

Who Were the Desert Fathers and Mothers?

The game *Kellia* is based in a light-hearted way on the lives of real people who lived in around the fourth century after Christ.

At this time, in Egypt, but also in Syria, Palestine and other areas of the Middle East and Asia Minor, a few men, and some women too, felt called to leave their possessions and their families, and give up their everyday life for an existence of extreme simplicity in the desert.

They made their homes sometimes in caves, or in small huts or “cells” (*kellia*) which they built themselves. They lived on bread, water, salt, and small amounts of herbs or vegetables, earning their living from simple manual work such as weaving linen, or making baskets and ropes. They kept life to its barest essentials in order to devote their time and attention to what really mattered to them.

One of most famous pioneering desert fathers was Antony, who one day in church had heard a reading containing the words of Christ: “Go and sell everything you have, give the money to the poor, and come, follow me.” He heard these words as a personal call addressed to him, and soon moved into the desert to spend the rest of his life in prayer and contemplation. He died in the year 356 at the age of over a hundred, after having inspired a large number of disciples.

*Abba Antony said: Whoever stays in the desert and lives in silence is set free from three combats – that of what is heard, of what is spoken and what is seen. He has to deal with just one: the combat of the heart.*¹

More and more people were attracted to this life in the desert. A few chose to live in solitude, meeting with other people only occasionally; others would gather as small groups of disciples to live near an elder. In some places, larger settlements grew up in the desert, the most important being Nitria, Scetis, and another that was actually known as Kellia, all situated in the North of Egypt. In the south of Egypt, Abba Pachomius gathered his disciples into a tightly-knit community, and so the first monastery came into existence.

Abba Antony once went to visit Abba Amoun in Mount Nitria and when they met, Abba Amoun said, “By your prayers, the number of the brethren increases, and some of them want to build more cells where they may live in silence.”...²

They referred to each other as “brother” or “sister”, but the words *Abba* (Father) or *Amma* (Mother) came to be used as a term of respect and affection for the most experienced and wisest of them. A little later, more specific terms came into use: “monk” and “nun”, or, for those who lived alone, “hermit” or “anchoress”.

Abba Joseph said: While we were sitting with Abba Poemen he mentioned Agathon as “abba” and we said to him: “He is very young; why do you call him ‘abba’?” Abba Poemen said, “Because his speech makes him worthy to be called ‘abba’.”³

1 *Sayings*, Systematic Collection 2.2

2 *Sayings*, Alphabetic Collection Alpha 34

3 *Sayings*, Alphabetic Collection Pi 61

Life in the desert had its physical dangers. Apart from thirst and hunger which were never far away, and the naturally harsh climate of the desert, there were attacks by bandits: the settlement at Scetis, for example, was pillaged and devastated in the year 407. Then there were wild animals. However, many anecdotes handed down about the desert fathers and mothers emphasize how some of them were able to live in harmony with all living things, including the most dangerous.

*One day a hyena took her cub which was blind, brought it to Abba Macarius, and pushed the door of his enclosure open with her head, came inside, where he was sitting, and dropped the cub at his feet. Then the saint picked it up, spat on its eyes, and said a prayer; and it recovered its sight. The mother hyena suckled it for a moment, took it, and went away.*⁴

*Abba Antony also said: Obedience, with abstinence, gives people power over wild beasts.*⁵

Many of the desert fathers and mothers took great care of the parts of the desert where they lived, cultivating it and making it fruitful. In some places, where they lived in community, this made it possible for them to provide for the poor who lived nearby or even to send grain to the cities for the relief of the destitute.

*When Abba Copres had finished telling us these amazing stories... he took us into his own garden and showed us the date-palms and other fruit-trees which he had planted himself in the desert. This had been suggested to him by the faith of those peasants to whom he had said that even the desert can bear fruit for those who have faith in God.*⁶

Wherever a large number of these early monks settled, a church was often built in a central location, to which they would gather on Saturday and Sunday for prayer together, the Eucharist, and a shared meal.

