

# Monasteries and Villages: Rural Economy and Religious Interdependency in Late Antique Palestine

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## Abstract

Monasticism played a significant role in the Late Antique economy of the Holy Land, as it did in neighboring regions, a role that can be traced both in hagiography and in archaeology. Though holy men settled in secluded monasteries in the desert of the Holy City, most of the monks of Palestine were living in and near villages throughout the land. The rural monastery housed presses that produced wine and oil in quantities exceeding the needs of the local monastic community. It seems that the monasteries, in addition to their obvious spiritual and religious functions, served as part of the region's economy, thus creating substantial relations with their lay neighbors.

## Keywords

monasticism – late antiquity – rural economy – monastic landscapes – holy man

## Introduction

Rural monasteries began to appear in Egypt and Syria towards the end of the fourth century and in Palestine in the beginning of the fifth.<sup>1</sup> Located inside

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<sup>1</sup> For rural monasticism in Egypt see: J. E. Goehring, 'Withdrawing from the Desert: Pachomius and the Development of Village Monasticism in Upper Egypt', *Harvard Theological Review* 89

villages or a short distance away, they contained industrial facilities whose production exceeded the needs of the local monastic community.<sup>2</sup> The rural economy of the Late Antique Levant was mainly based on olive oil and viticulture,<sup>3</sup> and the monasteries, in addition to their obvious spiritual and religious obligations, served as part of the region's economy. In this way the monks created substantial and lasting connections with the surrounding villages.<sup>4</sup>

We argue that monks in rural Palestine played a quite different role in society than as it appears in monastic literature. They relied less on miracles and heaven sent provisions, and more on daily, mundane and rather earthly sweat and hard work. Their monasteries were not always reluctant and autarchic economic units that zealously guarded their separation from the neighboring lay communities. We will show how monasteries were integrated in the rural economy, and how the monks were an integral part of the social fabric of the countryside. They were a central factor in the oil and wine production and thus contributed to the economic boom of the Levant in general and of Palestine in particular. This we claim was also significant as a simultaneous contribution to the establishment of Palestine as a Holy-Land and as a most attractive pilgrim destination.

Our argument is based on the ongoing archaeological surveys and excavations in the region that illuminate the hagiographic depiction of rural monasticism in a different color.

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- (1996), 267-285, and a detailed repertoire, based not only on literary sources but also on papyrology, by: E. Wipszycka, 'Le monachisme égyptien et les villes', *Travaux et mémoires* 12 (1994), 1-44. For North West Syria see a conclusive essay by: D. Hull, 'A Spatial and Morphological Analysis of Monastic Sites in the Northern Limestone Massif, Syria', *Levant* 40 (2008) 89-113.
- 2 B. Brenk, 'Monasteries as rural settlements: patron-dependence or self-sufficiency?', in W. Bowden, L. Lavan, C. Machado (eds), *Recent research on the late antique countryside*, Leiden 2004, 454-456.
  - 3 C. Wickham, *Framing the early Middle Ages: Europe and the Mediterranean 400-800*, Oxford 2005, 444-5. For the place of oil and wine production in the Mediterranean economy in Late Antiquity, see: Tamara Lewit, 'Pigs, presses and pastoralism: farming in the fifth to sixth centuries AD', *Early Medieval Europe* 17 (2009), 77-91.
  - 4 J. Ashkenazi, 'Holy man versus monk: village and monastery in the Late Antique Levant: Between hagiography and archaeology', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 57 (2014), 745-765. See also: C. Grey, *Constructing communities in the Late Roman countryside*, Cambridge 2011, 46.

### From Roman Patron to 'Tiller Monk'

The traditional figure and the status of the monk as a holy man within rural society in the Levant was effected by hagiographies that pictured him as a role model, a paragon and an exemplar for the entire monastic world.<sup>5</sup> But how was the hagiographic persona of the monk reflected in the social and economic reality of the rural landscape?

In his arguably authoritative manner Peter Brown coined the monk as a 'doublet' to the Roman patron. He claims that: 'the concept of sin and holiness dominated the cultural history of late Roman Syria rather than assimilation and resistance . . . rural patronage is the backdrop to the activities of the holy man . . . but unlike the roman patron the holy man was a non-participant in society. Sociologically he was not human: he lived the life of an angel.'<sup>6</sup> In his community he was, officially, "the stranger".<sup>7</sup> Notwithstanding, Brown himself noticed that the monk was a force within the village's economy and he based this assessment on Georges Tchalenko's conclusions drawn from his studies on the ancient villages of the limestone massif in north-west Syria.<sup>8</sup>

In a later and conclusive study, Brown fine-tuned his formula of the rise of the Holy Man as a rural patron. Reading his words, we define two phases in the process: the first is the search by the peasants of a doublet for the Roman patron and the second is the creation of the holy man as such.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, by using his terms 'collective representation' of monks and 'average believers',

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5 See for example the remarkable contextual analysis of the hagiographical literature by Claudia Rapp, "“For next to God, you are my salvation”": reflection on the rise of the holy man in late antiquity', in J. Howard-Johnston and P.A. Hayward (eds), *The cult of saints in Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages: essays on the contribution of Peter Brown*, Oxford 1999, 63-82 and esp. pp. 64 and 79. For a similar outlook on monastic literature, emphasizing on the Egyptian sphere, see: J. Goehring, "The dark side of landscape: ideology and power in the Christian myth of the desert", *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 33 (2003), 437-451.

6 See for instance the image of the monk in the *Apophthegmata patrum*: B. Ward, *The Sayings of the desert fathers: the Alphabetical collection*, Kalamazoo 1975, xxii.

