



Running from the mundane: *Anachoresis* as a compound social phenomenon in Roman Egypt Hava Bracha Korzakova, Bar Ilan University, Israel

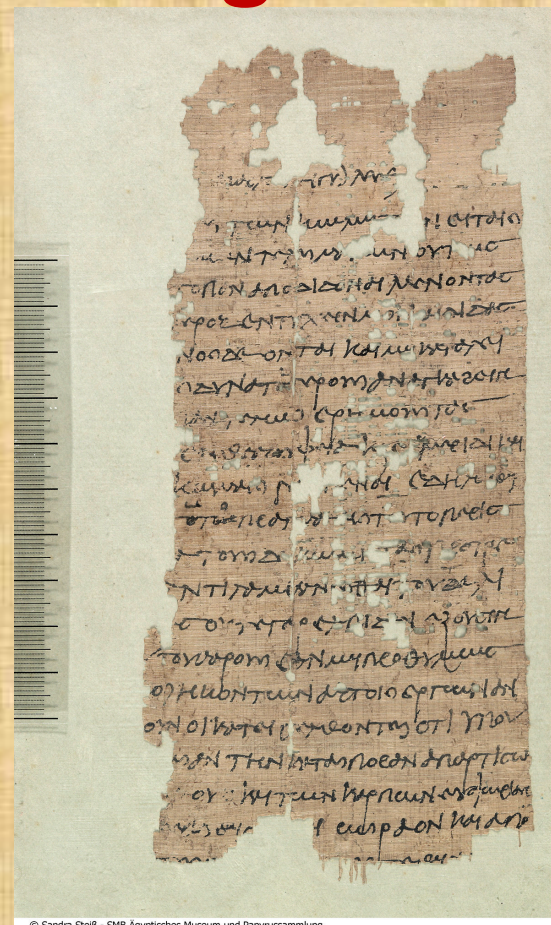


Summary

A tendency of a rural population to go away from its place of origin has been existed at all times and places, but in Roman Egypt this phenomenon known as *anachoresis* (“withdrawal”) has reached such a large scale that it became an issue for several prefectural edicts. The Roman authorities imposed a special tax on the population, *merismos anakechorekoton*, which is reflected in ostraca from Thebes and Syene-Elephantine, as well as in various documents on papyri. In some cases, partially surviving documents could be identified as dedicated to the issue of *anachoresis* due to the special vocabulary developed in this area.

An interesting parallel could be made between the seemingly strictly administrative matter of *anachoresis* as an economic and social phenomenon and a spiritual act of *anachoresis*, a withdrawal to desert, undertaken by the Christians. The very idea of monasticism as an escape from the mundane might go back, at least partly, to the very popular means of escape from the heavy taxation and the mandatory labor (*angaria*), and from the injustice and oppression in general, known in Egypt from the Pharaonic era. A closer look at both of these meanings of *anachoresis* might give us a clue for the better understanding of the origins of the early monasticism. This parallel also sheds some light on the economic management of the monastic communities during the Early Byzantine Era.

