



## Room with a Limited View Coptic Clairvoyance in Hellenistic Egypt

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Article abstract

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# ROOM WITH A LIMITED VIEW

## COPTIC CLAIRVOYANCE IN HELLENISTIC EGYPT

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*RÉSUMÉ : Les objets de la recherche universitaire débordent parfois les catégories habituellement admises. La religion en général et le christianisme en particulier doivent ainsi être replacés dans un contexte élargi, social, culturel, éducatif ou religieux. Le présent article examine brièvement le concept de clairvoyance dans la littérature monastique chrétienne de l'Égypte antérieure à 451, pour montrer qu'on doit l'étudier non seulement en fonction du contexte chrétien mais aussi du contexte hellénistique dans lequel le christianisme s'est développé.*

*ABSTRACT : Academic subjects do not fall neatly into distinctly labeled units. Religion in general, and Christianity in particular, must be considered within larger, pre-existing social, cultural, educational, and religious contexts. This paper briefly examines one concept, clairvoyance in Christian monastic literature in Egypt before 451 C.E., and attempts to demonstrate the necessity of studying it not only within the Christian context, but also within the wider, Hellenistic context within which Christianity eventually flourished.*

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When studying modern events, activities, movements, or other aspects of a culture, either our own or those of others, we know instinctively that incidents do not arise out of the ether. Yet, when studying ancient cultures, all too often historical episodes and communities are examined within a finite range. This is largely due to the nature of academia, i.e. no one can study everything so one must pick an area of specialization, one room in the ivory tower with a window that allows a limited view. This enables expertise in a given area of study, but the expertise is necessarily limited if one cannot approach the window frame to look sideways at the context surrounding events. Context is everything, as anyone who's ever been quoted out of it knows. The more culturally diverse a society, the more context is necessary in order to explain a given situation within that society. One of the more culturally diverse societies of the ancient world was Egypt, a land so rich it attracted people from all over the ancient world, with all their social and religious traditions, creating a religious melting pot. The ancient Egyptian, or pharaonic, myths and legends shifted as different dynasties rose and fell. As Egypt was conquered by other nations, the customs of the new leaders filtered into the populace, while some rulers adapted themselves to local beliefs, as during the Ptolemaic period. Eventually Christianity arrived and it appeared that, over time, the old faiths disappeared, but while Christianity did not originate in

Egypt, it would have been unable to take root as effectively as it did without practices and concepts that appealed to the inhabitants in some way.

There are many different concepts that deserve study in order to examine the transition of religion in Egypt, in all periods, but only a small window is allowed to an academic. We could examine legends of healing, of miracles, of unmarried mothers with saviour sons, but for the purposes of this paper, I have decided to examine the retrospective consideration of clairvoyance in Egypt in general before 451 C.E. when the Egyptian (Coptic) church split from the rest of the Christian world after the Council of Chalcedon. In particular, I will examine the hagiographical nature of the use of clairvoyance by monastic Christians and compare that use to the nature of descriptions of the same phenomena by associated cultures in the same geographical area, i.e. I will examine the Hellenistic context within which clairvoyance was used in Coptic monasticism.

Clairvoyance, also sometimes called ‘spiritual’ clairvoyance,<sup>1</sup> has been defined as a form of extrasensory perception pertaining to things or events,<sup>2</sup> as reading into the hearts of others, i.e. reading their minds, and the seeing of events that occur far away.<sup>3</sup> Clairvoyance seems to have been generally unknown in Christian writing before the blossoming of monastic literature, although Eusebius devotes a considerable amount of attention to the utilization of prophecy and clairvoyance by Christians, while maintaining a separation of Christianity from previous traditions.<sup>4</sup> In fourth century Egyptian literature, clairvoyance was associated with great Egyptian monastic authority figures of the third and fourth centuries C.E., including Pachomius (292-346 C.E.), generally considered the founder of community monasticism in Egypt, Theodore (ca. 314-368 C.E.), his successor, and Shenoute (ca. 350-465 C.E.), one of the first leaders of the White Monastery,<sup>5</sup> and Antony (ca. 251-356 C.E.), generally considered one of the first eremitic (or hermit) monks in Egypt. It is equally attributed to numerous other monks of whom memory is preserved in the apophthegmata of the desert Fathers, as well as other monastic histories.