7 P. Brown, *Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity*, Berkeley, 1982, 153-165.

8 G. Tchalenko, *Villages antiques de la Syrie du Nord; le massif du Bélus à l'époque romaine*, Paris 1953. For the works that succeeded Tchalenko see: G. Tate, *Les campagnes de la Syrie du nord*, I, Paris 1992.

9 P. Brown, "The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity, 1971-1997", *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 6 (1998), 356.

Brown left a small hatch for us to offer a third phase—mutual life of monks and farmers.<sup>10</sup>

What was the political and administrative background that enabled the material process of building rural monasteries in which the ‘three phases’ realized?

The imperial authorities encouraged private owners of deserted soils to cultivate them,<sup>11</sup> and offered to lease uncultivated crown or public estates in order to increase the tax revenues.<sup>12</sup> The prominent place of rural monasteries in the economic growth of the countryside in the fifth-sixth centuries shows that they played a key role in this process.<sup>13</sup>

In most cases the villagers own their land, and in other cases the land belonged to landowners from the city. The monasteries were built—in most cases—by private initiators on their own land, although ownership by the local bishopric should not be ruled out.<sup>14</sup>

In order to ‘relocate’ the monk as a vital and integral part of his community and substantiate his vital part in the rural economy we will now examine the emergence of rural monasticism as a type of monastic manifestation. The rapid growth in the number of rural monasteries leads us to distinguish between the ascetic character of the hagiographic ‘holy men’ and the ‘tiller monks’ who were most likely the majority within the monastic movement of the Levant in general and of Palestine in particular during Late Antiquity.<sup>15</sup> Following that, we introduce our recent study of rural monasteries in the north

10 Ibid., 374.

11 Y. Hirschfeld, ‘The expansion of rural settlements in Palestine during the fourth-fifth centuries C.E.’, in J. Lefort, C. Morisson, J.P. Sodini (eds), in *Les villages dans l’empire Byzantine (IV<sup>e</sup>-XV<sup>e</sup> siècle)*, Paris 2005, 533-534.

12 C. Grey, ‘Revisiting the “problem” of agri deserti in the Late Roman Empire’, *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 20 (2007), 371-372.

13 J. Ashkenazi and M. Aviam, ‘Monasteries, monks and villages in western Galilee in Late Antiquity’, *Journal of Late Antiquity* 5 (2012), 287-289.

14 For the diversity of landowning see: Wickham, *Framing the early Middle Ages*, 447; B. Brenk, ‘Monasteries as rural settlements’, 472-473. For building initiatives in rural areas, both sacral and secular, and for the variation of initiators (imperial, ecclesiastical and private), see: F. R. Trombley, ‘Epigraphic data on village culture and social institutions: an interregional comparison (Syria, Phoenicia Libanensis and Arabia)’, in *Recent research on the late antique countryside*, 73-105, esp. 74-81.

15 The distinctions between the two monastic manifestations can be found in one of the anecdotes of the *Pratum Spirituale* by John Moschus, telling the story of a couple whose daughter was possessed. They went to the monks in their village to seek a cure; however, the monks told them to go to the desert, where the holy men live. See: Joannes Moschus, *Pratum Spirituale*, 239, E. Mioni, *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 17 (1951), 83-94.

of Israel which illustrates as we argue the need to rethink the status and role of the monks. Further, it depicts that indeed monks in rural areas chose, time and again, not to 'leave the plough',<sup>16</sup> but rather deal with mundane ways of earning their keep and being part of the daily economy.<sup>17</sup> To clarify the inter-relationships between village and monastery and to emphasize their economic and religious interdependency, we will also examine few other test cases from various regions of Palestine.

### Economic Interdependency between Village and Monastery

**Horvat Qav:** The monastery of Horvat Qav is situated on a small hill near the center of the modern city of Karmiel,<sup>18</sup> a site that incurred severe damage during quarrying in the 1960s. Two salvage excavations were conducted at Horvat Qav. The first, on its northern edge, revealed the remains of a building that was destroyed by fire. A hoard of fifty gold coins was discovered in an oil lamp retrieved in the courtyard between the paving stones. The hoard is dated to 663 CE at the earliest, the Early Islamic period.<sup>19</sup>

The second excavation, at the top of the hill, uncovered a small basilical church, 10 × 18 meters, with three entrances from the west and a side entrance from the north. Both nave and isles were covered with a colorful mosaic floor, preserved in a fragmentary state. A small baptismal chapel 3 × 5 meters was uncovered a short distance south of the church. Inside the baptismal font, a bronze bowl with three bronze chains was found, probably a censer. The chapel's floor is also covered with a colorful mosaic decorated with geometric and floral patterns. A marble fragment from a reliquary lid was also found in the room. In an adjacent room, west of the baptistery, which was only partly uncovered, another bronze censer, as well as a bronze cross, were found. A door from this room leads to another chapel, completely destroyed by a later lime kiln. The main church was surrounded by a series of rooms, probably

16 The words 'Leave the ploughs' are the call of Isaac of Antioch to the rural monks. See in the discussion below.

17 Grey, *Constructing Communities*, 131.

18 J. Ashkenazi and M. Aviam, 'Small monasteries in Galilee in Late Antiquity: the test case of Karmiel', in G. C. Bottini, L. D. Chrupcala and J. Patrich (eds), *Knowledge and wisdom: archaeological and historical essays in honor of Leah Di Segni*, Studium Biblicum Franciscanum, Collectio Maior 54, Edizioni Terra Santa, Milano 2014, 165-166.

