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# Books in the Systematic Collection of the Apophthegmata Patrum\*

Saskia Dirkse

«Said an elder, <The prophets wrought the books; then came  
our fathers, who spent their labor in the same and learned  
the books by heart. But then came *this generation*,  
which copied them out and plopped them on the shelf.»  
*Apophth. Patr. Syst. 10.191*<sup>1</sup>

In a seminal article published in the early 1980s, social historian Evelyne Patlagean commented on the apparent availability of books to the holy men and women who populate Late Antique hagiography. «Adult characters», she writes, «always read, write and sing psalms; even in the poorest huts of the Egypto-Palestinian desert, there are Scriptures and spiritual books.»<sup>2</sup>

Patlagean spoke in general terms, but here we will focus on the monastic community of the Egyptian desert, where the monks had a profoundly ambivalent attitude towards books. For most who sought to draw closer to God by eking out

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<sup>1</sup> «Εἶπε γέρον, <Οἱ προφήται τὰ βιβλία ἐποίησαν, καὶ ἦλθον οἱ πατέρες ἡμῶν καὶ ἠργάσαντο ἐν αὐτοῖς καὶ ἔλαβον αὐτὰ ἀπὸ στήθους. Ἦλθε δὲ ἡ γενεὰ αὕτη καὶ ἔγραψαν αὐτὰ καὶ ἔθηκαν εἰς τὰς θυρίδας.» All citations are drawn from Jean-Claude Guy's three-volume edition: Jean-Claude Guy, *Les apophtegmes des pères*. Collection systématique, chapitres i–ix, Paris 1993; Jean-Claude Guy, *Les apophtegmes des pères*. Collection systématique, chapitres x–xvi, Paris 2003; Jean-Claude Guy, *Les apophtegmes des pères*. Collection systématique, chapitres xvii–xxi, Paris 2005. All translations are our own.

<sup>2</sup> Evelyne Patlagean, *Ancient Byzantine Hagiography and Social History*, in: Stephen Wilson (ed.), *Saints and Their Cults*. Studies in Religious Sociology, History and Folklore, Cambridge 1983, 103. The word <character> is important. Our aim here is also to consider the <literary> representation of book culture and literacy of the communities reflected through the lens of this particular text. For a «historical» investigation drawing on a wide range of sources, see Ewa Wipszycka, *Études sur le christianisme dans l'Égypte de l'antiquité tardive*, Rome 1996, 107–125. In a recent work on the apophthegmatic tradition, John Wortley also has an informative chapter focusing specifically on literacy and books; see John Wortley, *An Introduction to the Desert Fathers*, Cambridge 2019, 137–146.

a difficult life in the Egyptian desert, a book would have been a rare and valuable commodity, but it also represented a real risk. This value and this risk were both physical and spiritual. The monks' religious culture was organized around two pillars: on the one hand, immutable texts like Holy Writ and the writings of the Church Fathers, and on the other hand a more fluid tradition of oral instruction that the disciple received from his master. Monastic literature must be considered in the light of the monks' oral tradition, and conversely the oral tradition is clarified by literature. The books we are talking about here are precious objects in a culture that values the principles of simplicity and voluntary poverty.

In this paper we will consider some of Patlagean's claims about the reported prevalence of reading and owning books in Late Antique Greek hagiography within a collection of edifying tales and sayings known as the *Apophthegmata Patrum*, which emerged at the end of the fifth century as a written record of Egyptian desert spirituality.<sup>3</sup> We will examine different questions: when are books mentioned? How are they used? Who owns them, and is this ownership cast in a positive or a negative light? There are two main versions of this corpus of ascetic literature in Greek which have come down to us, an «alphabetico-anonymous» version, which features sayings and stories arranged primarily according to the speaker's name, as well as sayings and tales not connected with any particular desert father; and a «systematic version», which arranges the material into twenty-one thematic chapters (bearing such titles as «On being free of possessions, wherein it is shown that one must guard oneself against avarice»<sup>4</sup>) and then further classes them alphabetically by the speaker's name, if known. Many of the sayings are common to both collections, but each collection (and its many variants and descendants, for the manuscript tradition associated with this type of text is rich and varied) also has material unique to itself. For the purposes of this paper I have chosen to focus on the *Systematic Collection* for two reasons: to limit the discussion to a tractable amount of text, and because the *Systematic Collection* as a corpus appears to have received the greater deal of conscious editorial intervention in the process of transforming a fluid and largely oral tradition into a more fixed literary work. The *Systematic Collection*'s prologue is noteworthy for the prominent place given to a meta-literary discussion of the arrangement of its own text, remarkable even within a genre already given to self-reflexive prefaces. To give an idea of this collection's unusual character, we could compare it with a more or

<sup>3</sup> For an in-depth look at the history and transmission of this text, see Jean-Claude Guy, *Recherches sur la tradition grecque des Apophthegmata Patrum*, Brussels 1962.