The main concern of the desert fathers and mothers was the life of the heart: they wanted to be with God. But when someone lives alone and spends a lot of time in silence, they become aware of all the different thoughts and feelings that inhabit human nature, both good and bad. Without help, it is easy to become confused, and it can be difficult to distinguish what is life-giving from what is destructive, what really comes from God and what is just imagination. So the practice soon arose of sharing one's thoughts and way of life with an elder, whose experience was invaluable in discerning what was right from what was misleading, the authentic from the false.

Many highlights from these conversations between an elder and his or her disciples were remembered and passed on, and later they were written down. These are known as the *Apophthegms* or *Sayings*, and they contain a striking mixture of wisdom, challenge, psychological insight, realism, and humour. Some of them, because the mentality was so different from that of today, can seem strange to us; others, because of their insight into the human heart, can seem as fresh and authentic as they were when they were first spoken.

Other information about the desert fathers and mothers comes down to us from the accounts written by various people who visited Egypt in order to get to know their new and strange way of life. Among them are the *Historia Monachorum* by an anonymous author whose journey took

4 Palladius *Lausiac History* 18:27

5 *Sayings*, Alfabetic Collection Alpha 36

6 *Historia Monachorum* 12.16

place in about 395 (translated into English as *The Lives of the Desert Fathers*), and the *Lausiac History* by the monk Palladius (around the year 420). These accounts often mix authentic information with quite a lot of fantasy!

One aspect of life in the desert which is unfamiliar today is the practice of fasting (going without food for a certain time) and keeping vigil (reducing sleep to a minimum). The purpose of these exercises was to help to get free from the more compulsive desires of human nature, and to dig down to what is really essential. "Human beings do not live by bread alone, but by every word which comes from the mouth of God." (Deuteronomy 8:3 and Matthew 4:4.) The negative and destructive forces at work within the human heart are often personified as "demons" or "the enemy": the struggle against such forces, by humility, simplicity and trust in God, is quite prominent.

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The following *Sayings* give some idea of the things that the fathers and mothers of the desert most valued:

Silence or attentiveness

*The same Abba Theophilus, the archbishop, came to Scetis one day. The brethren who were assembled said to Abba Pambo, "Say something to the Archbishop, so that he may be edified." The old man said to them, "If he is not edified by my silence, he will not be edified by my speech."*⁷

*A brother asked Abba Rufus, "What is inner silence, and what use is it?" The old man said: "Interior peace means to remain sitting in one's kellion with respect and knowledge of God, keeping far off the remembrance of wrongs suffered and pride of spirit. Such inner peace brings forth all the virtues.... Be watchful over your soul."*⁸

Discernment

*Amma Synclitica said: There is a discipline which in fact comes from the enemy, and his disciples practise it. So how are we to distinguish between the divine, royal discipline and the demonic tyranny? Clearly through its quality of balance.*⁹

*Abba Poemen said: Do not give your heart to what does not satisfy your heart.*¹⁰

An attitude of simplicity, realism, humility

*Nilus also said: Do not be always wanting everything to turn out as you think it should, but rather as God pleases; then you will be undisturbed and thankful in your prayer.*¹¹

*Amma Synclitica also said: Choose the humility of Moses and you will find your heart which is a rock changed into a spring of water.*¹²

7 *Sayings*, Alphabetic Collection Theta 2

8 *Sayings*, Alphabetic Collection Rho 1

9 *Sayings*, Alphabetic Collection Sigma 15

10 *Sayings*, Alphabetic Collection Pi 80

11 *Sayings*, Alphabetic Collection Nu 7

12 *Sayings*, Alphabetic Collection Sigma 1

Refusing to condemn or judge others or to speak evil of them

*A brother questioned Abba Hierax, saying, "Give me a word. How can I be saved?" The old man said to him, "Sit in your cell, and if you are hungry, eat, if you are thirsty, drink; only do not speak evil of anyone and you will be saved."*¹³