19 D. Syon, 'A Hoard of Byzantine Solidi from Horvat Kab', *Israel Numismatic Journal* 14 (2000-2002), 211-223.

monks' dwellings. Attached to the northern rooms there is a very large wine-press whose treading floor is 6 × 6 meters and is paved with large stone tiles. In the center is a heavy weight for a screw press. From the treading floor a clay pipe led the wine into a small settling pool and from there to a very large collecting vat with a 36 cubic meter capacity. A cross was carved on one of the stones of the collecting vat, an aspect that will be discussed below. Two heavy stones were found, not *in situ*; they were probably part of squeezing installations of oil presses.<sup>20</sup>

**Horvat Bata:** About a kilometer east of Horvat Qav laid the remains of a large village, dated to the fourth–seventh centuries, whose ancient name is unknown; the modern name is Horvat Bata. The ruins cover an area of about 15,000 square meters. A survey conducted within the village identified a pottery kiln among the dwellings on the eastern side of the village, an oil press in its center, some cisterns and a large reservoir.

Two churches were excavated at Horvat Bata—a large one on the top of the hill and a small one at the foot of the hill.<sup>21</sup> The large church was probably the village church and presumably also served as a central church for the small settlements nearby. Eighteen dedication inscriptions were incorporated into the mosaic floor of the church from its early stage, and two others from the later stage. Altogether, eleven church officials are mentioned in the inscriptions, reflecting an intricate church hierarchy and indicating that Horvat Bata was a large and important village in the area. One inscription bears the name of Bishop Stephen, probably of Akko-Ptolemais. Of the local ecclesiastical hierarchy the inscriptions mention priests, an archdeacon, deacons, sub-deacons, readers and an *oikonomos* (steward). Presumably they all served in the church of this rural community.<sup>22</sup>

The second church, uncovered at the foot of the hill, attached to the village wall from the inside, was much more modest. It was decorated with limestone chancel screens bearing crosses, and was surrounded by rooms, including an oil press. Hence, the excavator identified it as a monastery.<sup>23</sup> It seems that when the village was fortified, its wall encompassed the monastery and turned it into a 'corner' building of the village. The monks, who lived there, though

20 E.J. Stern,—H. Abu Uqsa and N. Getzov, 'Horbat Qav', *Excavations and Surveys in Israel* 12 (2000), 11\*–14\*, aerial photograph, p. 17.

21 Z. Yeivin, 'Excavations at Carmiel (Khirbet Bata)', *Atiqot* 21 (1992), 109–128.

22 For the inscriptions see: V. Tzaferis, 'Greek inscriptions from Carmiel', *Atiqot* 21 (1992), 129–134.

23 F. Vitto, 'H. Bata', *Hadashot Arkheologiyot/Excavations and Surveys in Israel* 67–68 (1978), 16 (Hebrew).

they were subordinate to an abbot and led a solitary life, were part of the village community.

There are extensive signs of olive oil and wine production both in the village and in the monasteries. Evidence from the monastery at Horvat Qav points to the existence of two or three oil presses; there is another press in the village of Horvat Bata and one in the monastery within the village walls. Each press processed olives from c. 0.35 square kilometers of trees. The estimated quantity of olive oil from each press is c. 11.5 tones per season.<sup>24</sup>

We know that the village of Horvat Bata was surrounded by five monasteries other than the one within the village, each of which had at least one oil press.<sup>25</sup> Since one oil press could supply the entire needs of the village, the presence of these additional presses in the monasteries indicates that the resulting large quantity of olive oil was for export.

As for wine production: The amount of wine that a winepress can produce can be estimated by the dimensions of its treading floor and collecting vat. In the case of the monastery at Horvat Qav, the treading floor is 36 square meters and its collecting vat has a capacity of 20.5 cubic meters. Most scholars agree that the vat in a winepress was filled about three times a season. Hence, the extraordinary size of the wine press at the monastery allowed the production of a large amount of wine during the vintage. The accepted reckoning is that each 360 kgs (liters) of wine in the collecting vat represents 1000 square meters of vineyard. Accordingly, the monastery at Horvat Qav had c. 0.15-0.20 square kilometers of vineyards.<sup>26</sup>

**Avdat:** A similar picture also arises for the arid part of Palestine. Avdat (Oboda) was a large village in the central Negev. On the village's 'acropolis' there are two churches: The northern one was probably the village church and the southern one was a monastery, according to an inscription from a tomb found in its northern entrance that mentions an abbot.<sup>27</sup> Fifty meters south of the church, a very large winepress was discovered of a type known from many other sites in the Negev.<sup>28</sup> Its treading floor measures 33 square meters, but the

24 H. Ben David, 'Oil presses and oil production in the Golan in the Mishnaic and Talmudic periods', *Atiqot* 34 (1998), 1-62 (Hebrew, English summary).

25 Ashkenazi and Aviam, 'Small monasteries in Galilee', 167-169.

26 The calculation of the production of wine is based on S. Dar, *The settlement distribution of western Samaria during the Second Temple period, the Mishna and Talmud, and the Byzantine period*, Tel Aviv 1982, 240-262 (Hebrew).

27 A. Negev, *The Greek inscriptions from the Negev*, Jerusalem 1981, 36-7; P. Figueras, 'Monks and monasteries in the Negev desert', *Liber Annuus* 45 (1995), 432.

28 G. Mazor, 'The winepresses of the Negev', *Qadmoniot* 14 (1981), 51-60 (Hebrew).



side cells total 66 square meters and the capacity of one of its collecting vats is 8.8 square meters. The four other winepresses discovered at Avdat were found near the village. We assume that, as in Horvat Qav in the Galilee, the Avdat winepress was part of the monastery.

