

Singers Silently Speaking: Psalmists in Inscriptions from Late Antique Middle Egypt (Bawit)

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Personal agency and social microhistory of hymn-writing and singing in late antiquity have been mostly neglected in the study of Christian liturgy. In this article, I approach the question of social and administrative standing of “singers of psalms” in monastic communities in late antique Egypt through the study of their epigraphic (self)-representation. I focus on Coptic inscriptions, both *dipinti* and *graffiti*, left on behalf of, or applied by singers themselves on the walls of public structures in the extensive monastery complex of Apa Apollo at Bawit. Through the exploration of the patterns of visibility of these inscriptions, their positioning, and the manner of execution, I seek to unpack social implications of their use of epigraphic commemoration. I argue that while, contrary to the generally held views, certain singers were part of the administrative and spiritual elite of the ascetical community at Bawit, their vocational and ecclesial identities tended to merge with other professional and clerical strata, so social cohesion was more important than self-centered group awareness.

Structures & dipinti

1. Chapel 17 (4.6 × 4.6 m)

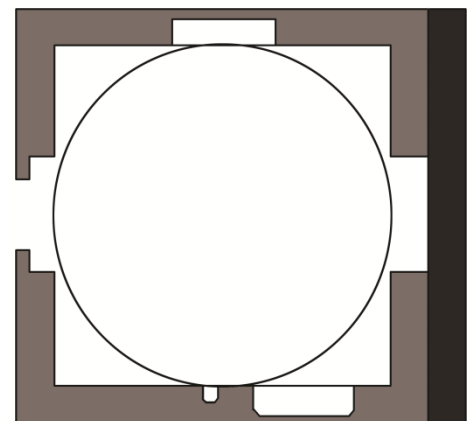
Of blessed memory apa Peqosh ([πμα]καρ[ι]ος απα Πεσοω

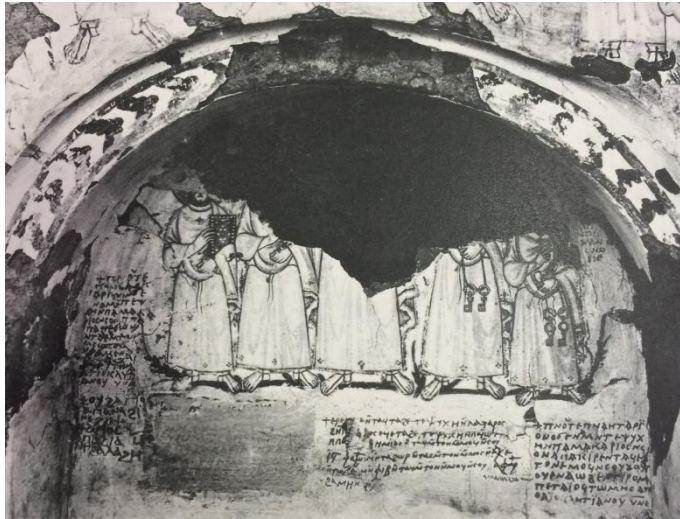
Of blessed memory apa Zakharias, archimandrite (πμακαριος απα
Ζαχαρια[ς] πεινωτ)

Archimandrite (“our father”) apa Iakōn, door-keeper (πεινωτ απα
ιακωβ πσεωωτ)

Master Papa, singer (ψαζ Παπα πεψαλ)