<sup>4</sup> *Apophth. Patr. Syst.*, Prologue, 11, «Περὶ ἀκτημοσύνης, ἐν ᾧ ὅτι δεῖ καὶ τὴν πλεονεξίαν φυλάττεσθαι.» It should be noted, however, that not all chapters start with the «Περὶ...» formula.

less contemporary work coming from the same cultural milieu: the *Ascetic Discourses* of Abba Isaiah of Scetis.<sup>5</sup> In this latter text apophthegmatic material is mixed in pell mell with a jumble of «monastic rules, exhortations, questions and answers, homilies [...] even a letter.»<sup>6</sup> The author of the *Systematic Collection*'s preface, by contrast, goes into some depth explaining the advantages of dividing the apophthegmata into chapters and the order behind them – there is a progression from the particular, intended mostly for monks, to the broadly applicable – so as to distill the essence of desert wisdom into a form both potent and approachable. The division into chapters, many of them starting with the traditional formula «Concerning...» («Περί...») calls to mind not only the organization of earlier Christian and pagan treatises on spiritual and philosophical themes, but also perhaps the division of Gospel texts into κεφάλαια, done so as to make the text more navigable for readers confronted with such an abundance of material.<sup>7</sup> The compilers of the *Systematic Collection*, in other words, put a great deal of thought into what a book is and what it can do for its readers. It will be interesting to see whether and how this literary self-awareness translates at all into how books are represented in the texts which the compilers selected.

In order to ascertain where in the text references to books and reading occur, it is necessary to establish a basic terminology of what desert ascetics called their written texts.<sup>8</sup> Ἡ Γραφή, referring specifically to Holy Writ, which with good reason can be called The Book *par excellence*,<sup>9</sup> is by far and unsurprisingly the most common word, occurring 29 times. It is followed by βιβλίον (17 instances), which is of particular interest to us as in most instances this refers to a physical book, whereas γραφή more often than not seems to indicate the work (the words and ideas). We also find βιβλος, which occurs a mere four times but appears to

<sup>5</sup> See John Chrysavgis/Pachomios Penkett, *Abba Isaiah of Scetis. Ascetic Discourses*, Kalamazoo 2001.

<sup>6</sup> William Harmless, *Desert Christians. An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism*, Oxford 2004, 248.

<sup>7</sup> The κεφάλαια also begin with «Περί...» On this subject, see Harvey K. McArthur, *The Earliest Divisions of the Gospels*, in: Frank L. Cross (ed.), *Studia Evangelica* vol. III, Part II: *The New Testament Message*, Berlin 1964, 266–272; Pierre Petitmengin, *Capitula paiens et chrétiens*, in: Jean-Claude Fredouille (ed.), *Titres et articulations du texte dans les œuvres antiques*, Paris 1997, 491–507; James R. Edwards, *The Hermeneutical Significance of Chapter Divisions in Ancient Gospel Manuscripts*, in: *New Testament Studies* 56/3 (2010) 413–426.

<sup>8</sup> For a thorough survey of the terminology associated with books in Early Christian writing, see Alain Le Boulluec, *Les emplois figurés du livre dans la Septante et leur interprétation chez Origène et les Pères grecs*, in: *Mètis. Anthropologie des mondes grecs anciens* 7/1–2 (1992) 111–134.

<sup>9</sup> Douglas Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert. Scripture and the Quest for Holiness in Early Christian Monasticism*, Oxford 1993, 83. Cf. the Ἀγία Γραφή's alternative name, ἡ Βίβλος (with the definite article).

be used interchangeably with βιβλίον. It is interesting to note that the prologue refers to the *Systematic Collection* itself both as a βίβλος and a βιβλίον. Lastly we find two references to another specific book, the ψαλτήριον, but in each case the text mentions the psalter in the context of reciting the psalms (i.e. having the book memorized), rather than the physical book itself. It should be added, however, that a reference to the psalter as a book does occur in the anonymous collection.<sup>10</sup> References to singing the psalms, on the other hand (ψάλλειν and its related noun ψαλμωδία), occur with greater frequency, 22 and nine times respectively. This suggests that when monks performed the psalter or the liturgy, they did so from memory. I could find no other specific mention of liturgical books. On the whole, we can say that for a work filling three sizeable *Sources Chrétiennes* volumes, references to books are relatively few. It is also revealing that the verb γράφω occurs only 45 times, while the verb διηγοῦμαι is found 106 times – well over twice as often. What this suggests is that we are very much still in an oral culture where books are present but not prominent.