**Nessana:** The most significant evidence of economic interdependency between monks and peasants in Palestine comes from Nessana. In this desert village, four churches and two monasteries were discovered.<sup>29</sup> Monastic life in Nessana was dominated by local families who also figured centrally in the church hierarchy. The deep involvement of the monasteries in the village economy can be seen in extensive papyri documentation and from inscriptions discovered at the site by the Colt expedition.<sup>30</sup>

The most prominent family in the village was the family of Patrikios,<sup>31</sup> who held the title of abbot and bequeathed it to his son Georgios, who in turn passed it on to his son, Sergios. The family originated in the Syrian city of Emessa, where they were part of the city's elite,<sup>32</sup> but they probably relocated to Nessana and lived there for at least three generations.<sup>33</sup> The papyri indicate that both monks and villagers were involved in agriculture and in commerce,<sup>34</sup> as well as in serving pilgrims on their way to southern Sinai.<sup>35</sup> It appears that the residence of Nessana—monks, peasants and even soldiers—formed a homogenous rural community that thrived and prospered in the sixth–seventh centuries, overcoming the harsh conditions of the arid Negev.<sup>36</sup>

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- 29 For a detailed survey on the recent excavations in Nessana see: D. Urman, 'Nessana excavations 1987-1995', *Beer-Sheva* 17 (2004), 1-118; a concise summary of the main ecclesiastical buildings is found on pp. 113\*-116\*
- 30 The inscriptions were published in H. D. Colt, *Excavations at Nessana (AujaHafir, Palestine)*, vol. 1, London 1962. The papyri were published by C. J. Kraemer, *Excavations at Nessana (AujaHafir, Palestine)*, vol. 3: Non-literary papyri, Princeton 1958.
- 31 G. Ruffini, 'Village life and family power in Late Antique Nessana', *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 141 (2011), 207-218.
- 32 L. Di Segni, 'Dated Greek Inscriptions from Palestine from the Roman and Byzantine Periods', PhD diss., Jerusalem 1997, 793.
- 33 P. Figueras, 'Monks and Monasteries in the Negev Desert', *Liber Annuus* 45 (1995), 429.
- 34 P. Mayerson, 'Agricultural evidence in the Colt papyri', in H. D. Colt (ed), *Excavations at Nessana*, vol. I, London 1962, 227-230.
- 35 Idem, 'The desert of southern Palestine according to Byzantine sources', *Proceedings of the American Philological Society* 107 (1963), 170-1. For pilgrim services in Nessana see: idem, *Monks, martyrs, soldiers and Saracens, papers on the Near East in Late Antiquity, 1962-1993*, Jerusalem 1994, 232-249; Figueras, 'Monks and monasteries', 430.
- 36 R. Stroumsa, 'People and identities in Nessana', PhD diss. Durham NC 2008, 55.



A snapshot emerges from the surveyed and excavated villages and monasteries described above, revealing typical rural landscapes in Late Antique Palestine. This landscape is evident not only in the Galilee and in the Negev but also in the rural landscapes of Samaria,<sup>37</sup> Judaea,<sup>38</sup> and Gaza.<sup>39</sup>

Industrial installations are present in all of the excavated monasteries and villages in these regions, and it appears that both villagers and monks were occupied in intensive agricultural production. The monasteries were situated within and near the villages and the number and size of the agricultural installations indicate that they produced large quantities of agricultural products, far beyond the needs of their communities. Given that the monastic community was small, according to the average size of the sites and the number of laborers was limited, the villagers must certainly have constituted a key component of the work force in the fields and workshops of the monasteries. It likewise seems that the monks' activities, such as planting and maintaining olive orchards and vineyards and building oil and wine presses, contributed, along with the rest of the inhabitants' efforts, to the economic growth of neighboring villages, creating mutual interests and dependencies among the two social elements, monks and villagers.<sup>40</sup>

The life of monks and peasants, side by side, in rural communities in Late Antique Palestine is well attested in literary sources and also supported by

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- 37 For a conclusive study on rural monasteries in Samaria see: I. Taxel, 'Rural Monasticism at the foothills of Southern Samaria and Judaea in the Byzantine period: asceticism, agriculture and pilgrimage', *Bulletin of the Anglo-Israel Archaeological Society* 26 (2008), 57-73. A very well preserved rural monastery with three large presses was discovered in Samaria by Y. Magen, 'A Roman Fortress and Byzantine Monastery at Khirbet Deir Sam'an', *Judea and Samaria Publications* 15 (2012), 9-106.
- 38 For monasteries in the rural surroundings of Jerusalem see: J. Seligman, 'The rural hinterland of Jerusalem in the Byzantine period', PhD diss. Haifa 2011.
- 39 For the rural monastic landscape in the vicinity of Gaza see: Y. Hirschfeld, 'The monasteries of Gaza: an archaeological review', in B. Bitton-Ashkelony and A. Kofsky (eds), *Christian Gaza in Late Antiquity* (Leiden 2004, 61-88; L. Di Segni, 'Monastery, city and village in Byzantine Gaza', *Proche Orient Chrétien* 55 (2005), 24-51; A. Kofsky and B. Bitton-Ashkelony, *The monastic school of Gaza*, Leiden 2006, 27. For a short list of the monastic institutions in Gaza and in the northern coast of Sinai see: P. Figueras, *From Gaza to Pelusium: materials for the historical geography of North Sinai and Southwestern Palestine (332 BCE—640 CE)*, Beer Sheva, vol. 14, Tel Aviv 2000, 132-136.
- 40 For the mutual economic interests of villagers and monasteries see: J. Banaji, *Agrarian change in Late Antiquity: gold, labor, and aristocratic dominance*, Oxford 2001, 61; M. Dunn, *The emergence of monasticism: From the Desert Fathers to the early Middle Ages*, Blackwell, NJ 2000, 21.

