

JAMES E. GOEHRING

Constructing and Enforcing Orthodoxy: Evidence from the Coptic Panegyrics on Abraham of Farshut

The construction and enforcement of orthodoxy neither occurred through the simple progression of ideas nor everywhere followed a linear track. While later sources, frequently limited, one-sided, and anachronistic, fashion a seductively simple and convincing division between heresy and orthodoxy, the reality was much more complex. Orthodoxy recreates itself in each and every conflict, as distinctions are made, lines are drawn, individuals and groups are forced to take sides, and the past is rearticulated to bring it into line with the newly defined ideology. What follows is but a single example of this complex process drawn from three texts that I am currently editing contained in two 10th-11th century codices from the White Monastery of Shenoute in Upper Egypt. They include two panegyrics on Abraham of Farshut, the last Coptic orthodox abbot of the Pachomian monastic federation, both preserved in White Monastery Codex GC, and an extended excerpt on the same Abraham contained in a panegyric on Manasse preserved in White Monastery Codex GB¹. The texts supply important information on the intrigue that led to the demise of the Pachomian federation in Egypt in the middle of the sixth century as its members were compelled either to accept the decrees of the Council of Chalcedon or leave the community². While the basic outline of the events is clear, deeper reflection raises intriguing questions with respect to the diachronic construction of orthodoxy within a single monastic movement and its eventual enforcement, initially through expulsion and physical separation, and subsequently through a politically motivated re-articulation of the past.

The events surrounding the fate of Abraham of Farshut are briefly recorded in the Copto-Arabic *Synaxarion*³. The text reports that Abraham sent a letter from Constantinople to his monastery in Egypt informing the monks of the demand placed upon him by the Emperor Justinian I (527–565 C.E.) to either accept the decrees of Chalcedon or relinquish the office of archimandrite of the Pachomian federation's central monastery of Pbow. Abraham refused, and the emperor sent a certain Bankâres with soldiers to the monastery of Pbow in Upper Egypt to enforce his decree. According to the *Synaxarion*, the monks left the monastery for the desert and other monastic communities. No mention is made of any who remained, though one assumes that some did. Abraham, we are told, went first to the White Monastery of Shenoute in Atripe. There he copied the rules and sent them on to the Monastery of Apa Moses, from where he later retrieved them for his own new foundation at Farshut.

¹ ANTONELLA CAMPAGNANO, *Monaci egiziani fra V e VI secolo. VetC 5* (1978): 223–246. For preliminary microfiche editions of the two codices, see idem, *Preliminary Editions of Coptic Codices: Monb. GC: Life of Abraham – Encomium of Abraham, Corpus dei Manoscritti Copti Letterari* (Rome: Centro Italiano Microfisches, 1985) and idem, *Preliminary Editions of Coptic Codices: Monb. GB: Life of Manasses – Encomium of Moses – Encomium of Abraham, Corpus dei Manoscritti Copti Letterari* (Rome: Centro Italiano Microfisches, 1985).

² JAMES E. GOEHRING, *Remembering Abraham of Farshut: History, Hagiography, and the Fate of the Pachomian Tradition. JECS 14, 1* (2006) 1–26 supplies a fuller account of the events with more detailed references. See also my earlier “Chalcedonian Power Politics and the Demise of Pachomian Monasticism”, *Occasional Papers 15* (Claremont, CA: Institute for Antiquity and Christianity, 1989) 1–20; reprinted in idem, *Ascetics, Society and the Desert: Studies in Early Egyptian Monasticism* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1999) 241–261.

³ RÉNE BASSET, ed. and trans., *Le synaxaire arabe jacobite (Rédaction copte) III: Les moines de toubeh at d'amchir, PO 11, 5* (Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1916; reprint ed., Turnhout: Brepols, 1973), 682–688; JACQUES FORGET, *Synaxarium Alexandrinum, CSCO 48, Scriptorum Arabici, ser. 3, vol. 18* (Beryti: E Typographeo catholico, 1906), 411–13 (text); *CSCO 78, Scriptorum Arabici, ser. 3, 1* (Rome: Karolus de Luigi, 1921), 401–405 (translation).