Fragmentary documents



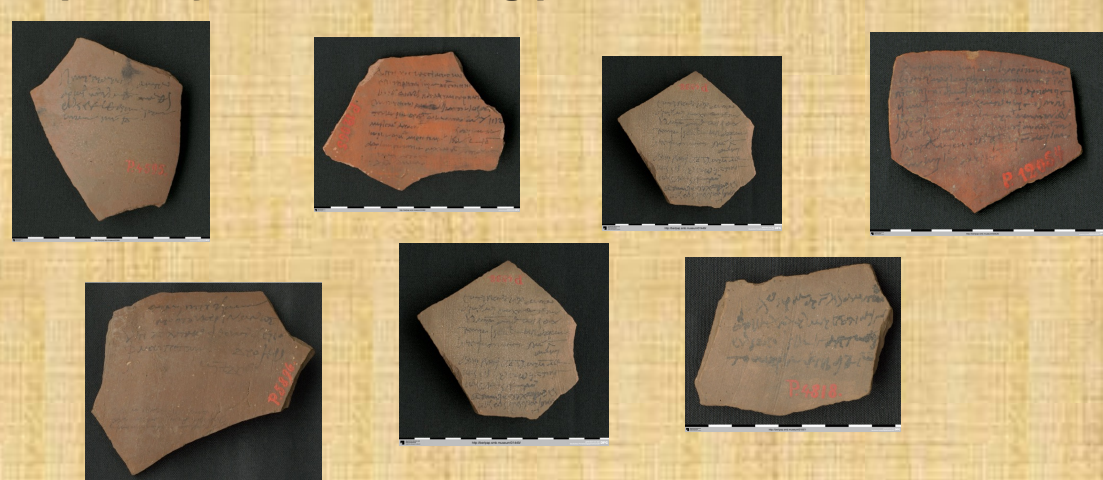
Papyrus no. 16024, Berlin
end of II – beg. of II cent. C.E.

“..., the prefect of Egypt, says: ... from the farmers, in... paying taxes; so that... a place to pass forward while they stay... a share came out in the tax distribution (?)... they need, and not to leave... to force the wealthier... which are not inhabited and do not prosper... to the policemen? in the district... who are in the villages. It was revealed to me... this action... and the farmers listed below... to contradict the timid (?)... they should not hope... of the insolence, and if not finish the sowing in time... the supply of harvest... as soon as possible... year...”

From: H. B. Korzakova. *Edicts of Roman Prefects of Egypt*. PhD Thesis, Bar Ilan University, 2002, 429 pp. (Hebrew with English summary).

Merismos anakechorekoton - The price paid by the others

Ostraca with receipts for *merismos anakechorekoton*, a tax paid by the remaining peasants for those who fled.

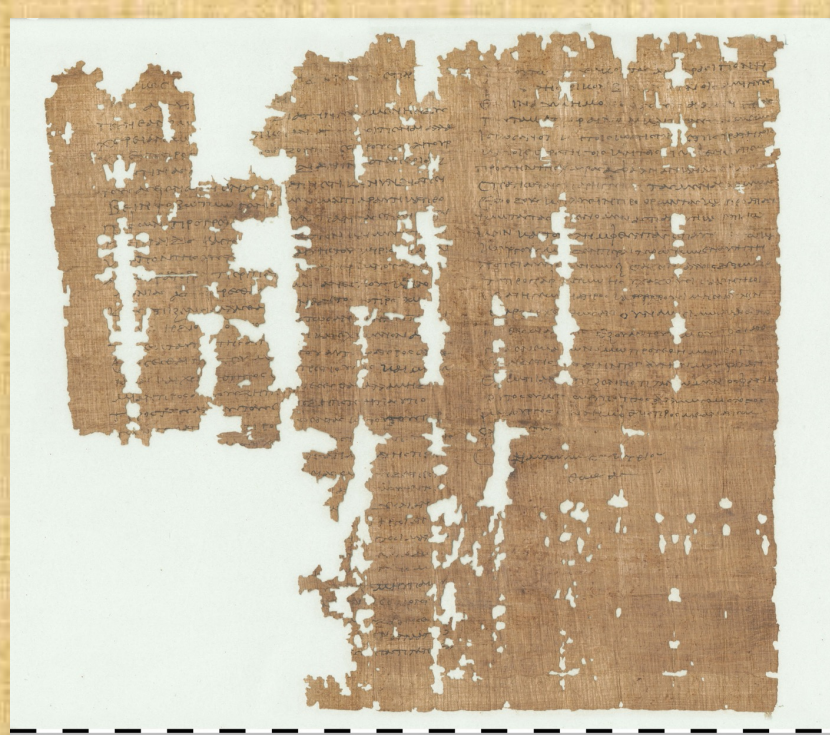


Amnesty

BGU II 372
Edict by Marcus Sempronius Liberalis, prefect of Egypt
ca. 154-158 CE

Cowey J. M. S. “New Readings in an Edict of M. Sempronius Liberalis (BGU II 372)”, *ZPE* 106 (1995), pp. 195-199.