archaeology in Syria, Arabia and Egypt.<sup>41</sup> Following studies on the place of monasticism in society and economy of the countryside, it seems that rural monks, even if they appear to have been a remote element in terms of the village social fabric, remained within the rural community in these regions.<sup>42</sup> The monks enjoyed the sponsorship of wealthy members of the community who initiated the construction of monasteries within the confines of the village, as reflected in the anecdote from the life of Peter the Iberian, cited below.<sup>43</sup> It also appears that monasteries leased plots of land in rural areas from wealthy landowners, which strengthened their social bonds with the rural aristocracy.<sup>44</sup>

This picture contrasts with the monastic landscape of the well-known desert of the Holy City, where monasticism adopted an anchoritic manifestation. The intensive research of the Judean desert monasticism, both archaeological and historical, has created a 'Holy' image of the monk that effected the

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- 41 For Syria see: P. Canivet, 'Contributions archéologiques à l'histoire des moines de Syrie (IV<sup>e</sup>-V<sup>e</sup> siècles): à propos de l'Histoire Philothée de Théodoret (444 env.)', *Studia Patristica* 13 (1975), 444-460; C. Foss, 'Syria in transition, A. D. 550-750: An archaeological approach', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 51 (1997), 189-269. A good example for a possible cooperation between monks and peasants in agricultural production can be seen in the remains of the village of Kharab Shams, where a large oil press was situated halfway between the village and the nearby monastery. See: Hull, 'A spatial and morphological analysis', 98-102; For Arabia see: B. Hamarneh, 'Monasteries in rural context in Byzantine Arabia and Palaestina Tertia: a reassessment', in *Christ is here, studies in Biblical and Christian archaeology in memory of Fr Michele Piccirillo OFM*, Jerusalem 2012, p. 275-296; For Egypt see: R. S. Bagnall, *Egypt in Late Antiquity*, Princeton 1996, 296-303; E. Wipszycka, 'Resources and economic activities of the Egyptian monastic communities (4th-8th century)', *The Journal of Juristic Papyrology* 46 (2011), 159-263.
- 42 J. E. Goehring, *Ascetics, society, and the desert: studies in early Egyptian monasticism*, Harrisburg PA 1999, 21. On the locality of the monks in the rural surroundings of Gaza and the attitude of monastic fathers to the relations between the monks and their families see: Kofsky and Bitton-Ashkelony, *The monastic school of Gaza*, 210, and cf.: R. Krawiec, "'From the womb of the church': monastic families", *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 11 (2003), 283-307, who argues that monastic fathers showed a favorable attitude towards family life and in that way strengthened the place of monasticism as an integral part of the Late Antique society.
- 43 C. Mango, 'Aspects of Syrian piety', in *Ecclesiastical silver plate in sixth century Byzantium* (Washington, D.C.: 1992), 99-105; P.-L. Gatier, 'Villages en Proche-Orient proto-byzantin (4<sup>e</sup>-7<sup>e</sup> siècle): Étude régionale', in G.R.D. King and A. Cameron (eds), *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East*, vol. 2, Princeton 1994, 17-48.
- 44 Banaji, *Agrarian Change*, 195.

general conception of monastic manifestation in the settled land.<sup>45</sup> Naturally, the monasteries of the Judean Desert based their economy mainly on small crafts and donations and some—especially those who were close to the pilgrim routes—on supplying services to those that traveled them.<sup>46</sup>

Moreover, most of the monks who came to settle in the desert of Jerusalem were foreign to the Holy Land and remained alien to the lay communities, both nomadic and rural.<sup>47</sup> The monastic leader, Euthymius, for example, built his *laura* close to the road that led from Jericho to Jerusalem towards the mid fifth century.<sup>48</sup> He was involved in converting the Saracens, who came to the Judean Desert from the eastern borders of the empire, but he kept his monastery detached from their camp and refused to let them stay near his cell and threaten his *hesychia*.<sup>49</sup> Euthymius appears to be the typical hagiographic ideal of a Saint-Patron.<sup>50</sup>

### Religious Interdependencies

The religious role of rural monks within the village community is reflected not only in the hagiographic literature but also in archaeological discoveries in Palestine. By using the term ‘religious role’ we exclude the acts of the monk as an individual ‘holy man’ in the village. The villagers greatly desired his presence in the village, for spiritual reasons, but we believe that the spiritual role of the monk in the village was augmented by the economic role of monks within the rural community. In inscriptions from mosaic church floors, the epithet *hegumenos* (abbot) appears together with the title *presbyteros* (priest). This

45 D. Chitty, *The Desert a City: An Introduction to the Study of Egyptian and Palestinian Monasticism under the Christian Empire*, Oxford 1966; J. Binns, *Ascetics and Ambassadors of Christ. The Monasteries of Palestine 314-631*, Oxford 1994.

46 Y. Hirschfeld, *The Judean Desert monasteries in the Byzantine period*, New Haven 1992, 102-111.

47 For the multinational and secluded character of the Judean Desert monks see: J. Binns, *Ascetics and Ambassadors of Christ: The monasteries of Palestine 314-631*, 1928.

48 Cyrillus Scythopolitanus, *Vita Euthymii*, 12-14, E. Schwartz (ed.), *Kyriillos von Skythopolis*, Leipzig, 1939, 22-24.

49 *Vita Euthymii*, 10:20-21; 15:24-25.