The Coptic *Panegyric of Apollo, Archimandrite of the Monastery of Isaac*, offers a few additional details.⁴ It reports that the emperor, after having removed Abraham as archimandrite of Pbow, appointed the transgressor in his place, forcing “all who loved godliness” to depart. This brief passage both indicates the appointment of a pro-Chalcedonian replacement for Abraham as archimandrite of Pbow and more clearly suggests that not all of the Pachomian monks left the community as a result; one may assume, using the author’s categories, that “all those who did not love godliness” remained.

The three texts that I am currently editing, while fragmentary, expand considerably on the events leading up to Abraham’s dismissal. They indicate that the emperor’s action was not simply an external imposition on the Pachomian community at Pbow, but rather the final result of intrigue that began within the Pachomian federation⁵. The texts supply considerable detail on Abraham’s appearance before the emperor in Constantinople, his return to Egypt aided by the empress Theodora, and his eventual foundation of a monastic community at Farshut. For my purposes here, I want to focus on the events that preceded the emperor’s summons of Abraham to Constantinople. The *First Panegyric on Abraham of Farshut* suggests that Abraham was brought to the city as part of a broader effort aimed at bishops and monastic superiors throughout Egypt⁶. This version of the events seems unlikely, however, given the fact that other nearby and equally significant monasteries, like the White Monastery of Shenoute, were unaffected. The *Second Panegyric on Abraham of Farshut* contained in the same codex and the excerpt on Abraham preserved in a *Panegyric on Manasseh* contained in White Monastery Codex GB offer a more plausible alternative. The former of these two texts, reporting on Abraham’s appearance before the emperor in Constantinople, refers to the rejoicing of “the accusers” when they learned that Abraham had renounced his position as archimandrite. In the author’s words, “when the accusers saw that Apa Abraham had renounced everything, they rejoiced greatly like the devil, like the lions and wolves of Arabia; dividers of souls, they continued to accuse us vigorously”⁷. Rather than responding to a general imperial summons sent throughout Egypt, in this panegyric, Abraham was apparently singled out by accusers. While their precise relationship to him remains unclear in what survives of the panegyric, their existence suggests something more at work in the summoning of Abraham to Constantinople than a general decree issued by the emperor.

Fortunately, the excerpt on Abraham of Farshut contained in the *Panegyric on Manasseh* preserves more information on role of the accusers. It names Peter of Nemhaata, Patelphe of Šmin, Pesour of Ermont, and Pancharis as among those who brought charges against Abraham. It reports that Pancharis took the lead in taking the charges to the emperor in Constantinople, which resulted in Abraham’s summons to the imperial city. While most of the pages recounting Abraham’s appearance before the emperor are missing, the text picks up near the end of Abraham’s interrogation with the emperor asserting that “some men here who belong to the Koinonia of Apa Pachomius are faithful men of trust and love the emperors. I will give them the office of archimandrite of Apa Pachomius and allow no one to oppose them”⁸. Abraham, who refuses the emperor’s demands, is removed as archimandrite, and when the empress seeks to intervene with the emperor, she too is rebuffed and told by the emperor, “If he [Abraham] will not be in communion with me, he will never dwell in the Koinonia of Apa Pachomius”⁹. The last surviving fragmentary page of this excerpt refers to the letter mentioned in the *Synaxarion* that Abraham sent to his monastery informing the monks of his dismissal as their leader and noting the grief experienced by “those who were present when Pancharis entered the monastery”¹⁰.