From the *Systematic Collection* itself it is not easy to learn about the kinds of books that circulated among desert ascetics and what they looked like. Little information is given in the text about books' materiality: we know that they wrote both on parchment (δέρμα) and papyrus (χαρτίον), as well as (rarely and only for snippets of text) wood (ξύλον).<sup>11</sup> Moreover, the text also remains reticent about the size of books, the types of bindings, the presence of illuminations, and the layout of texts.<sup>12</sup> On the production of books the text offers more information and we meet in the collection two monks who act as scribes. The one Sinai monk's primary responsibility (after personal spiritual growth) was to act as scribe (καλλιγράφος) and to accept orders for copy jobs from the other brethren, but his scribal production is not described in detail, because he is too preoccupied with his spiritual progress to complete his literary tasks.<sup>13</sup> This story shows, though, that monasteries had monks whose principle responsibility was to work as scribes. Another tale, on perfect obedience, gives a glimpse of the working methods of desert monk-scribes: an elder summons his most beloved disciple to some task; when the disciple has (presumably) gone off to perform the task, the elder enters the disciple's cell. Leafing through the notebook (τετράδιον) that this obedient scribe had left open, the elder sees that the disciple had begun to write an omega

<sup>10</sup> See Jacques-Paul Migne, *Patrologiae cursus completus* (series graeca), Paris 1864, 416.

<sup>11</sup> For more background on the materiality of the early Christian book, see Harry Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church*, New Haven/London 1995, 66–81.

<sup>12</sup> But see Wortley, *Introduction to the Desert Fathers* (cf. note 2), 140 for a saying in which binding decoration is mentioned in the Anonymous Collection.

<sup>13</sup> *Apophth. Patr. Syst.* 15.129



but that, upon hearing his master's voice, he left his work without even turning his pen to complete the letter.<sup>14</sup> So the scribal profession is portrayed here as going hand in hand with spiritual progress and ascetic excellence.

Books also reached desert communities through purchase and sale. Douglas Burton-Christie observes that the fourth and fifth centuries, the period during which the apophthegmata were likely being collected and recorded, also saw the production of the great uncial codices.<sup>15</sup> One can imagine that some manuscripts from this flourishing tradition of production also came into the hands of the desert fathers, even if these were more likely to be smaller and more portable Bibles.<sup>16</sup> Just such a manuscript, though presumably a humbler counterpart, plays a central role in a story of a certain Abba Gelasios. Gelasios had in his possession a parchment manuscript worth eighteen pieces of silver. This manuscript contained the whole of the Old and New Testaments and was centrally placed in a church so that the brethren could peruse it at their leisure.<sup>17</sup> The story revolves around the theft of this precious object by an unscrupulous brother whose plans to sell it come to an amusing yet soul-profiting end: a potential buyer calls on Gelasios, as an authority on manuscripts, to appraise the value of his own stolen manuscript! The theft of Gelasios's manuscript highlights an ambiguity associated with books that is found in many of the *Systematic Collection*'s stories. While for its spiritual value a copy of Holy Writ is certainly a boon to the community (the brethren are able to consult the Scriptures whenever they are in the church), as a material object the Bible is also a costly and desirable artifact for which a willing buyer is readily found, thus making it a source of temptation and sin.

The connection between books and the dangers of theft is also explored, albeit in a more metaphorical sense, in a reported exchange between Abba Serapion and a bibliophile monk. When the monk asks Serapion for a «word», the abba replies somewhat tersely, «What have I to say to you? That you took what belonged to the widows and the fatherless and put it in this bookcase.» For, the tale concludes, «he saw it was full of books.»<sup>18</sup> The idea that spending money on books rather than giving it away to charity is tantamount to stealing from widows and orphans gets to the heart of the anxieties that clung to book ownership for these desert

<sup>14</sup> Apophth. Patr. Syst. 14.11.

<sup>15</sup> Burton-Christie, *Desert Christians* (cf. note 9), 83.

<sup>16</sup> On this subject, see Chrysi Kotsifou, *Books and Book Production in the Monastic Communities of Byzantine Egypt*, in: William E. Klingshirn/Linda Safran (eds.), *The Early Christian Book*, Washington, D.C. 2007.

<sup>17</sup> Apoth. Patr. Syst. 16.2.