50 For analysis on the remoteness and strangeness of the holy man in the writings of Cyril of Scythopolis see: B. Flusin, *Miracle et histoire dans l'œuvre de Cyrille de Scythopolis*, Paris 1983, 125-126.

combination is known both from urban and rural monasteries,<sup>51</sup> and reflects one of the aspects of the bilateral relationship between the monastic and lay communities, since the abbot as a priest could provide religious services to the monastery and to the village as well. In some inscriptions the epithet *hegumenos* appears without the title *presbyteros*. This reality is reflected in inscriptions discovered in monasteries in different rural regions: the north-western Negev,<sup>52</sup> the southern Hebron Hills<sup>53</sup> and western Galilee.<sup>54</sup> In these cases it is likely that the monks had to depend on the services supplied by the nearby village priests.

Baptisteries were found in the excavations of many rural monasteries.<sup>55</sup> Though baptisteries were installed in both urban and pilgrim monasteries,

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- 51 For the combination in an urban context see the inscription from the Nea Church in Jerusalem, where an abbot and priest name Constantine is mentioned (H. M. Cotton and others [eds], *Corpus Inscriptionum Iudaeae/Palaestinae I: Jerusalem. Part 2: 705-1120*, Berlin 2012, 105-107). This church was an Imperial foundation and served as one of the most venerated pilgrim churches in Jerusalem in the second half of the sixth century (see: H. Amizur, 'Justinian's Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem', in M. Poorthuis and Ch. Safrai [eds], *The centrality of Jerusalem; historical perspectives*, Kampen 1996, 160-175). For the combination of the titles in a pilgrim monastery see the inscription at the entrance to the baptistery at Kursi, see: V. Tzaferis, 'The excavations of Kursi-Gergesa', *Atiqot* 16 (1983), 28-29; for the appearance of the double title in a rural context, see, for instance, the inscription from the mosaic floor in a church at Khisfin in southern Golan: V. Tzaferis and S. Bar-Lev, 'A Byzantine Inscription from Khisfin', *Atiqot* 11 (1976), 114-115. Though this was a monastery church, laymen were mentioned in the inscriptions as donors.
- 52 R. Cohen, 'A Byzantine church and its mosaic floors at Kissufim', in Y. Tsafirir (ed) *Ancient Churches Revealed*, Jerusalem 1993, 277-282, where a monk named Theodore held the office of abbot in a rural monastery. See also: A. Walter and others (eds), *Corpus Inscriptionum Iudaeae/Palaestinae, III: South Coast 2161-2648*, Berlin 2014, 545-554.
- 53 Two churches were discovered at Yatir, in the southern Hebron Hills. One was the village church, bearing an inscription mentioning Theodore, a bishop, and Sabinus, the local priest. The other church belonged to a monastery, as can be seen by the mention of two different abbots, Thomas and John (whose ecclesiastical rank was deacon). See: H. Eshel, J. Magness, and E. Shenhav, 'Khirbet Yattir, 1995-1999: preliminary report', *Israel Exploration Journal* 50 (2000), 153-168. This is another example of the religious interdependence between village and monastery.
- 54 See: Ashkenazi and Aviam, 'Monasteries, monks and villages', 281-282.
- 55 The only survey on baptisteries in Palestine done so far is by M. Ben-Pechat, 'Baptism and monasticism in the Holy Land: archaeological and literary evidence', in G. C. Bottini, L. Di Segni and E. Alliata (eds), *Christian archaeology in the Holy Land, essays in honour of Virgilio C. Corbo*, OFM (Studium Biblicum Franciscanum, Collectio Maior 36, Jerusalem 1990, pp. 501-522). This survey is updated to 1984. An updated catalogue of ancient Christian baptisteries in Europe and the Mediterranean was published in 1998 by

the presence of such installations in rural monasteries emphasizes the religious bonds between the villagers and the neighboring monks—the peasants brought their newborns to the nearby monastery to be baptized in a church that was sanctified by the local holy men. A telling example of this phenomenon can be seen in the churches of Shivta in the Negev: Three churches were identified in the village, of which at least two—the northern and the southern—were monasteries with baptisteries installed in both, while in the third—identified as the village church—there was no baptismal font.<sup>56</sup>

Another example, from Galilee, is to be found in the above-mentioned village of Horvat Bata: the village church lacked a baptistery and the surrounding monasteries probably served the needs of the village community, since at least two of them housed baptismal facilities.<sup>57</sup>

It may also be suggested that the interrelations between monks and their peasant neighbors are reflected in burial customs. Among burials discovered in rural monasteries, there is evidence for the burial of monks as well as laymen.<sup>58</sup> A suitable example can be found in a burial cave which was quarried under the western edge of the monastery at Khirbet el-Shubeika in western Galilee. There the bones of men, women and children were found, including a small heap of skulls.<sup>59</sup>

Another example, albeit from a pilgrim monastery, was found in Kursi on the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee.<sup>60</sup> Adjacent to and outside the apse of the monastery church, a group of burials was uncovered that according to the excavator contained a mass burial of men, women and children. Whatever the circumstances of the burials in these two sites, it is clear that the interment of laymen within the monastery points to an additional link between monasteries and laymen.<sup>61</sup>

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Sebastian Ristow. Regarding late antique Palestine, the catalogue includes references to sites that were not listed by Ben Pschat's, but no discussion is dedicated to the connection between baptisteries and monasticism. See: S. Ristow, *Frühchristliche Baptisterien*, Münster 1998. The baptisteries that were discovered in Israel are listed in pp. 166-172.

56 For baptisteries in Shivta see: Figueras, 'Monks and monasteries', 438-9 (Shivta). A baptismal font was found also in the monastery church at Memsis. See: *ibid.* 419.