Emperor – Antoninus Pius.



«The content sets out measures which have been taken to induce people, who fled their native village or town because of difficulties in being able to pay taxes or undertake the burden of performing liturgies, to come back and continue to work as normal. Two reasons are given for this: first is the desire that the crops should be properly harvested and secondly so that these people are not absent from their idia (place of residence) and wandering freely around the country.

Although the word does not appear in the text as we have it, it is clear that this text deals with some of the problems arising out of the phenomenon known ἀναχώρησις. Property was sequestrated until debts had been paid (P.Mich. XI 616, c. AD 182). If the debts were not paid, or if a man was unable to meet the demands of the liturgy, for which he had been put forward, and fled, the property might be sold.»

“And so that they do this more eagerly and readily, let them know that property, which is still under sequestration for this reason, will be released, since this is the instruction given by the good-will and generosity of the emperor, and that there will not be any judicial inquiry at all concerning them, nor indeed (will there be any judicial inquiry) concerning others, whose names had been hung up publicly by the strategi for whatever reason at all.”

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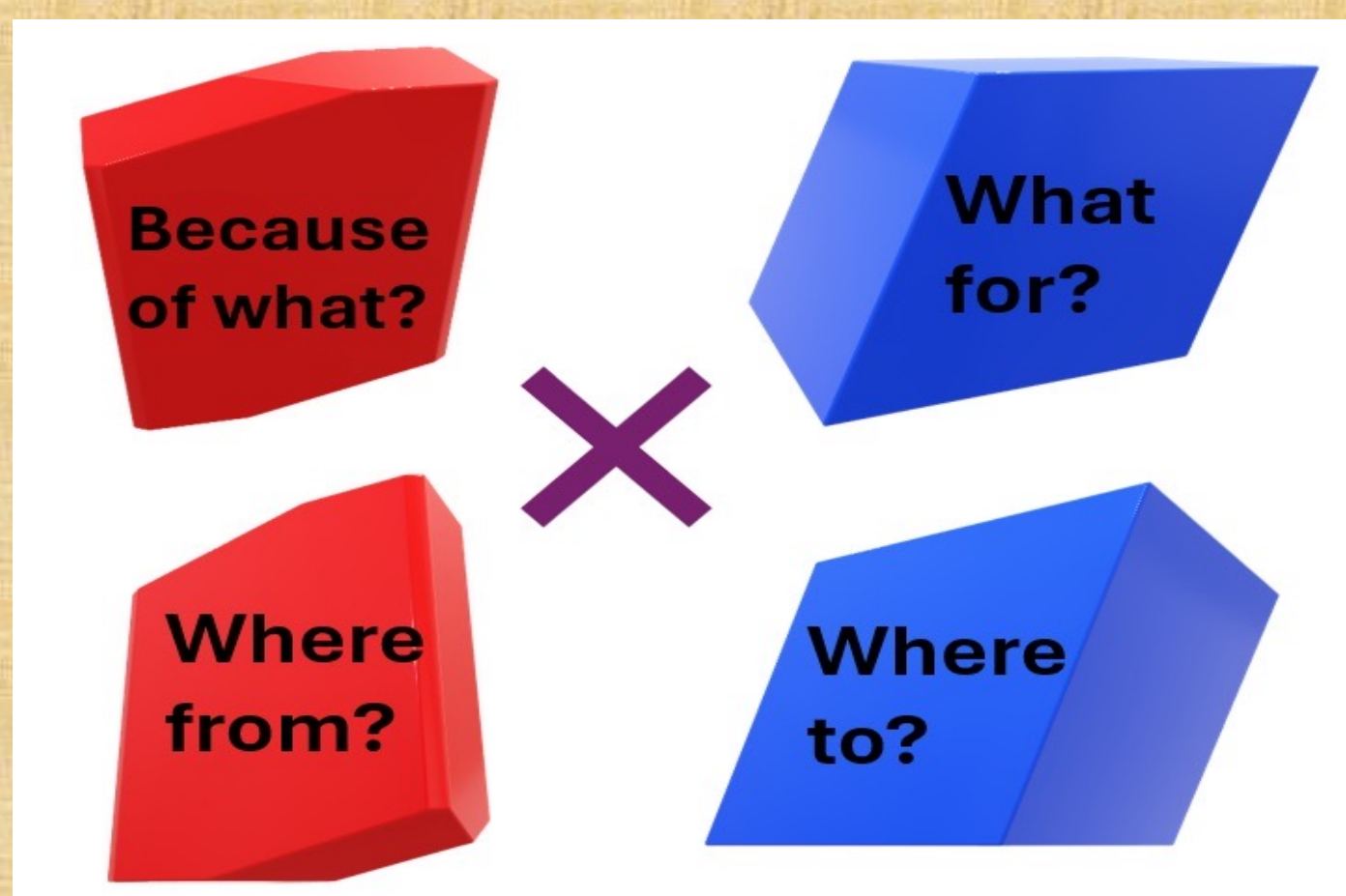
Spiritual vs. mundane