Contrary to the account in the *First Panegyric on Abraham of Farshut*, the evidence contained in the *Second Panegyric* and the *Excerpt on Abraham* indicate that the action against Abraham did not occur as part

⁴ K. H. KUHN, ed., *Panegyric on Apollo Archimandrite of the Monastery of Isaac* by Stephen Bishop of Heracleopolis Magna, *CSCO* 394–395, *Scriptores Coptici* 39–40 (Louvain: Secrétariat du *CSCO*, 1978).

⁵ See GOEHRING, *Remembering Abraham of Farshut* 11–14 for a fuller account of these events and specific manuscript references.

⁶ White Monastery Codex GC 11.ii.25–12.i.7 (Paris, Bibl. Nat. 129¹³ 13r–13v).

⁷ White Monastery Codex GC 106.ii.5–21 (Vienna, Nat. Bibl. K9404v); my translation.

⁸ White Monastery Codex GB 29.i.6–19 (Paris, Bibl. Nat. 78, 32r); my translation.

⁹ White Monastery Codex GB 30.i.17–23 (Paris, Bibl. Nat. 78, 32v); my translation.

¹⁰ White Monastery Codex GB 35.ii.1–5 (Paris, Bibl. Nat. 129¹³ 1r); my translation.

of a more general effort directed against anti-Chalcedonian elements in Egypt. It was rather a singular action taken against a specific monastic leader as a result of accusations brought against him by persons in Egypt. The emperor's statement in the *Excerpt on Abraham* that he will give the office of archimandrite of Apa Pachomius to "some men here who belong to the Koinonia of Apa Pachomius" suggests that at least some of the accusers, if not all, were monks from the Pachomian federation. Pancharis, in particular, stands out as Abraham's probable pro-Chalcedonian replacement as archimandrite of Pbow. He corresponds to the Bankâres of the *Synaxarion*, who came with soldiers to expel the pro-Chalcedonian elements from Pbow. Rather than a military leader, however, as one might surmise from the *Synaxarion* alone, Pancharis was a pro-Chalcedonian Pachomian monk who led the faction opposed to Abraham and effected his removal as archimandrite. The soldiers mentioned in the *Synaxarion* were not led by Pancharis, but rather supplied the imperial muscle that installed him as the new pro-Chalcedonian archimandrite of Pbow and insured allegiance to him within the monastery by expelling its anti-Chalcedonian members.

Let me now turn to the topic at hand and suggest a few of the issues raised by this evidence with respect to the construction and enforcement of orthodoxy within the upper Egyptian coenobitic institutions in the middle of the sixth century and beyond. My observations are not offered as firm or final conclusions, but rather to suggest possible avenues for discussion. First, as the episode at hand makes clear, the issue of orthodoxy (and heresy) arises in a community's discourse only when the divisions against which it is deployed have generated a sufficient degree of discord within the community. The sources produce and engage in the discourse in order to compel their readers' to make a choice, a choice that assumes an unbridgeable divide. One wonders, however, about the state of the community with respect to the topic of the discourse before it reaches the degree of discord that produces the discourse. While the absence of sources often makes any effort to reconstruct this earlier period somewhat of a fool's errand, I would argue that we need to at least consider this period in any discussion of the production of orthodoxy. In the case at hand, for example, one has to assume that prior to the accusations brought against Abraham by Pancharis and his fellow pro-Chalcedonian Pachomians, the Pachomian communities included in some fashion both pro- and anti-Chalcedonian elements¹¹. One has to wonder how they interacted in the many years between Chalcedon and the mid-sixth century split evidenced in the sources discussed here¹².