## I. RELIGIOUS MUTATION & CONVERSION

We already know implicitly, but it bears restating, that apprehension often accompanies change. The less change, or more precisely, the more familiarity involved, the higher the comfort level of those involved in shifting circumstances. This is particularly true when it comes to religion. People make religious adjustments that in-

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1. Marcel VILLER, *Dictionnaire de spiritualité*, Vol. 2, p. 923.

2. Peter DINZELBACHER, *Dictionnaire de la mystique*, Belgium, Brepols Publishers, 1993, p. 178.

3. VILLER, *Dictionnaire de spiritualité*, Vol. 2, p. 922.

4. Eugen V. GALLAGHER, “Prophecy and Patriarchs in Eusebius’ Apologetic,” in Robert M. BERCHMAN, *Mediators of the Divine. Horizons of Prophecy, Divination, Dreams and Theurgy in Mediterranean Antiquity*, Atlanta, Scholars Press, 1998, p. 210.

5. The White Monastery was a large community comprising several groups of segregated male and female monks, so called because of white washed church at the centre.

volve continuity of belief or practice, not by completely changing their worldviews. An understanding or, at the very least, the perception of understanding, allows for transition from one set of beliefs to another.<sup>6</sup>

Given that familiarity is critically necessary to attract religious converts, it becomes equally necessary to study the historical and literary context of a religion, i.e. not just the beliefs of the converts, in our case, Christians, but of the non-Christians with whom the converts and early believers retained contact. It is the experience of Christians and non-Christians alike that illuminates belief. According to Jauss,

L'esthétique de la réception ne permet pas de saisir le sens et la forme de l'œuvre littéraire tels qu'ils ont été compris de façon évolutive à travers l'histoire. Elle exige aussi que chaque œuvre soit replacée dans la "série littéraire" dont elle fait partie, afin que l'on puisse déterminer sa situation historique, son rôle et son importance dans le contexte général de l'expérience littéraire.<sup>7</sup>

Attempting to study each religious practice individually within a given time period and a particular culture, without looking at others, is meaningless — customs do not, and have never, existed within a vacuum. All cultures are found within the context of a larger whole, with customs exchanged, adapted, and made new again. This process served, and continues to serve to legitimize developing traditions. However, there is a fine line between legitimizing a new religious movement through tradition, and a group casting about for a new identity, unable to be distinguished from its precursor. If the new belief system cannot extricate itself from its antecedent(s), it risks failure from lack of definition. Christianity, particularly in Egypt, is a key example of this religious mutation, which involves the absorption of 'them' into 'us,' ensuring continuity and legitimacy, while creating something new.

Early Christians necessarily came from polytheistic or Jewish backgrounds, bringing to Christianity their own customs and institutions. The capital of Hellenistic Egypt, Alexandria, had a wide variety of religious cultures within its borders ; Roman and Greek polytheists, Christians, Jews, and even Buddhists were found on the streets as early as the defeat of Antony and Cleopatra and the transition from Roman Republic to Empire. Founded by Alexander the Great during his conquest of the (then) known world, claimed by his general, Ptolemy, after his death, and the capital of Egypt thereafter for centuries, Alexandria was a vast melting pot of customs and people, both native and imported. For this reason it is inapt to equate Alexandria, while the rest of Egypt remained predominantly populated by indigenous inhabitants with indigenous faiths, with the few other Hellenistic cities along the Nile. However, in the capital, which would later be the seat of the bishop/patriarch of Egyptian Christianity, it was impossible to separate each group into self-contained classes ; all groups interacted, and it remains difficult to study virtually any Egyptian tradition in the late-antique period without at least considering the effects, both on, and by, other beliefs prevalent in the area. We must also remember that native Egyptians had not enjoyed self-rule for several hundred years before the Common Era : by the time

6. Rodney STARK, *The Rise of Christianity*, Princeton, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1996, p. 55.

7. Hans Robert JAUSS, *Pour une esthétique de la réception*, Paris, Gallimard, 1987, p. 63.

Egypt became the breadbasket of the Roman Empire, it had been ruled by Greeks, Persians, Libyans, and Nubians, all of whom imported their particular customs, and fused them with native practices. These particular borrowings will not be studied at this time but it further reveals the syncretism of Egyptian religion that already existed when Christianity came on the scene.