ANACHORESIS, the step by which an ascetic, following the example of Saint ANTONY, leaves his village “to withdraw” (Greek, *anachorein*) to the desert and thus becomes an ANCHORITE (*anachoretēs*). But the oldest attestations of the word in Egypt relate to a phenomenon of a social character. Crushed by excessive fiscal burdens, peasants fled from their villages to the desert or some other place. This phenomenon, already noted in pharaonic Egypt (Posener, 1975) and again under Arab domination, is particularly well known, thanks to papyri from the Greco-Roman period (Martin, 1934; Henne, 1956; Braunert, 1964).

Several historians, such as A. Piganiol (1947, p. 376), have thought that there is a close relationship between this *anachoresis* of the peasants and the monastic *anachoresis*. In 373 and 377 the emperor Valens adopted measures against those among the monks who sought to escape their civil and military obligations (Piganiol, 1947, pp. 380-81). The monasteries sometimes served as refuges for crowds of people who fled before the exactions of the civil officials, as is apparent in the fifth century from the testimony of Isidorus of Pelusium (letter 191 PG 78, cols. 305A and B). The Pachomian Rules (see PACHOMIUS OF TABENNESE), in prescribing the conduct to be adopted with regard to candidates for the monastic life, call attention to the case—which must therefore have occurred—of those who presented themselves in order to escape judicial proceedings. Such candidates were naturally to be rejected.

The monastic *anachoresis*, in fact, must be made, as it is said in the *Life of Saint Antony* (Athanasius, 1857, col. 853A), “out of virtue.” It is thus of a quite different nature from the *anachoresis* of peasants fleeing from their fiscal obligations. In accomplishing it, the monk separates himself from “the world,” that is, from all the objects (people and things) and occupations that excite the passions and distract the spirit, thus preventing him from being mindful of God alone. In this the monastic *anachoresis* is rather in the tradition of the philosophers and sages of Hellenism who withdrew from public life to devote themselves solely to philosophy (Festugière, 1960).

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Outside of Egypt

But Judas Maccabeus, with about nine others, got away to the wilderness, and kept himself and his companions alive in the mountains as wild animals do; they continued to live on what grew wild, so that they might not share in the defilement.

2 Maccabees 5:27



View of Anchorite's cell in Holy Trinity Church Skipton, United Kingdom

Pre-modern downshifting



Teodor Axentowicz, The Anchorite (1881)

Perception depends on the bubble you are currently in

Anachoresis

The habit of living in holes or crevices as a means of avoiding predators.

A Dictionary of Zoology

The attraction of micro-organisms to a local tissue lesion.

A Dictionary of Dentistry