<sup>18</sup> Apoth. Patr. Syst. 6.16. «Τί σοι ἔχω εἰπεῖν; Ὅτι ἔλαβες τὰ τῶν χηρῶν καὶ ὀρφανῶν καὶ ἔθηκας αὐτὰ εἰς τὴν θυρίδα ταύτην. [...] Εἶδε γὰρ αὐτὴν μεστὴν βιβλίων.» His reproach is an allusion to that which Jesus made of the Pharisees, cf. Matthew 23.14, Mark 12.38–40, Luke 20.45–47.

ascetics. Owning a book – any book, even the Holy Scriptures – went against the fundamental monastic principle of freedom from possessions (ἀκτημοσύνη), a virtue to which the *Systematic Collection*'s entire sixth chapter is dedicated. Even when ownership came with the best intentions (like profiting the community, as in the case of Abba Gelasios) this small good is always outweighed by the greater good of ἀκτημοσύνη. The story of Abba Theodore of Pherme illustrates this well. This father, being in possession of «three fine books», inquired of a certain Abba Makarios what he ought to do, prefacing his question with some unsolicited justifications for owning these items and saying that both he himself and his brethren drew great profit from them. Much like Abba Serapion in the previous tale, Makarios is quick to point out the weakness in Theodore's rationalizations: «These are good deeds», he allows, «but the greatest deed of all is freedom from possessions.»<sup>19</sup> Theodore's subsequent actions – selling his books and giving the money to those in need – show that he had taken Serapion's words to heart. Interestingly, in what we may perhaps call an arc of character growth, the first chapter (on progression towards perfection) says that Theodore of Pherme was known for three specific virtues, namely «freedom from possession, asceticism, and avoiding other people».<sup>20</sup>

While *owning* books could thus create problems both for those who had them in their possession and those tempted by their material value, *reading* on the other hand (especially reading the Scriptures) is generally presented in the *Systematic Collection* as an unqualified good. Reading formed a part of a set of sanctioned behaviors around which monks built their daily routines in an effort to stave off boredom (ἀκηδία) and to control the interferences of distracting thoughts (λογισμοί). Like prayer, reading the Scriptures served to sharpen the mind in contemplation of the divine and to free it from distractions. But, unlike manual labor and other activities that could, if needed, be done automatically, Scripture reading required an active mental engagement with the text. The purpose of Bible study was not simply to memorize or to enrich one's own dogmatic panoply but to grasp the essence of the Lord's teaching with humility of spirit and to practice it in one's life. A well-known father from the first generation of desert brethren confided the following to his equally famous peer, Sisoës of Raithou: «Whenever I read Scripture, my thoughts desire to foster reflection, which inclines me to posing questions.» Sisoës rejects his colleague's reading strategy and urges him to simpler yet

<sup>19</sup> Apophth. Patr. Syst. 6.7. «Τρία βιβλία καλὰ.» «Καλαὶ μὲν αἱ πράξεις», he allows, «ἀλλὰ μείζων πάντων ἐστὶν ἡ ἀκτημοσύνη.»

<sup>20</sup> Apophth. Patr. Syst. 1.12. «[Α]κτημοσύνην, καὶ τὴν ἄσκησιν, καὶ τὸ φεύγειν τοὺς ἀνθρώπους.» The word ἄσκησις is one with many meanings in a monastic context. Lampe s.v. gives nine forms of «exercise, practice, training», the first being «study, esp. of scripture» (italics and bold removed).

more profound engagement with the text: «There is no need to do this, but you ought rather to obtain, with a clean mind, the ability both to perceive and to speak.»<sup>21</sup> Reading the Scriptures was thus encouraged, but it had to be done in the correct fashion. Religious books outside the accepted canon of Holy Writ and the Lives of the Saints were considered even riskier. One saying compares the λογισμός of fornication (πορνεία) to a riveting book: if you read it and, despite its alluring contents, are able to put it away, it will not affect you; but if you continue to read it, you will «become sweetened» (ἐγγλυκαίνεσθαι) to it and its temptations will take root in your heart.<sup>22</sup> Πορνεία and its derivative verb (ἐκ)πορνεύω are often associated in the Septuagint with apostasy and idolatry: the worship of foreign gods and man-made objects. It is said in the Psalms, «Thus were they defiled with their own works, and went a whoring with their own inventions.»<sup>23</sup> These are the risks that according to the desert fathers accompany the reading of a bad book!