*An elder said, "The monk must be one who does not listen in, does not back-bite, and does not take offense".*¹⁴

Persevering and holding firm even when things get tough

*Abba Moses asked Abba Silvanus, "Can a person make a fresh start every day?" And Abba Silvanus said, "If he is a toiler, a person can make a fresh start every day and every hour".*¹⁵

*Abba Macarius was asked, "How should one pray?" The old man said, "There is no need at all to make long discourses; it is enough to stretch out one's hands and say: Lord, as you will, and as you know, have mercy. And if the conflict grows fiercer, say: Lord, help! He knows very well what we need and he shows us his mercy."*¹⁶

*A brother visited Abba Moses at Scetis, asking him for a word. The elder said to him: "Go and stay in your cell. Your cell will teach you everything."*¹⁷

Struggling against *akedia* (or *accidie*) – a kind of discouragement, lassitude, or depression which makes it hard to see any more the point of what one is doing

*Amma Synclitica also said: There is a grief that is useful and there is a grief that is destructive. The first sort consists in weeping over one's own faults and over the weakness of one's neighbour,... in order to attach oneself to what is really good. But there is also a grief that comes from the enemy, full of mockery, which some call *akedia*. This spirit must be cast out, mainly by prayer and singing psalms.*¹⁸

*Amma Theodora also said: It is good to live in silence, for a wise person practises perpetual prayer.... However, you should realize that as soon as you intend to live in silence, at once evil comes and weighs down your soul through *akedia*, faintheartedness, and evil thoughts.... But if we are vigilant, all these temptations fall away.*¹⁹

*A brother asked Abba Poemen about *akedia*. The old man said to him, "*Akedia* is there every time one begins something and there is no more destructive feeling. But if one recognizes it for what it is, one will gain peace."*²⁰

Avoiding being contented with routine

Abba Lot went to see Abba Joseph and said to him, "Abba, as far as I can, I say my little office, I fast a little, I pray and meditate, I live in peace, and as far as I can I purify my thoughts. What else

13 *Sayings*, Alphabetic Collection Iota 1

14 *Sayings*, Systematic Collection 21.64

15 *Sayings*, Systematic Collection 11.69

16 *Sayings*, Alphabetic Collection Mu 19

17 *Sayings*, Systematic Collection 2.19

18 *Sayings*, Alphabetic Collection Sigma 27

19 *Sayings*, Alphabetic Collection Theta 3

20 *Sayings*, Alphabetic Collection Pi 149

can I do?" Then the old man stood up and stretched his hands towards heaven. His fingers became like ten lamps of fire and he said to him, "If you want to, you can become all flame."

(Sayings, Alphabetic Collection Iota 7)

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Here are a few more details about the historical personalities on which the characters in the game *Kellia* are based.

Abba Agathon

Agathon lived first in the Thebaid in Upper Egypt, where he was a disciple of the great Abba Poemen; later he lived at Scetis in the North, and finally near the river Nile. He was "wise in spirit and active in body". Many of his sayings have been preserved in the different collections of the *Apophthegms*; the story about the snake is from the Coptic collection. ²¹

Amma Alexandra

She is known from the *Lausiac History* written by Palladius (see above). He recounts that Alexandra was a servant-girl before her life in the desert; she lived as a recluse in a former Egyptian tomb, spending her whole time praying, spinning flax, and meditating on the Bible. ²²

Abba Bessarion

A man of great self-discipline and prayer, he is known from a few anecdotes and sayings, some of them recorded by his disciple Doulas. "His life was like that of a bird of the air, or a fish, or an animal living on the earth, passing all the time of his life without trouble or disquiet. The care of a dwelling did not trouble him, and the desire of a particular place never seemed to dominate his soul, no more than the abundance of delights, or the possession of houses, or the reading of books." ²³