## II. COPTIC CONTEXT

A thorough examination of primary sources, as far as can be discerned, reveals a vast body of instances of clairvoyance as described by monastic Christians, in late antique Egypt. Working primarily within the monastic milieu, it is these groups, and their adoption of non-Christian motifs, with which this paper is most concerned. The first examples of widespread monasticism stem from beginnings in Egypt, with Pachomius, Shenoute, and Antony as prime examples. The lives of each of these men were treated in biographies written for the edification and inspiration of followers. These men were held up as examples to be followed in daily life. Hagiographic works of this type were often written to legitimize both the activities of the subject, as well as the authority of either the one writing or one who followed the main subject. Clerics, such as Theodore, were considered to be endowed with these abilities, but over time this “golden age” was held up as an example to follow as general monastic numbers increased, countered by declining numbers of charismatics.<sup>8</sup>

Within the Lives of these men were many and various illustrations of clairvoyant activity such as visions, seeing the future, and reading into the hearts of men. Part of the purpose behind such biographies was to legitimize the authority of the alleged author, to draw parallels between the previous leader and the new one, in order to validate both. The position of this paper is that by drawing parallels between the Hellenistic philosophers and monastic leaders we can see this process in action.

For example : The *Life of Antony* was written by an eastern writer for a western monastic audience<sup>9</sup>, and has quite a bit of discussion of clairvoyance within its pages. However, this *Life* is commonly considered to have been written by the Bishop Athanasius, in which case it may have been designed to promote humility and submission of the monks to ecclesiastical authority. The writer of the *Life of Antony* also indicates that those who make such claims are merely trying to gain the confidence of others, not because they actually have the ability to tell the future, but because demons wish to destroy them.<sup>10</sup> Antony is depicted as saying that their abilities are not special, and compares their claimed clairvoyance to a person who rides horseback arriving at their destination faster than one on foot. “So, once again there is no need

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8. Philip ROUSSEAU, *Ascetics, Authority, and the Church in the Age of Jerome and Cassian*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1978, p. 63, 69.

9. Adalbert DE VOGÜÉ, *Histoire littéraire du mouvement monastique dans l'Antiquité. Première partie : le monachisme latin. Jérôme, Augustin et Rufin au tournant du siècle (391-405)*, Paris, Cerf, 1996, p. 20.

10. Robert T. MEYER, *Life of Antony*, § 31 (in *St. Athanasius : The Life of St. Antony*, New York, Newman Press, 1978).

to marvel at them. They have no fore-knowledge of what has not yet happened, but God alone knows all things before they come into being.”<sup>11</sup>

In the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, Antony is said to exhibit clairvoyant abilities such as seeing at a distance, where he is actually portrayed as saying that demons had shown him a vision, even though the vision was true.

Some brothers came to find Abba Anthony to tell him about the visions they were having, and to find out from him if they were true or if they came from the demons. They had a donkey which [*sic*] died on the way. When they reached the place where the old man was, he said to them before they could ask him anything, ‘How was it that the little donkey died on the way here?’ They said, ‘How do you know about that, Father?’ And he told them, ‘The demons shewed me what happened.’ So they said, ‘That was what we came to question you about, for fear we were being deceived, for we have visions which often turn out to be true.’ Thus the old man convinced them, by the example of the donkey, that their visions came from the demons.<sup>12</sup>

Antony appears to be of the opinion that most claims to clairvoyance are either due to demonic influence, or clarity of the human mind, developed through asceticism. This design may be illustrated by Antony’s apparent disdain for those who “pretend to prophecy and to foretell future events.”<sup>13</sup>