Abba Sopatrus issued an even stronger warning to a querying brother, stating three simple rules for virtuous living: «Let no woman enter your cell, do not read apocrypha, and do not enter into discussion concerning the image.»<sup>24</sup> The equal placement of these three injunctions suggests that Sopatrus deemed inappropriate or heretical reading material as deleterious to the soul as adultery or idolatry.

Alongside an unquestionable and deep-seated reverence for the written word (particularly for Holy Writ) and, as is especially apparent in the *Alphabetical Collection*, a widely-held belief in the almost «talismatic» properties of the Bible as a physical object,<sup>25</sup> there are also subtle hints present throughout the text which

<sup>21</sup> Apophth. Patr. Syst. 8.21. «Ὅταν ἀναγινώσκω Γραφήν, θέλει ὁ λογισμός μου φιλοκαλεῖν λόγον, ἵνα ἔχω εἰς ἐπερώτημα.» «Οὐκ ἔστι χρεία τούτου, ἀλλὰ μᾶλλον ἐκ τῆς καθαρότητος τοῦ νοῦς κτῆσαι σεαυτῷ καὶ τὸ νοεῖν καὶ τὸ λέγειν.» Cf. 1Cor. 2.13 («Which things also we speak, not in the words which man's wisdom [ἀνθρωπίνης σοφίας λόγοις] teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost teacheth...»).

<sup>22</sup> Apophth. Patr. Syst. 5.38. «Ἐλεγον οἱ γέροντες ὅτι ὁ λογισμὸς τῆς πορνείας βιβλίον ἐστίν· ἐὰν οὖν σπαρῇ εἰς ἡμᾶς καὶ μὴ πειθόμενοι αὐτῷ ἀπορρίψωμεν αὐτὸν ἀφ' ἡμῶν, μετὰ ἀναπαύσεως κόπτεται· ἐὰν δὲ σπαρέντος αὐτοῦ ἐγγλυκανθῶμεν αὐτῷ ὡς πειθόμενοι, ἀντιστραφεῖς γίνεται σιδηροῦς καὶ δυσκόλως κόπτεται.»

<sup>23</sup> Psalms 105.39 (=Masor. 106.39) «Καὶ ἐμιάνθη ἐν τοῖς ἔργοις αὐτῶν καὶ ἐπόρνευσαν ἐν τοῖς ἐπιτηδεύμασιν αὐτῶν.» For the verb, cf. Exodus 34.16, 34.16, Leviticus 17.7, 20.5sq., Numbers 15.39, Deuteronomy 31.16, Judges 2.17, 8.27, 8.33, 1Chronicles 5.25, Psalms 72.27 (=Masor. 73.27), Ezekiel 6.9, 16.17, 23.3, 23.30, 23.43, Hosea 1.2, 4.10–14, 4.18, 5.3, 6.10 and 9.1. For the noun, Jeremiah 3.9 («Καὶ ἐγένετο εἰς οὐθὲν ἡ πορνεία αὐτῆς καὶ ἐμοίχευσεν τὸ ξύλον καὶ τὸν λίθον»), 13.27, Ezekiel 23.7sq., 23.11, 23.14, 23.17sq., 23.25, 23.27, 23.29, 43.7, 43.9, Hosea 4.11sq. and 5.4.

<sup>24</sup> Apophth. Patr. Syst. 14.16. «Μὴ εἰσέλθῃ γυνὴ εἰς τὸ κελλίον σου, καὶ μὴ ἀναγνώσης ἀπόκρυφα, καὶ μὴ ἐκζητήσης περὶ τῆς εἰκόνης.»

<sup>25</sup> The act of reading the Scriptures is also described as having apotropaic properties in Apophth. Patr. Syst. 21.44: «Εἴτε γέρων ὅτι καὶ τὸ ἀναγνῶναι τὰς θείας Γραφὰς φοβεῖ τοὺς δαίμονας.»



call into question the usefulness of book learning on the path to spiritual perfection.<sup>26</sup> As Burton-Christie has shown, there is an inherent tension between the written word and oral teaching; this tension underpins the entirety of the apophthegmatic corpus and feeds into a complex web of questions concerning literacy, social standing, and a resistance to what could be termed secular or pagan culture.<sup>27</sup> This subject is too broad and complex for an exhaustive treatment here and we will limit ourselves to a few examples where book learning and rote memorization are specifically criticized or deemed less effective than the practice of monastic ideals and personal experience. This message occupies a central place in a memorable tale where three brothers visit an elder and tell him of their activities; the first says, «Abba, I have learned the Old and New Testaments by heart.» To which the elder replies, «You have filled the air with words.» The second brother gets a similarly critical response when he mentions he has copied out the whole of the two Testaments. The brother's scribal industry does him no credit in his auditor's eyes and the elder tells him, «And you have stuffed the bookcases with papyri.»<sup>28</sup> The monk denounces the brethren's activities as a waste of time and goods, a vain effort, a mark of pedantry. His attitude reflects Paul's saying that «the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life» (an idea, ironically, conveyed by writing).<sup>29</sup> This censorious response contrasts with the lighter reprimands of previous apophthegmata, though even there books are viewed as potential distractions whose expense might be better dedicated to the practice of charity. It is important to note, however, that the old man does not criticize the brethren's objectives, namely to learn the word of the Lord, but their methods.