57 For baptisteries in the monasteries around the village of Horvat Bata see: Ashkenazi and Aviam, 'Small monasteries', 164-5 (Horvat Kenes), 165-166 (Horvat Qav).

58 Brenk, 'Monasteries as rural settlements', 457.

59 A. Tacher and Y. Nagar, 'The burial caves', in Z. Gal (ed), *Eretz Zafon: studies in Galilean archaeology*, Jerusalem 2002, 263-287 (Hebrew, English summary).

60 V. Tzaferis, 'New archaeological finds from Kursi-Gergesa', *Atiqot* 79 (2014), 186-196.

61 H. Goldfus, 'Tombs and burials in churches and monasteries of Byzantine Palestine (324-628 A.D.)', PhD. diss. Boston 1997, 227.

Finally we would like to present another material cultural evidence of the religious role of monks in rural society. In four different cases, a cross was found chiseled into or attached to winepresses.<sup>62</sup> These crosses were sometimes covered by the wine that filled the collecting vat; therefore it appears as if their purpose was to add a spiritual essence to the manual labor of both monks and villagers and to bless their cooperative efforts.<sup>63</sup>

A fine example for the economic and religious inter-relations between village and monastery can be found in the following anecdote, cited from the hagiography of Peter the Iberian, dated to the late fifth century:

In the city of Gaza was a lawyer, an orthodox man whose name [was] Dionysius . . . since he was anxious to inherit a blessing from the saint, he persuaded him to stay in his village, which is called Magdal Tutha, south of Gaza, by the side of the temple of the holy Hilarion, the great ascetic and prophet and father of the monks. He built houses that were fitting, so to say, the blessed one, at abundant expense, and thus kept the saint there for three years. While he was offering him every comfort, he also was esteemed worthy of the blessing that was [going out] from him and [of] salvation. That Christ-loving man then was telling us, "When I had spent three hundred darics<sup>64</sup> on the building and the preparation of that place, after a few days I recovered these three hundred darics from where I never would have expected nor [from where] it would have come to my mind." Surrounding that village are vineyards that used to produce

62 One of these crosses was found in the collecting vat of the winepress at Horvat Qav, mentioned above. A second was found in the collecting vat of the winepress at Bir Abu Faur in Upper Galilee. See Ashkenazi and Aviam, 'Monasteries, monks and villages', 277-279 (fig. 6).

63 For more examples and a discussion on this matter see Hirschfeld, *The Judean Desert monasteries*, 63-64. Like the crosses on the collecting vats walls, so crosses, covered by water, marked the walls of two large reservoirs. The first was identified in the reservoir of the Nea Church in Jerusalem, where the cross was carved under a large dedicatory inscription, appearing to hold it up. See: N. Avigad, 'A building inscription of the Emperor Justinian and the Nea in Jerusalem (preliminary notes)', *Israel Exploration Journal* 27 (1977), 145-151; the second is in a reservoir in a Judean Desert monastery. See: Hirschfeld, *ibid.* 108-109. It seems that the cross symbolized God's blessing on the monastery and all its belongings therefore it appeared inside storage facilities and was covered by the contents. For insight into this phenomenon see: A. Lopez, 'Life on schedule: monks and the agricultural cycle in late antique Egypt', *Motions of Late Antiquity: essays on religion, politics and society in honor of Peter Brown*, Turnhout 2015 (forthcoming).

64 A Persian gold coin.

low-quality wine in meager quantities because the soil was sandy and shallow. When he took the saint and brought him to each one of the vineyards, he asked him to make a prayer and to bless the place. Thereafter [each vineyard] began to produce wine many times double [the quantity] and [wine that] stored well, something that no one from among the workers of that soil [could] remember ever happening. These vineyards continued to give such a yield of fruit throughout the lifetime of the blessed one.<sup>65</sup>

What is apparent from this anecdote is, first of all, the residence of a holy man within a village; secondly, a private donor connected to the village, who builds houses—to our understanding a monastery—within the village boundaries.<sup>66</sup> But above all, quite clear evidence arises from the text for economic and religious relationship between the village community—represented here by Dionysius the lawyer—and the holy man: The lawyer invested a large sum of money in building a monastery for the holy man and that investment was repaid in the form of increased agricultural production as a result of the holy man's blessing.<sup>67</sup> In a way, the text displays the three phase process suggested in the introduction of our study: the peasants search for a doublet to the roman patron, the creation of the holy man as a Patron (though in this anecdote the lay patron himself is eager to install the holy man in the village), and the life of the monk as an integral part of the village social and economic tissue, after his monastery was built inside the village.

Furthermore, this hagiographic anecdote is painted in vivid colors by the analysis of the information derived from the surveys and excavations that were discussed above. This analysis shows that the monks in rural monasteries in Palestine were occupied not only in contemplation and seclusion, as well as with religious services and duties, but were also intensively involved in agricultural production. The dual manifestation of rural monasticism in Palestine—religious and contemplative duties as well as agricultural production together

65 Iohanes Rufus, *Vita Petri Iberii*, R. Raabe (ed.), 101. English translation by C. B. Horn and R.R. Phenix, Jr, *John Rufus: The Lives of Peter the Iberian, Theodosius of Jerusalem, and the Monk Romanus* (Society of Biblical Literature, 2008), 201-202.

66 For lay patrons as founders and maintainers of monasteries in villages see: Brenk, 'Monasteries as rural settlements', 467.

