaeological site reports, which record more modest alterations: the partitioning of tomb courtyards; installation of pavements, benches and cooking facilities; carving of shelves and lamp niches; plastering and painting of walls; inscribing or painting of texts and figures.

The content of papyri and ostraka from these same archaeological contexts provides a number of points of access for understanding the practical and potentially ideological implications of the reuse of funerary architecture for habitation and ascetic practice. Such texts record a great variety of social and economic transactions in the forms of letters, petitions, contracts, receipts, and other “documentary” texts. This paper will discuss physical description and conceptual construction of cemetery-settlements in documents from late sixth to eighth century Western Thebes.