This monk's hostility towards the three brethren is barely veiled and represents an extreme point of view among a diversity of opinions existing in the *Systematic Collection* about the book. It is a delicious irony that such a negative attitude towards books is itself preserved through a book. Obviously the compiler could not be of the same opinion as this book slayer: his very project proves that he is clearly in favor of books, at least in general. Now, the apophthegmatic collection is meant to instill morals, not excite with subtlety; yet the compiler allows the inclusion of a position quite opposed to his own, and so shows that he is prepared to admit a variety of opinions even concerning his very own undertaking.

However, most expressions of mistrust towards books as physical objects are more measured. Books *per se* are not denigrated; it is simply that personal expe-

<sup>26</sup> Burton-Christie, *Desert Christians* (cf. note 9), 118.

<sup>27</sup> On this subject see also Wortley, *Introduction to the Desert Fathers* (cf. note 2), 138–139.

<sup>28</sup> Apophth. Patr. Syst. 10.147. «Ἀββᾶ, ἔμαθον τὴν παλαιὰν καὶ νέαν διαθήκην ἀπὸ στήθους.» «Ἐγέμισας τὸν ἀέρα λόγων.» «Καὶ σὺ τὰς θυρίδας ἐγέμισας χαρτίων.»

<sup>29</sup> 2Cor. 3.6 («[Τ]ὸ γὰρ γράμμα ἀποκτείνει, τὸ δὲ πνεῦμα ζωοποιεῖ»).

rience and oral teaching are valued more. In the collection's chapter on discernment an elder from Kellia chances upon a monk struggling with a λογισμός. The monk explains that his spirit is perturbed because, just as he was about to begin the recitation of the synaxis, he heard a complaint uttered outside his cell. When it was time for the recitation, he could not recall a single word of the office but only the words of the complaint. This happened, he adds emphatically, despite the fact that he knew fourteen books of Scripture by heart. This particular λογισμός suggests that even an encyclopedic knowledge of Holy Writ and great feats of memory do not reliably indicate understanding, which is requisite for true ascetic progress. As William Harmless remarks, «the accent on practice led the desert fathers to criticize any who equated knowledge of the scriptural text with knowledge of scripture.»<sup>30</sup> In another tale, when a brother has received a particularly soul-profitting piece of advice from an elder, he remarks, «I have indeed read many books, but have never known such instruction as this.»<sup>31</sup>

To conclude: the *Systematic Collection* includes a wide array of differing and sometimes competing attitudes and teachings concerning the book. This represents an elegant bit of authorial maneuvering on the part of the compilers, who found themselves in the challenging position of being the literary inheritors of a largely oral culture, always looking back to a golden past from a brazen present. The attitude of studied ambivalence towards cultivated in the *Systematic Collection* is thus no mere chance: as material objects books are honored as both storehouses of spiritual treasure and potential instruments of vice. Patlagean's assertion that there were Scriptures and spiritual books in even the poorest desert hut does not seem to correspond entirely to the picture painted in the *Systematic Collection*. The relative scarcity of books in the collection suggests that, both for financial and spiritual reasons, books were regarded as a somewhat rare commodity in desert communities and that owning one was not regarded as a casual or everyday occurrence. What does speak to Patlagean's claim about the presence of books, however, and what is in itself rather surprising, is that many famous elders are portrayed as literate men conversant with books and book culture. At the same time, they take pains to condemn imprudent ownership of expensive material goods and emphasize that Scripture has its greatest power when it is not only learned but also lived. This simultaneous familiarity with and rejection of

<sup>30</sup> Harmless, *Desert Christians* (cf. note 6), 245.