67 In the same manner one can refer to words of Rufinus in his *Historia monachorum* (Prologue, 10), regarding the villages in Egypt: 'There is not a village or city in Egypt and the Thebaid that is not surrounded by hermitages as if by walls, and the people are supported by their prayers as though by God himself'. See: N. Russell, *The lives of the Desert Fathers: The Historia Monachorum in Aegypto*, Kalamazoo 1981, 50.



with their neighboring villagers—was a crucial factor in the development of the economic and religious prosperity of Palestine in Late Antiquity.<sup>68</sup>

Some notable monastic fathers, though not from Palestine, are known to have related to this dual manifestation. One of them, Isaac of Antioch, who was well aware of the growing numbers of monasteries in the neighboring limestone massif, stood firmly against monks in the rural monasteries occupying themselves with mundane daily activities. In his homilies he preached to the monks, using the words of God to Elijah—‘I have commanded the ravens to feed thee there’ (1 Kings 17:4)—and added a call of his own to the monks: ‘Leave the ploughs!’<sup>69</sup>

Isaac was not alone in such a call.<sup>70</sup> Similar critical attitudes were expressed by other monastic figures such as Theodoret of Cyrhus,<sup>71</sup> Alexander Akoimetes<sup>72</sup> and Rabbula of Edessa,<sup>73</sup> and can be also traced in monastic literature from Egypt.<sup>74</sup> In contrast, there are no traces of this kind of critical

68 For a discussion on the connection between economic growth and Christian building activities in Late Antique Palestine see: D. Bar, ‘Population, settlement and economy in Late Roman and Byzantine Palestine (70-641 AD)’, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 67 (2004), 307-320. Bar argues rightfully that the spread of monasteries in Palestine was an outcome of the economic growth and not its cause (p. 316).

69 *Homiliae S. Isaaci Syri Antiocheni* I, ed. P. Bedjan, Leipzig 1903, 24.

70 For a detailed survey on the attitude of the Syrian fathers toward coenobitic monasticism, see: A. Vööbus, *History of asceticism in the Syrian Orient*. vol. 2: *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium* 14, Louvain 1958, 144-158.

71 Theodoretus, *Religiosa historia*, xxx, 5 (PG 82, 1493). For Theodoret’s concept of the rural Monk see: A. M. Schor, *Theodoret’s People: Social Networks and Religious Conflict in Late Roman Syria*, Los Angeles 2011, 73; 136-138.

72 *Vie d’Alexandre l’Acémète*, É. de Stoop (ed), *Patrologia Orientalis* 6/5 (1971), 691. Alexander was criticized by other monastic teachers and church fathers for inciting monks to forgo manual labor and was considered by his opponents a follower of the Messalian heresy, which encouraged ascetics to practice poverty and avoid manual labor. On Alexander, his teaching, his followers, and his adversaries, see: D. Caner, *Wandering, begging monks: spiritual authority and the promotion of monasticism in Late Antiquity*, Berkeley and London 2002, 126-157.

73 A. Vööbus, *Syriac and Arabic documents regarding legislation relative to Syrian monasticism*, Stockholm 1960, vol. I, 40; R. Finn O.P., *Asceticism in the Graeco-Roman world*, Cambridge, 2009, 138.

74 For Egypt see: R.S. Bagnall, ‘Monks and property—rhetoric, law and patronage in the Apophthegmata Patrum and the papyri’, *Greek Roman and Byzantine Studies* 42 (2001), 20-24. For implicit criticism in the writings of Evagrius Ponticus see: D. Brakke, ‘Care for the Poor, Fear of Poverty, and Love of Money: Evagrius Ponticus on the Monk’s Economic Vulnerability’, in: S. R. Holman (ed.), *Wealth and Poverty in Early Church and Society*, Grand Rapids, MI 2008, 78-79.

approach in monastic writings from Palestine. Cyril of Scythopolis' 'holy men' were occupied by practicing asceticism and guarding Orthodoxy against all possible adversaries.<sup>75</sup> Therefore, no criticism was needed in this case. Conversely, the monastic literature from Gaza pictures a landscape where laymen and monks shared livelihoods and perhaps spiritual ideas and attitudes; therefore no criticism would be expected in that milieu either.<sup>76</sup>

### Summary

In summation, throughout this paper we argue for a more nuanced approach to the character of the rural monasteries in Palestine, and it seems that it was the same in other provinces of the East. Further, the very existence of arguably large number of monasteries needs to be seen and understood in the context of the contrast between the two concepts of monasticism: the ascetic and hermitic in contrast to the agricultural-productive. While the former starred in hagiographic literature, the second played a significant role in agricultural production as a pivotal component of Late Antique economy.<sup>77</sup> In this study we presented some examples for the rural monastic landscape where thousands of tiller monks settled in compounds inside or near villages. While acting as a venerated and adored component of rural society, they offered a 'package' of religious services to the villagers and at the same time they functioned as a diligent workforce in olive orchards, vineyards and presses. In so doing they contributed to the development of mutual dependency that played a crucial role in the economic growth of the Levant as a whole and of Palestine in particular in Late Antiquity.

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75 On the theological tendencies of the Judean desert monks see: J. Patrich, *Sabas, Leader of Palestinian Monasticism. A Comparative Study in Eastern Monasticism, Fourth to Seventh Centuries*, Washington 1995, 301-310.

76 On the intense interactions of monks and laymen in the surroundings of Gaza see: L. Perrone, 'Byzantine monasticism in Gaza and in the Judean desert: a comparison of their spiritual traditions', *Proche Orient Chrétien* 62 (2012), 13. See also: Binns, *Ascetics and ambassadors of Christ*, 192.

77 On the negligence of economic matters in the life of the monks in hagiographic literature see: Brenk, 'Monasteries as rural settlements', 454.