Demons [...] know nothing of themselves, but they see what knowledge others have, and like thieves they pick it up and misrepresent it. They practice guesswork rather than prophecy. Wherefore, even if they should sometimes hit on the truth in speaking of such things, even so a person must not wonder at them. Indeed, physicians, too, who are experts in diseases from having observed the same ailment in different persons, often make conjectures on the basis of their practice and foretell what will happen. And again, pilots and farmers, observing the weather conditions, forecast from their experience if there will be a storm or fair weather. But no one would say because of this that they prophecy by divine inspiration, but by experience and practice. Consequently, if the demons, too, sometimes guess at these same things and mention them, you must not therefore be astonished at them nor mind them at all.<sup>14</sup>

And we should pray, not in order to know the future, nor should we ask for this as a reward for the practice of asceticism, but that the Lord may be our fellow worker in achieving victory over the Devil. But if we care some day to know the future, let us be pure in mind. For I feel confident that if the soul is pure through and through and is in its natural state, it becomes clear-sighted and sees more and farther than the demons. It then has the Lord to reveal things to it.<sup>15</sup>

As we will see, Antony is reported as saying that if one receives a vision and is afraid, and that fear is removed to be replaced by a peaceful feeling, then the vision comes from God, but that if confusion accompanies the vision, then it is from an evil spirit.<sup>16</sup> This shows Antony, or at least the writer of his biography, to be concerned

11. *Ibid.*

12. Benedicta WARD, *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, Oxford, Cistercian Publications, 1975, p. 2, Antony 12.

13. MEYER, *Life of Antony*, § 23.

14. *Ibid.*, § 33.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 49, § 34.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 51, § 36.

with the origin of discernment, as to whether visions come from God or from demons.

The writer of the *Life of Antony*, however, portrays Antony as seeing at a distance and receiving visions. These events are considered miraculous and are not described as coming from Antony's own powers of perception, despite an emphasis on this interpretation previously. In one instance, parents of a girl from Busiris, suffering an illness, brought her to local monks who then go to visit Antony, who anticipates what they are going to say by telling them he knows all about the girl's illness and her journey to him.<sup>17</sup> On another occasion, Antony sees the distress of two traveling monks and sends two others to them with water, so they will not die of thirst.<sup>18</sup> Antony also knew that Amoun had died, at the moment it happened.<sup>19</sup> With these descriptions, however, there is no discussion as to the origin of these visions.

Antony was said to frequently foretell the arrival of people who would come to see him, days or even months in advance, but he insisted that he should not be admired for this ability, but that the Lord should receive the admiration "because He granted to us mere men to know Him to the best of our capability."<sup>20</sup> Antony was even said to have foretold the arrival of Arianism,<sup>21</sup> as well as the death of a commander, Balacius, who was a supporter of Arianism.<sup>22</sup>

He was also said to have seen the moral stumble of a young monk who had performed a miracle.

Abba Anthony heard of a very young monk who had performed a miracle on the road. Seeing the old men walking with difficulty along the road, he ordered the wild asses to come and carry them until they reached Abba Anthony. Those whom they had carried told Abba Anthony about it. He said to them, 'This monk seems to me to be a ship loaded with goods but I do not know if he will reach harbour.' After a while, Anthony suddenly began to weep, to tear his hair and lament. His disciples said to him, 'Why are you weeping, Father?' and the old man replied, 'A great pillar of the Church has just fallen (he meant the young monk) but go to him and see what has happened.' So the disciples went and found the monk sitting on a mat and weeping for the sin he had committed. Seeing the disciples of the old man he said, 'Tell the old man to pray that God will give me just ten days and I hope I will have made satisfaction.' But in the space of five days he died.<sup>23</sup>

There are many other examples of prophecy by monks. While these examples form the bulk of the accounts of clairvoyance, they are only representative of those found within Egyptian monasticism, and not what may be found in other social and cultural settings, both Christian and non-Christian. They are also, essentially, works of propaganda, designed to edify and inspire those who would read them, namely, later monks.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 69, § 56.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 71, § 59.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 71, § 60.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 72-73, § 62.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 88, § 82.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 91, § 86.