<sup>31</sup> Apophth. Patr. Syst. 10.24 «Ὅντως πολλὰ βιβλία ἀνέγνω, τοιαύτην δὲ παιδείαν οὐδέποτε ἔγνω.» There is a pun here, which I am unable to render into English, contrasting reading (ἀναγινώσκω) with knowing (γινώσκω). There is an interesting comparandum in Wortley, *Introduction to the Desert Fathers* (cf. note 2), 161–164, who highlights the very positive approach towards books and learning which characterized Pachomian communities.

books allows the virtuous elders to partake in the cachet of literacy (never emphasized but nonetheless present in desert spirituality) while dissociating themselves from worldly habits, which were often thought to attend such a degree of education. In a broader, more literary sense, the way the compilers treat the book shows them negotiating a medium which stood both at the beginning of Egyptian desert asceticism – the Scriptures being the foundation and cornerstone of monastic teaching – and also, in a way, at its end. The elder whose words are printed at the top of this article mentions the «γενεὰ αὕτη», a pregnant gospel phrase used for the last generation before destruction,<sup>32</sup> a wicked<sup>33</sup> and adulterous generation which is ashamed of the Lord's words,<sup>34</sup> seeks a physical sign,<sup>35</sup> and rejects (even slaying) the prophets.<sup>36</sup> He echoes the oft-quoted sentiments of King Thamus in Plato's *Phaedrus*, complaining that with the written word comes stagnation, indifference and, at length, forgetfulness.<sup>37</sup> But it is the translation of this rich, diffuse, and unruly tradition into the fixed and tangible permanence of a well-ordered written corpus which allows these stories to remain; the tales draw from the oral treasury of desert wisdom a collection of ideas, words and thoughts that were, already in the time of work's compilation after the sack of Scetis, in danger of receding irrevocably into the past.<sup>38</sup> The compilers put these stories onto pages that could be copied and into ears that were linked to mouths (which spoke to other ears, and so on). They converted, in other words, a transitory and finite commodity into a form where it can still be shared again and again and suffer little diminution.

<sup>32</sup> Mark 13.28–31 («[Α]μὴν λέγω ὑμῖν ὅτι οὐ μὴ παρέλθῃ ἡ γενεὰ αὕτη μέχρις οὗ πάντα ταῦτα γένηται. Ὁ οὐρανὸς καὶ ἡ γῆ παρελεύσονται, οἱ δὲ λόγοι μου οὐ μὴ παρέλθωσιν»), cf. Matthew 24.32–34.

<sup>33</sup> Luke 11.29 («Ἡ γενεὰ αὕτη πονηρὰ ἐστίν [καὶ] σημεῖον ἐπιζητεῖ»).

<sup>34</sup> Mark 8.38 («Ὅς γὰρ ἂν ἐπαισχυθῇ με καὶ τοὺς ἐμοὺς λόγους ἐν τῇ γενεᾷ ταύτῃ τῇ μοιχαλίδι καὶ ἁμαρτωλῷ...»).

<sup>35</sup> Mark 8.12 («Τί ἡ γενεὰ αὕτη σημεῖον ἐπιζητεῖ»). In the New Testament the phrase «ἡ γενεὰ αὕτη» has almost always negative connotations. Besides the preceding three instances, cf. inter alia Matthew 11.16, 12.41sq., Luke 7.31, 11.31sq., 11.50sq., 17.25.

<sup>36</sup> Matthew 23.36sq. («Ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν, ἤξει ταῦτα πάντα ἐπὶ τὴν γενεὰν ταύτην. Ἰερουσαλὴμ, Ἰερουσαλὴμ, ἡ ἀποκτείνουσα τοὺς προφῆτας καὶ λιθοβολοῦσα τοὺς ἀπεσταλμένους πρὸς αὐτήν...»). It is the prophets who, according to the elder at 10.191, «τὰ βιβλία ἐποίησαν».

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Plato, *Phaedrus* 274D–275D.

<sup>38</sup> On the role of the «Apophthegmata Patrum» in preserving a vanishing monastic culture, see especially William Harmless, *Remembering Poemen Remember. The Desert Fathers and the Spirituality of Memory*, in: *Church History* 69/3 (2000) 483–518.

*Books in the Systematic Collection of the Apophthegmata Patrum*

The compiling of the Systematic Collection of the *Apophthegmata Patrum* coincided with the fifth-century twilight of the great age of Egyptian desert monasticism. While the substance of this movement was being transferred from living memory to written form, this setting down in writing of the sayings of the Desert Fathers reflected the tension between the written word and personal experience, between the letter and the spirit. Here we consider the variety of monastic opinions regarding the book as a physical object. We examine further how prevalent the books were, who copied them (monks specializing in this work), how they entered into monastic communities (through production and purchase), their circulation in the monastery (communal and individual use), and the relation between book culture and spirituality. We also explore how these valuable objects could be something of a double-edged sword, by having the potential to instruct and inspire, while also posing a real danger to a community that valued poverty, focus, and industry (the risks of theft, distraction, and the misdirection of labor).