It is possible, of course, that hostility emerged quickly in the monasteries over the issues raised by Chalcedon and that a sharp division among its members endured until Justinian's religious policies offered an opportunity for one side to gain the upper hand. Such a scenario would require a long and uncomfortable period of rather un-ascetic hostility within individual monastic communities known for sharing a common life under a written rule. Alternatively, one might imagine that the monks within any given community varied in their responses to the ideological divide implied by the Council of Chalcedon. The sharp discursive division between orthodoxy and heresy should not be allowed to force itself without question on the understanding of community. While the logic of the sources demands a bipartite division of the individuals involved, monks, like all individuals, were surely more complex. The ideological questions may have been of

¹¹ While it seems likely that the division involved a stronger pro-Chalcedonian element in the Lower Egyptian Pachomian Monastery of Metanoia and an anti-Chalcedonian element centered at the federation's upper Egyptian Monastery of Pbow, the division was not strictly geographical. The fact that a number of fifth and sixth century pro-Chalcedonian archbishops were drawn from the Pachomian monks of Metanoia, contrary to the assertion of some, does not mean that this community was uniformly pro-Chalcedonian. The surviving evidence suggests a more complex situation. So too the fact that some of the Pachomian monks remained at Pbow when Pancharis was forceably installed as the new pro-Chalcedonian archimandrite indicates that the community was not uniformly anti-Chalcedonian. GOEHRING, *Remembering Abraham of Farshut* 14–17.

¹² One recalls that adherents of both parties initially existed in both Nitria and Cellia, and that the latter location eventually had separate churches for each communion. HUGH G. EVELYN WHITE, *The Monasteries of the Wadi 'n Natrun: Part II, The History of the Monasteries of Nitria and of Scetis* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1932. Reprint ed., New York: Arno Press, 1973) 221–223. Documentary evidence similarly indicates that while Melitian and non-Melitian monks had separate monasteries at the beginning of the sixth century, they worked together on occasion and may well have shared in the running of some communities. JAMES E GOEHRING, *Monastic Diversity and Ideological Boundaries in Fourth-Century Egypt*. *J ECS* 5 (1997) 69–70; reprinted in: *idem, Ascetics, Society, and the Desert* 204–205. Where does one locate such a stage of separation in the production of orthodoxy?

extreme importance to some, but they may have been less so to others. Some were likely more interested in asceticism than ideology, and others might have embraced one view without demanding exclusive allegiance to it. What then tips the scale? I pretend no easy answers. I assume individual cases unfold differently. In the Pachomian example I have chosen for this discussion, it would seem that a more rigorous pro-Chalcedonian element within the federation used the opportunity of Justinian's religious policies to effect a change that they could not accomplish on their own. Their ability to enforce a rigorous and exclusive ideology within the federation altered the Upper Egyptian coenobitic landscape, sharpening the lines of division and eventually reshaping the memory of the coenobitic past¹³. They forced a choice even on those who would rather not choose, and as the lines of division hardened and reached discursively into the past, they erased from the memory of the past not only those of the other side, but even more so those who would rather not have chosen. The latter are forgotten, having no place in the bipartite division between the orthodox ("those who love Godliness") and their opponents (those who don't).

Given the involvement of Justinian I in this internal Pachomian conflict, at least as portrayed in these accounts, a further question can be asked with respect to who is using whom in this conflict. While one often hears or thinks of bishops and political authorities harnessing ascetics to their cause, the episode at hand illustrates the complex nature of such interactions. It is easy enough to read Justinian's efforts as an example of his general religious policies. The *First Panegyric on Abraham of Farshut* makes this move by interpreting Abraham's summons as part of a broader effort underway in Egypt. The other two sources, however, whose account I find more believable, indicate that the imperial summons occurred as a direct result of an internal ideological dispute within the Pachomian federation. While one may argue that Justinian used the pro-Chalcedonian Pachomians to further his own agenda, he did so only as a result of an appeal from rigorous pro-Chalcedonian monks within the federation. In reality, the events unfolded because these more rigorous and obviously politically astute monks used the emperor to gain control of the Koinonia.