23. WARD, *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, p. 2, Antony 14.

### III. APOCRYPHAL CONTEXT

There are also examples in the apocryphal Acts of the Apostles. In the *Acts of John*, for example, dated ca. 150-200 C.E., in which John reads the mind of the father of the priest of Artemis of Ephesus when he brings the body of his son for healing.<sup>24</sup> In this case, however, the ability serves to reinforce the apostolic authority of John, and is associated with other abilities, such as healing, which help to create a standardized story of a saint.

Après l'homélie aux frères, la prière, l'eucharistie et l'imposition des mains sur chacune des personnes rassemblées, Jean dit sous l'action de l'Esprit : "Parmi les gens qui sont ici, quelqu'un, conduit vers <cette maison> par la foi en Dieu, a déposé devant la porte le prêtre d'Artémis, puis est entré. Par amour pour sa propre âme, il a donné la préférence au souci de soi-même et a pensé en son for intérieur : 'Il vaut mieux que je me préoccupe de l'homme vivant que de mon parent mort. Je sais en effet que, lorsque je me serai converti au Seigneur et que j'aurai sauvé mon âme, Jean ne refusera pas de ressusciter le mort également'." Alors, Jean se leva de sa place et se dirigea vers l'endroit où s'était mis le parent du prêtre qui avait eu cette pensée. Il lui prit la main et dit : "Est-ce bien cela que tu as pensé, mon enfant, en venant vers moi ?" Saisi de tremblements et de frissons, il répondit : "Oui, Seigneur !" et il se jeta à ses pieds. Jean dit : "Notre Seigneur, c'est Jésus-Christ, qui montrera sa puissance sur ton parent mort en le ressuscitant."<sup>25</sup>

We see that within Christianity, a tradition pertaining to clairvoyance was prevalent in texts pertaining to sainthood and divinity, but we also see that it wasn't necessarily always accepted as coming from God.

### IV. HELLENISTIC CONTEXT

#### 1. Literary context

Perhaps the study of clairvoyance, both within Egyptian monasticism as well as other traditions, should start with the examination and evaluation of the holy man,<sup>26</sup> his place within a given culture, as well as the fact that clairvoyance was a characteristic of both holy men and philosophers. Peter Brown has devoted a great deal of study to this concept, and Robert Kirschner describes the power held by these individuals thus : "Power on earth was conferred upon a class of men who claimed power in heaven." He goes on to say "the primary social function of the pagan holy man was the teaching of philosophy."<sup>27</sup> In his article "The Vocation of Holiness in Late Antiquity," Kirschner describes seemingly magical acts performed by monks, including Antony, and compares these acts, and these men, to pagan holy men.<sup>28</sup> It is these men

24. *Acts of John*, 46.

25. Éric JUNOD & Jean-Daniel KAESTLI, "Actes de Jean," in François BOVON & Pierre GEOLTRAIN, *Écrits apocryphes chrétiens I*, Paris, Gallimard, 1997, p. 1012-1013.

26. Or woman, or individual.

27. Robert KIRSCHNER, "The Vocation of Holiness in Late Antiquity," *Vigiliae Christianae*, 38 (1984), p. 105.

28. *Ibid.*



who are gifted as oracles or who perform clairvoyant feats with whom our Egyptian monastic leaders must be compared.

Our first example is Apollonius of Tyana, an individual from Hellenistic literature who was the paradigmatic instance of the polytheistic holy man. His *Life* boasts extensive examples of clairvoyant activities from divination by dreams (τὸ μαντικὸν τὸ ἐκ τῶν ὄνειράτων),<sup>29</sup> to prescience (πρόγνῳσιν), to knowing a person's disposition by discernment (καθεώρακας).<sup>30</sup> A longer discussion would take several pages but by way of example, philosophers were entrusted "the task of rightly discerning things divine and human as they should be discerned"<sup>31</sup> and would ponder divination by the stars.<sup>32</sup>

Another Hellenistic example of clairvoyance is within Porphyry's *Life of Plotinus*. Porphyry relates that Plotinus had "a surpassing degree of penetration into character" once determining who had stolen a valuable necklace by looking deep into the eyes of the household slaves. He was also allegedly able to foretell the future of the children with whom he was associated, and kept Porphyry himself from committing suicide by recommending he go on holiday instead.<sup>33</sup>

