

St. Anthony the Great and the Beginnings of Christian Monasticism

**PhD Lecturer DANIEL LEMENI,
University of Timișoara,
dlemeni@yahoo.com**

Abstract

Specialized exegesis holds stereotypical perspective on the origins of early Egyptian monasticism: first, St. Antony was the founder of eremitic monasticism; second, St. Pachomius was the founder of coenobitic monasticism, and third, Egypt was its birthplace. In our opinion these assertions are inaccurate. Certainly, St. Antony, St. Pachomius and Egypt are extremely important landmarks, but the matter of Egyptian monasticism's origins is much more complex. In this sense, we point out that not even St. Athanasius deems Abba Antony to be the first monk. He affirms that young Antony started his discipleship under an Elder who led in the vicinity of the village. Who was this anonymous Elder living on the village outskirts? Could there exist an older tradition, extremely widespread during the third century, namely that of the ascetics living on village outskirts? As we will see below, scholars call these ascetics *apotaktikoi* („renouncers”). From this perspective, St. Antony appears in a new light, namely not as the founder but the innovator of Egyptian monasticism. In other words, the renewal brought about by Abba Antony lay not in the ascetical lifestyle, but rather in practicing it in the desert. In conclusion, we point out that Antony the Great evokes the transition from urban and rural asceticism to that practiced in the desert.