Finally, the evidence from the panegyrics on Abraham of Farshut illustrates how orthodoxy establishes dominance through the discursive re-articulation of the past. At some point subsequent to the removal of Abraham of Farshut as the last Coptic orthodox archimandrite of the Pachomian federation, the Egyptian tradition reshaped the memory of the past so as to enroll Shenoute, archimandrite of the parallel but independent White Monastery federation, more directly into the Pachomian lineage. In doing so, it re-established the Coptic orthodox coenobitic continuity that had been sundered by the loss of the later Pachomian federation to the pro-Chalcedonian party¹⁴.

When the White monastery emerged in the fourth century, its founder Pcol appears to have borrowed ideas and rules from the Pachomian communities that existed in the immediate area. The community, however, did not become part of the Pachomian federation. As it grew and expanded under Shenoute, the two federations interacted, but remained independent. In the fifth century, for example, the sources suggest that the archimandrites of both federations, Shenoute and Victor, accompanied the archbishop Cyril to the Council of Ephesus in 431 C.E. Each community, while recognizing the other, maintained its own unique identity which included a lineage of its leaders. Victor would have traced his lineage back through his Pachomian predecessors at Pbow to Horsiesius, Theodore, Petronius, and ultimately Pachomius. Shenoute, on the other hand, would have traced his back through his immediate unnamed predecessor to Pcol, the founder of the White Monastery. The independence is further underscored by the fact that Shenoute only mentions Pachomius twice in his extant writings, referring to him once as the great Pachomius when citing a Pachomian rule, and a second time as "a good and wise and truly pious father," when quoting from one of his letters¹⁵.

¹³ See my discussion of this process more generally in my "Monastic Diversity and Ideological Boundaries" 61–84; reprinted in: *Ascetics, Society, and the Desert* 196–218.

¹⁴ The following again draws heavily on my recent "Remembering Abraham of Farshut" 20–24.

¹⁵ The first passage occurs in Shenoute's treatise "So Listen". See STEPHEN EMMEL, *Shenoute's Literary Corpus*. 2 vols. CSCO 599–600, Subsidia 111–112 (Louvain: Peeters, 2004), § 2.8.1 (pp. 594–595); E. AMÉLINEAU, *Oeuvres de Schenoudi: Texte copte et traduction française* (Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1909) vol. 3, fasc. 3, 461. The second passage derives from his discourse "*I Have Heard about Your Wisdom*". EMMEL, *Shenoute's Literary Corpus*, § 13.2.8 (2:624) and § 7.3 (1:244–254); ÉMILE CHASSINAT, *Le*

Shenoute certainly recognized Pachomius and his importance, but he does not present him as a direct ancestor within the White Monastery's lineage. The later *Life of Shenoute*, traditionally attributed to his disciple Besa, reiterates this viewpoint. In a death bed vision found in this text, Shenoute sees Apa Pšoi, Apa Antony, and Apa Pachomius descending with angels to lead his soul to heaven. Pachomius appears as one of the recognized monastic greats of the past, but not a direct White Monastery predecessor¹⁶.

In the aftermath of the loss of the Pachomian federation to the pro-Chalcedonian party, however, the situation changes as is evident in the panegyrics on Abraham of Farshut. Reporting Abraham's vision of his own impending death, the author of the *First Panegyric* writes,

He looked and saw our holy fathers of the Koinonia, Apa Pachomius and Apa Petronius and Apa Shenoute of the monastery of Atripe. They came to him, and when he saw them, he ran to them (and) greeted them with his face downcast towards the earth. They embraced him, raised him up, (and) greeted him. And they said to him, "Peace to you who has built upon the foundation that we laid"¹⁷.

In this text, Shenoute has taken his place alongside Pachomius and his immediate successor Petronius as a "holy father of the Koinonia," one of those who laid the foundation on which Abraham, the last Coptic orthodox Pachomian abbot built. Later, the same author again praises Abraham as "a great one among the saints and an elect and perfect one among the monks, like our ancient fathers and forefathers, that is, Apa Pachomius and Apa Shenoute and Apa Petronius and Apa Horsiesius, the fathers of the world"¹⁸. So too while the Shenoutean federation knew and likely borrowed from the Pachomian rule, in the mind of the author of the *First Panegyric*, the distinction fades and is forgotten. In his text, Abraham, complaining about the laxity of the monks with respect to the rule asserts, "And even if the whole world were in prosperity, you would be in need because you abandoned the laws of the Lord that our holy fathers gave us, namely Apa Pachomius and Apa Shenoute"¹⁹.