## 2. Cultural context

Hellenistic philosophy also bears examination not only for its contribution to mainline religion, but also its contribution to all cultures in which it was disseminated.<sup>34</sup> Change comes from within, from piecing together existent ideas, old themes form new patterns.<sup>35</sup> It is not only religious practices that need to be examined, but also non-religious cultural institutions. An example of a Hellenistic cultural institution is the concept of *paideia* in the eastern Roman Empire, a kind of etiquette and code of conduct engaged in by the upper classes to achieve desired results. Men of *paideia* could communicate with each other, even when strangers, in such a manner

29. PHILOSTRATUS, *Apollonius of Tyana*, Book 2, 37 (*The Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, New York, MacMillan, 1912).

30. *Ibid.*, Book 3, 16.

31. *Ibid.*, Book 2, 39.

32. *Ibid.*, Book 3, 41.

33. Arthur Hilary ARMSTRONG, *Plotinus Volume I*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1966, § 11 : "He once noticed that I, Porphyry, was thinking of removing myself from this life. He came to me unexpectedly while I was staying indoors in my home and told me that this lust for death did not come from a settled rational decision but from a bilious indisposition, and urged me to go away for a holiday. I obeyed him and went to Sicily, since I had heard that a distinguished man called Probus was living near Lilybaeum. So I was brought to abandon my longing for death and prevented from staying with Plotinus to the end." (Καί ποτε ἐμοῦ Πορφυρίου ἦσθετο ἐξάγειν ἑμαυτὸν διάνοιζόμενου τοῦ βίου· καὶ ἐξαίφνης ἐπιστάς μοι ἐν τῷ οἴκῳ διατρίβοντι καὶ εἰπὼν μὴ εἶναι ταύτην τὴν προθυμίαν ἐκ νοεῶς καταστάσεως, ἀλλ' ἐκ μελαγχολικῆς τινος νόσου, ἀποδημῆσαι ἐκέλευσε. Πεισθεὶς δὲ αὐτῷ ἐγὼ εἰς τὴν Σικελίαν ἀφικόμενῳ Πρόβῳ τινὰ ἀκούων ἐλλόγιμον ἄνδρα περὶ τὸ Λιλύβαιον διατρίβειν· καὶ αὐτός τε τῆς τοιαύτης προθυμίας ἀπεσχόμην τοῦ τε παρεῖναι ἄχρι θανάτου τῷ Πλωτίνῳ ἐνεποδίσθην.)

34. C.J. BLEEKER, "The Pattern of Ancient Egyptian Culture," *Numen*, XI (1964), p. 82.

35. Peter BROWN, *The Making of Late Antiquity*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1978, p. 8.

that neither would “lose face” if the rules were followed.<sup>36</sup> Philosophers were, however, considered free of the verbal constraints of *paideia* and practiced *parrhêsia*, a kind of free speech indicating the speaker was not speaking out of duty to another, or to a member of an upper class.<sup>37</sup> This system was transferred to Christianity and monks and bishops engaged *parrhêsia* in their dealings with the Emperor.<sup>38</sup> In a way, monks and bishops became the new philosophers in the eastern Christian Empire, communicating with each other through shared beliefs and values, but at least in Egypt, avoiding any sense of obligation to the Emperor. However, they retained *paideia*, not as the end result of education, but as the beginning of wisdom for educated Christians, and formed only one of the many Hellenistic foundations in which Christianity developed.<sup>39</sup>

Within the context of Hellenistic Egypt, it is not unreasonable to consider that monks would have had access to and read books written or inspired by Hellenistic philosophers, or Jews, or any of a number of, strictly speaking, “non-Christian” books. Certainly they *could* read. Mark Sheridan points out that while it has been acceptable to postulate that most monks were illiterate, considering their inspiration to be from God alone, Pachomian rules *required* monks to learn to read, and “considered reading a spiritual exercise, part of ascetic practice.”<sup>40</sup>