The Bible – Books – Near Eastern monasticism – Late Antiquity – Desert fathers – Patristic literature – Christianity.

*Bücher in der systematischen Sammlung der Apophthegmata Patrum*

Die Zusammenstellung der systematischen Sammlung der *Apophthegmata Patrum* fiel mit dem Niedergang des großen Zeitalters der ägyptischen Wüstenklöster im fünften Jahrhundert zusammen. Während die Substanz dieser Bewegung von der lebendigen Erinnerung in die schriftliche Form übertragen wurde, spiegelte diese Niederschrift die Spannung zwischen dem geschriebenen Wort und der persönlichen Erfahrung, zwischen dem Buchstaben und dem Geist wider. Hier betrachten wir die Vielfalt der klösterlichen Ansichten über das Buch als «physischen Gegenstand». Wir untersuchen weiter, wie verbreitet Bücher waren, wer sie kopierte (auf diese Aufgabe spezialisierte Mönche), wie sie in klösterliche Gemeinschaften kamen (durch Produktion und Kauf), ihre Verbreitung in Klöstern (gemeinschaftlicher und individueller Gebrauch), die Beziehung zwischen Buchkultur und Spiritualität, und wie diese wertvollen Objekte so etwas wie ein zweischneidiges Schwert sein konnten. Die Bücher hatten das Potenzial inne, zu belehren und zu inspirieren, aber stellten auch eine echte Gefahr für eine Gemeinschaft dar, welche Armut, Fokussierung und Mühe wertschätzte: die Risiken von Diebstahl, Ablenkung und Irreführung in der Müheanstrengung.

Die Bibel – Bücher – das nahöstliche Mönchtum – die Spätantike – Wüstenväter – patristische Literatur – das Christentum.

*Livres de la collection systématique de l'Apophthegmata Patrum*

La compilation de la collection systématique de l'*Apophthegmata Patrum* a coïncidé avec le déclin de la grande époque des monastères du désert égyptien au 5<sup>ème</sup> siècle. Alors que la substance de ce mouvement a été traduite de mémoire vivante sous forme écrite, ce document reflète la tension entre l'écrit et l'expérience personnelle, entre la lettre et l'esprit. Nous considérons ici la variété des points de vue monastiques sur le livre comme un «objet physique». Nous examinons ensuite la diffusion des livres, qui les a copiés (des moines spécialisés dans cette tâche), comment ils sont arrivés dans les communautés monastiques (par la production et l'achat), leur distribution dans les monastères (utilisation communautaire et individuelle), la relation entre la culture du livre et la spiritualité, et comment ces objets précieux pourraient constituer une sorte d'épée à double tranchant. Les livres avaient le potentiel d'éclairer et d'inspirer, mais ils représentaient aussi un réel danger pour une communauté qui valorisait la pauvreté, la concentration et l'effort (les risques de vol, de distraction et de tromperie dans l'effort).

La Bible –livres –monachisme du Moyen-Orient – antiquité tardive – pères du désert – la littérature patristique – christianisme.

*Libri nella raccolta sistematica degli Apophthegmata Patrum*

La compilazione della raccolta sistematica degli *Apophthegmata Patrum* ha coinciso con il declino della grande epoca dei monasteri egiziani del deserto nel V secolo. Mentre la sostanza di questo movimento veniva tradotta da memoria vivente a forma scritta, questa registrazione rifletteva la tensione tra la parola scritta e l'esperienza personale, tra la lettera e lo spirito. Qui consideriamo la varietà dei punti di vista monastici sul libro come un «oggetto fisico». Esaminiamo inoltre quanto fossero diffusi i libri, chi li copiava (monaci specializzati in questo compito), come entravano nelle comunità monastiche (attraverso la produzione e l'acquisto), la loro distribuzione nei monasteri (uso comunitario e individuale), il rapporto tra cultura del libro e spiritualità, e come questi preziosi oggetti potessero essere qualcosa di simile a un'arma a doppio taglio. I libri avevano il potenziale di illuminare e ispirare, ma rappresentavano anche un pericolo reale per una comunità che apprezzava la povertà, l'attenzione e lo sforzo: i rischi di furto, di distrazione e d'inganno nello sforzo.

La Bibbia – libri – monachesimo mediorientale – tarda antichità – padri del deserto – letteratura patristica – cristianesimo.

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