Abba Helenus (or Helle)

His life is known only from the story told by a priest called Copres to a group of visitors to the fathers and mothers of the Egyptian desert. Apparently he began living in the desert very young, and was known for his spiritual insight and many miracles. In his stories, Copres stresses the miraculous powers of Helenus and others in order to make his own miracles seem unimpressive. ²⁴

Amma Melania the elder

Her life is recounted by Palladius in his *Lausiac History*; he seems to have known her well and respected her greatly. She came from a very wealthy Roman family, but after the death of her husband when she was still young, she sold her possessions, and set out for Egypt. She stayed for a long time with some of the great fathers and mothers of the desert; their inspiration led her to

21 v. Lucien Regnault *La vie quotidienne des pères du désert* Hachette 1990 p. 218, quoting *Apophthegmes traduits du copte dans Les sentences des pères du désert – nouveau recueil*, Solesmes, pp 277-285

22 Lisa Cremaschi *Deti e fatti delle donne des deserto*, Qiqajon, Comunità de Bose 2018 pp. 139-144 & Palladius *Lausiac History* ch 5

23 *Sayings*, Alphabetical Collection, Beta

24 *Historia Monachorum* 12

found a community of women at Jerusalem in which she spent the last 27 years of her life, practising hospitality to pilgrims and working for reconciliation when there were conflicts in the Church.²⁵

Abba Paulos of Thebes

An older contemporary of Antony, he lived his long life (c. 227 – c. 341) as a hermit in the region of Thebes in Upper Egypt, having fled to the desert during the persecution of Christians around the year 250. His *Life* was later written by Saint Jerome.²⁶

Amma Sara

Little is known of her except for a small number of *Sayings* reported in Greek, Armenian, and Latin, but they are sufficient to give a good impression of her strong personality.²⁷

Abba Serapion the sindonite

He is known from the *Lausiac History* of Palladius and from a few *Sayings*: apparently he spent his life as a wandering pilgrim, not staying under a roof, and wearing no clothes except a loincloth.²⁸

Amma Syncletica

Probably the best-known of the desert Mothers, many of her *Sayings* have been preserved, and her *Life* was written in the fifth century. After her parents' death she left her considerable wealth and comfortable social position for life a life of poverty and prayer; gradually a large number of women, drawn by her authenticity and wisdom, became her disciples.²⁹

Amma Talida or Talis

She is mentioned by Palladius in his *Lausiac History*; he met her when she was very elderly, having lived for eighty years in her community with sixty other women, who loved and respected her greatly. Her long experience of self-discipline gave her great freedom.³⁰

The life of these humble and holy men and women became well-known and gave an immense impetus to the development and deepening of the life of the Church in the centuries that followed. Their way of life did not die out, but developed into different forms. In Egypt today, there are some monasteries which can trace their history back directly to these fourth-century groups of hermits. But in fact all Christian monasteries, religious orders, and communities that are centred on a life of prayer – including Taizé – could say that they are branches of the tree that was planted long ago by the fathers and mothers of the desert.

25 Cremaschi op. cit. pp. 165-172 & Palladius *Lausiac History* ch. 46

26 *Vita Pauli primi eremite* 10 par saint Jérôme, dans Regnault op.cit. p. 216

27 Regnaut op. cit. p 236 who quotes *Apophtegmes traduits du latin in Les sentences des pères du désert – 3e recueil*, Solesmes, pp 125-128 ; Cremaschi op. cit. pp. 85-93

28 Palladius, *Lausiac History* 37,1 & *Les sentences des pères du désert – série des anonymes*, Solesmes-Bellefontaine, 1985, n° 565

29 Lisa Cremaschi op. cit. pp. 95-115, who quotes the *Life of Syncletica* 21,5 in *Donne di comunione* p. 94; *Sayings*, Alphabetic Collection Sigma)

30 Cremaschi op. cit. pp. 145-147 & Palladius *Lausiac History* ch. 59