By the time of the composition of this text, the two related but independent monastic federations of Pachomius and Shenoute had merged in the author's memory of the past. The loss of the Pachomian federation to the pro-Chalcedonian party in the middle of the sixth century forced Coptic orthodoxy to re-imagine its heritage, articulating it so as to trace the orthodox present, represented by the Shenoutean federation, back through the orthodox past, represented by the earlier Pachomian federation. While outside of Egypt, Shenoute remained unknown, in Egypt his status rose and his communities endured. The great basilicas of his federation's White and Red Monasteries, for example, have survived, while the equally massive Pachomian basilica at Pbow lies in ruins; its pillars, scattered at the edge of the modern village of Faw Qibli, are the only visible remains of the once great Pachomian federation. Over time, Shenoute became the more visible representative of the coenobitic institution in Egypt, his name being chosen by three Coptic popes, including the present Pope Shenoute III. The name of Pachomius has yet to be used.

In closing, let me reiterate the three points I draw from the Coptic panegyrics on Abraham of Farshut. First, it is of course well known that the concepts of orthodoxy and heresy are created. Fashioned as part of the formative process of a faith, the divisions they articulate become important factors for the faith in the process of their articulation. While one imagines divisions and discussions over Chalcedon within the Pachomian federation after 451 C.E., the divisions do not rise to the breaking point until a more rigorous group, represented by Abraham's accusers, force the issue. What may have always been present and subject for

quatrième livre des entretiens et épîtres de Schenouti, Mémoires publiés par les membres de l'Institut français d'archéologie orientale du Caire 23 (Cairo: Imprimerie de l'Institut français d'archéologie orientale, 1911), 111; my translation.

¹⁶ Besa, *Life of Shenoute* 185; JOHANNES LEIPOLDT, *Sinuthii vita bohairice*, CSCO 41, *Scriptores Coptici* 1 (Paris: e typographeo reipublicae, 1906), 75; DAVID N. BELL, trans., *The Life of Shenoute by Besa*. *Cistercian Studies* 73 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1983) 91.

¹⁷ White Monastery Codex GC, Coptic page 49.i.14–ii.13 (Cairo, IFAO 8r); my translation.

¹⁸ White Monastery Codex GC, Coptic page [84].ii.11–24 (Paris, Bibl. Nat. 129¹³ 15v); my translation.

¹⁹ Cf. Horsiesius's statement, "Let us not abandon the law of God, which our father [Pachomius] received from Him and handed down to us." *Liber Horseiesii* 46; translation from ARMAND VEILLEUX, *Pachomian Koinonia* 3. 204.

discussion then became a matter that forced decision and ultimately division. One could no longer practice an ascetic life in a federation that harbored both pro- and anti-Chalcedonian (and the unsung undecided) ascetics. One had to choose, and it is only then that the Coptic orthodox monks left.

Second, the account of events reported here illustrates the complexity of the politics involved. Ascetics were a diverse lot whose numbers certainly included politically astute and connected individuals. While they were on occasion pawns in the political games of bishops and kings, we should use caution lest we overplay that hand and forget that the tables could and were on occasion reversed. I suspect that the evidence presented here represents the more normal pattern, one of an alliance that benefited both parties, often at the expense of a third.

Thirdly, orthodoxy claims final victory through its re-articulation of the past. It erases the memory of the division against which it created itself, linking its present to a past that existed before the division that created it. As such, it fashions a sense of the historical continuity of its ideology by erasing the memory of its opposition.