Egyptian monks would likely have been acquainted, at least tangentially, with polytheistic oracular experience. In his book, *Religion in Roman Egypt*, David Frankfurter extensively discusses clairvoyant activities including oracles (verbal or “ticket”<sup>41</sup>) and incubation rites.<sup>42</sup> He also points out that a rival to early Christian authority was the regional seer, whose functions were the same as that of any temple oracle, including, “resolution of disputes and other juridical acts, moral and ritual exhortation, agricultural predictions, speculation and guarantees of healing and safety, and more general, often political, prophecy.”<sup>43</sup> Christian ascetics appear to have adapted to this role quite well<sup>44</sup> — so well, in fact, that the regional seers became competition for the Christians. Frankfurter contends that the polemic against a temple oracle in the *Life of Antony*,<sup>45</sup> an alleged recounting of Antony’s life, is evidence for the continued existence of these oracles well into the so-called “Christian” period.

36. ID., *Power and Persuasion in Late Antiquity : Towards a Christian Empire*, Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1992, p. 40.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 62.

38. *Ibid.*, p. 135.

39. *Ibid.*, p. 123.

40. Mark SHERIDAN, “The Spiritual and Intellectual World of Early Egyptian Monasticism,” *Coptica*, 1 (2002), p. 11.

41. A ticket oracle involves the writing of a question on a piece of paper, or some other item, and presenting it to the oracle for a response.

42. David FRANKFURTER, *Religion in Roman Egypt*, Princeton, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1998, p. 145-197.

43. *Ibid.*, p. 184.

44. *Ibid.*, p. 189.

45. *V. Ant.* 31-32.

## V. AUTHORITY

Pachomius, before the bishops at Latopolis, called his clairvoyance τὸ χάρισμα τοῦ θεοῦ, a gift of God. While he understood it to have a human basis, namely familiarity with those with whom one might live, he also understood this gift to be heightened in some, which must reflect the providence of God, and that “Some he would choose as his special instruments, singled out not so much by quality of character as by their accidental association with those most in need of their help. To these chosen men he gave exceptional gifts of judgment and insight.”<sup>46</sup> The Greek Life of Pachomius, or *Vita*, includes an account of a Synod at Latopolis, which called Pachomius to justify claims to clairvoyance, specifically to determine if this gift came from God or from demons.

As Pachomius’ fame spread far away and people talked about him, some would say balanced things, others would exaggerate. And once there arose a debate about his being called clairvoyant. He himself was summoned to answer this in the church of Latopolis in the presence of monks and bishops.

Some bishops questioned Pachomius about this charge and he answered,

Were you not once monks with me in the monastery before you became bishops ? Do you not know that by the grace of God I, just like you, love Him and care for the brothers ?

Pachomius says that as a child of pagans, he did not know what God was, but that it was God who gave him the grace to become a Christian, and that :

As you yourselves confess that we have knowledge concerning unclean spirits, so too the Lord has given us to recognize, when he wills, which of them is walking aright and which has only the appearance of a monk. But let the gift of God alone ! When those who are wise and sensible according to the world spend a few days in the midst of men, do they not distinguish and recognize each one’s disposition ?

Pachomius goes on to say that God lives in good men, and thereby allows discernment of the souls of others.<sup>47</sup> He also asserts that his ability is legitimate because other, polytheistic, philosophers had the same ability.<sup>48</sup> With his statements, Pachomius was reinforcing his own authority, but also within a larger context of Hellenistic philosophers and Hellenistic claims to clairvoyance as he also drew explicit parallels between his gift and the gifts of the Hellenistic philosophers.

Another example, found in the Bohairic *Vita*, but this time not in the Greek, is the account of some brothers of the community bringing three men who wish to become monks to Pbou. Pachomius takes the head of the brothers aside and asks, “Pourquoi as-tu amené avec toi cette ivraie <en me disant> ‘fais-le moine’ ?” to which the brother replied, “Saint Père, t’es-tu dit que je possède ce charisme qui te fut donné par le Seigneur (ΠΙΣΜΟΤ ΕΤΑΠΘΕ ΤΗΙ ΝΑΚ) de reconnaître les bons et les mau-

46. ROUSSEAU, *Ascetics, Authority, and the Church*, p. 31 ; *V. Pach. Bo.*, § 102.

47. *Vita G.*, § 112.