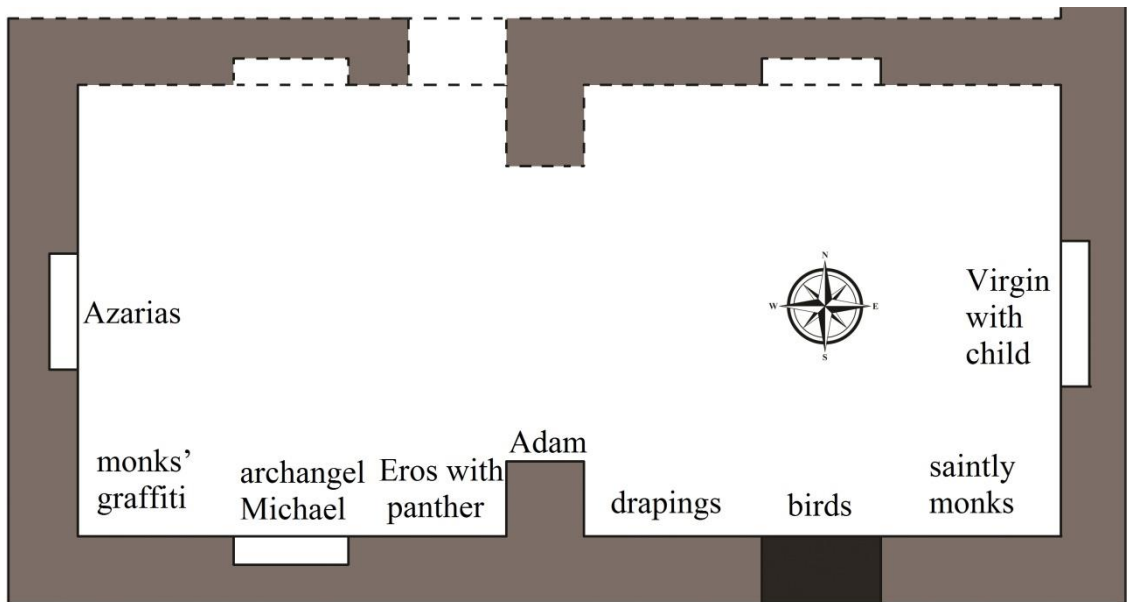
Monk (“my brother”) apa Kire (πασον απα Κιρε)



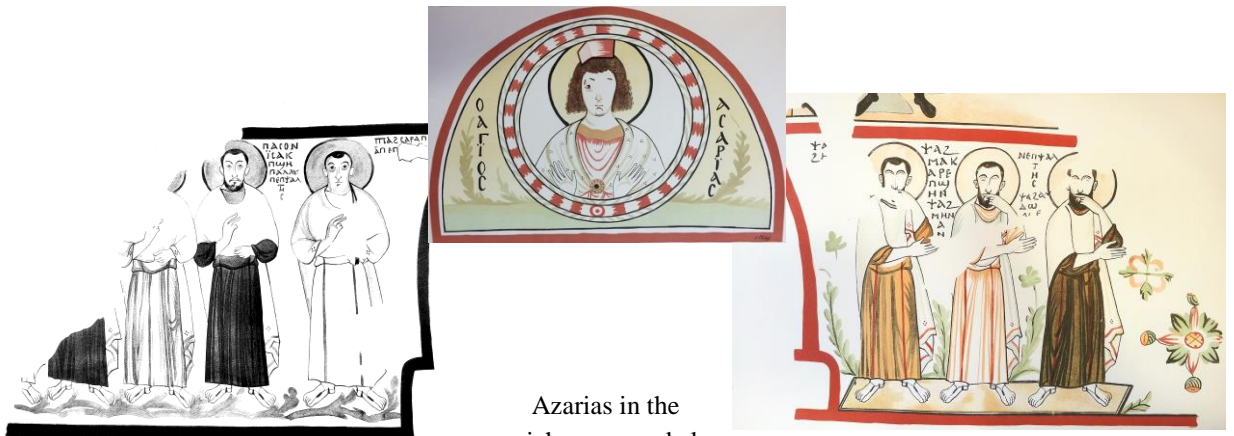


Monastic figures in a niche apse, Chapel 17 (“master Papa the singer” on the right) (reproduced from MIFAO 12, plates L and LI).

2. Chapel 28 (10.7 × 4.6 m) & Chapel 19 (23 × 5 m)



Plan adapted from MIFAO 12:155, fig. 64



Azarias in the niche surrounded by images of saintly figures on both sides (Chapel 28, west wall). Compiled from MIFAO 12, plates CI–CIII

<p>brother Isak, son of Palau, singer (ΠΑCΩΝ ἸCΑΚ ΠΩΗ Παλαυ πεπψαλτης) master (“scribe”) Sararamō (ΠCΑΖ CΑΡΑΡΑΜΩ)</p>	<p>Hēlias (ΨΑΖ ΘΗΛΙΑC) master Makare, son of master Mēna, head of the singers (ΨΑΖ ΜΑΚΑΡΕ [Π]ΩΗ ΝΨΑΖ ΜΗΝΑ ΠΙΝΟC ΝΝΕΠΨΑΛΤΗC) master Andōne (ΨΑΖ ΔΝΔΩΝΕ)</p>
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3. Room 1



Apse niche in Room 1 (from MIFAO 59:2, Plate VI)