48. *Vita Prima*, § 112.

vais hommes (ΕCOΥΕΝΝΙΡΩΜΙ ΕΘΑΝΕΥ ΝΕΜΝΗ ΕΤΖΩΟΥ) ?<sup>49</sup> Here we see that Pachomius' disciples attribute the faculty of clairvoyance to him, while his disciples do not possess it.<sup>50</sup>

## VI. OTHER PARALLELS

At the time of the arrival and development of Christianity in Egypt, there was a pre-existent class of seers and priests who were consulted for advice about the future. People would indulge in incubation (sleeping overnight in a temple to receive a vision from the god of that temple) in an attempt to gain this knowledge. Christianity needed to both appeal to these followers of indigenous traditions as well as maintain a certain distinction from their customs. As in other regions, Christianity adopted local practices and tried to make them their own. The emerging group of seers and hermits, including the Christians, in Egypt were a “new form of oracle,” a group which supplemented the temple oracles within the population.<sup>51</sup>

Another familiar figure in the Hellenistic period was the “Holy man” — men like Apollonius of Tyana and Porphyry. Peter Brown says, “In Egypt, and in other parts of the Mediterranean world,” monks “brought about the emergence of the holy man in his definitive Late Antique form. This involved the lodging of spiritual power in individuals in an ever firmer manner, and the application of this power, in the monastic movement, to the creation of permanent institutions”<sup>52</sup> which would seem to confirm the use of clairvoyance to cement authority in an enduring form during this period of time. It was not just polytheist and Christian holy men who were considered clairvoyant : rabbinic sages were also said to be so gifted<sup>53</sup> but whether this was the case in Egypt, specifically, needs further examination.

So we see that with the various pre-existing traditions, Christian apologetics had to appeal to both Jewish and Graeco-Roman cultures<sup>54</sup> to maintain any sense of continuity and legitimacy within the shared context in which these cultures coexisted. This hearkens back to our earlier statement about the fine line between legitimacy and absorption within older cultures.

## VII. SOCIAL CONTEXT

There seems to be no question among modern writers, as with the primary sources, that clairvoyance was a hallmark of a man of God, a man vested with au-

49. *Vita B.*, § 107.5-10 ; Armand VEILLEUX, *La vie de saint Pachôme selon la tradition copte : traduite du copte*, Bégrolles-en-Mauges, Abbaye de Bellefontaine, 1984, p. 147.

50. *Vita B.*, § 107.5-10 ; VEILLEUX, *La vie de saint Pachôme*, p. 147.

51. FRANKFURTER, *Religion in Roman Egypt*, p. 189.

52. BROWN, *Making of Late Antiquity*, p. 93.

53. KIRSCHNER, “The Vocation of Holiness in Late Antiquity,” p. 116-117.

54. GALLAGHER, “Prophecy and Patriarchs,” p. 207 ; EUSEBIUS, *Preparation for the Gospel and Proof of the Gospel*.

thority over others. The primary sources chiefly depict clairvoyance as a gift of God among those with authority but we have no first person discussion of clairvoyant abilities from that period, no claimants to the capacity to read the minds of one's fellows. We are restricted to third person retrospective claims. There was no question that the Christian holy man was speaking his mind, engaging in a kind of *parrhësia* enabled by his visions. While it is impossible to know how contemporaries of the great leaders would have received claims of clairvoyance, we can see how successors wanted those same claims to be received at a later date. Claims of clairvoyance were retrospective assertions of power for successors in whom these abilities may have been vested, recovered from Hellenistic predecessors who used them for the same purposes. My hope is that this paper has allowed us to see that Coptic Christianity, and in particular, clairvoyance did not develop in a vacuum, as we sometimes tend to study it in one. While I acknowledge that this is not a revolutionary observation, it is an important one for our understanding of the subject, or indeed, for any subject.