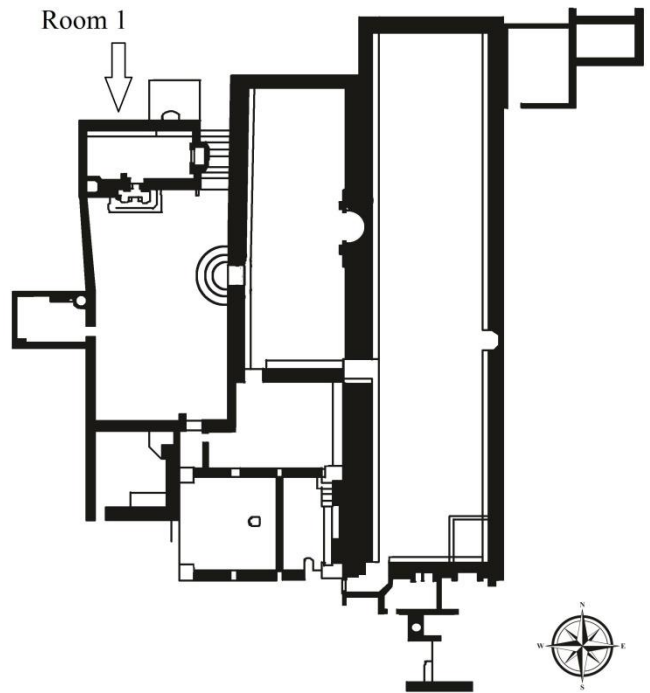


Fig. 5 Plan of “Rooms” (Room 1 in top left corner) (adapted from MIFAO 59:1, Plate I)

Geōrge the psalm-singer (Γεωργε πεψ[αλμωτος/ψαλτης) (charcoal, left below the niche)

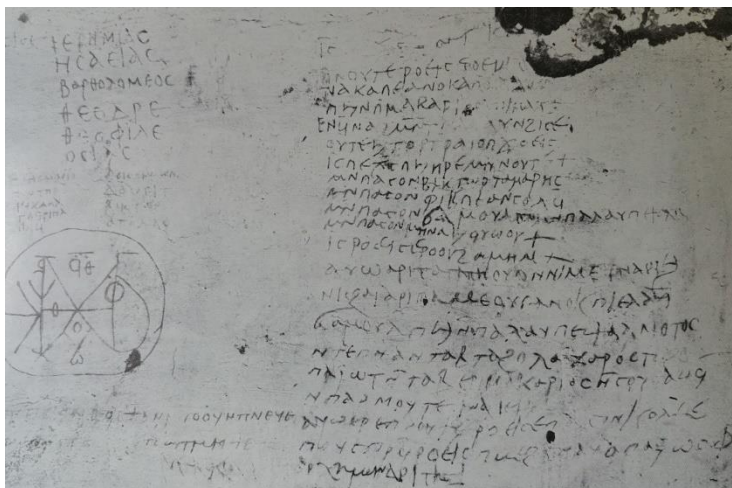


Fig. 7. The double inscription by Apollo and Qamoul. Reproduced

North wall of Room 1, extensive black ink graffiti of lengthy prayers offered on behalf of a number of monks simultaneously. The upper graffiti is a petition for prayerful remembrance by Apollo, apparently a monk at Bawit. Alongside himself, he also asks for prayers for his fellow-monks—brother (ΠΑCΩΝ) Victor “man of Said,” Qamoul the

psalm-singer (πεψαλτμοτος), and brother (πασον) Mena Shnuou.

Continued by an inscribed prayer by Qamoul the psalm-singer (πεψαλτμοτος) who extends the petition to cover his late father Palau, a fellow-monk (πασον) Kollouthos, Pous “the second guardian” (πῆροεις), and apa archimandrite Joseph.

4. Chapel 18

A band of tondo portraits of such virtues ran along the north wall of Chapel 18 set in a broader band of elaborate geometric design and coupled by depictions of other figures that are more difficult to interpret, particularly as their inscribed labels perished.

A petition on behalf of at least six individuals (as the preservation of the inscription seems incomplete, they could be more numerous) is inscribed prayer above one such personification: Amon, Viktōr, Shinoute, Samouēl, Kōstantine, and another Shinoute the singer (ΩΙΝΟΥΤΕ ΨΑΛ[Τ]ΗΣ).