

Athanasius of Alexandria in Flight

The desert has no doors, and all who wish pass through, but the Lord's house is enclosed with walls and doors, and brings to light the differences between the pious and the profane.

—ATHANASIUS, *DEFENSE BEFORE CONSTANTIUS*¹

Then do walls make Christians?

—AUGUSTINE, *CONFESSIONS*²

In book 8 of his *Confessions*, Augustine of Hippo (354–430) describes in great detail a series of conversion narratives that lead to his own famous scene in the garden. Wandering men turn to the Christian faith as they mine the scriptures for Platonic truths or encounter fanciful stories of monks in the desert. Augustine decides to initiate his stories of conversions with the tale of Marius Victorinus. A famous fourth-century orator and fierce defender of the Roman imperial cults for the majority of his long life, Victorinus eventually devotes himself to the careful study of the scriptures. As we might expect, his study results in his conversion. After Victorinus discloses this miraculous change of heart to a friend, he is immediately chided: “I shall not believe that or count you among the Christians unless I see you *in* the church of Christ.” Victorinus, puzzled by such a statement, quickly retorts with a question that will occupy us in this chapter: “Then do walls make Christians?”

For Augustine and his friends, it would seem that walls do, in fact, make Christians. Holy spaces safely mark out those who are in and those who are not. This question was by no means a new one by the time Augustine wrote his *Confessions*: Athanasius of Alexandria made a similar argument nearly half a century earlier, although, for him, at least at an early moment in his career as the reigning bishop of Alexandria, the overarching issue was not the declaration of one's faith within

1. Athanasius, *Apol. Const.* 17. Edition: PG 25. Translation of this text is in consultation with Hanns Christof Brennecke, Uta Heilsand, and Annette Stockhausen, eds., *Apologia ad Constantium*, Lieferung 8 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2006), with a few alterations or otherwise noted.

2. Augustine, *Conf.* 8.2(4). Edition: PL 32, CSEL 33, CCSL 27. Translation mine.

the walls of the church but who owned the walls of the church. Those walls, he stressed, belonged to the Roman emperor. Athanasius was a fierce defender of those Roman imperial walls until, forced to flee from them, he was also forced to change his thinking. This miraculous transformation came about in the most unlikely of places: the Nitrian desert.

In this chapter, I focus on how the displaced bishop of Alexandria represented his own exile in two key polemical texts: *Defense before Constantius* and *Defense of His Flight*. In the first text, Athanasius began to think through the role particular spaces play in the identification and preservation of the Christian faith. As his position as an exile came into sharper focus, he shifted his argument away from the protection of imperial walls and toward the desert. By the end of his *Defense before Constantius*, Athanasius concluded that the desert, although a fearful place, is much safer than the walls of a church corrupted by a misguided emperor and, worse, heretical foes.

The desert, the space into which he fled, was then carefully constructed as a heterotopic *politeia*, which he defended in *Defense of His Flight*.³ In this second text, Athanasius elaborated on his theory of the desert to redefine and further defend his continued absence from Alexandria as accusations of cowardice and abandonment began to mount against him. The desert is an ascetic retreat rendered holy by other fleeing saints, who also find refuge there. It is not cowardly to flee, he argued, but this flight—his flight—is paramount to the survival of the Christian faith.

His description of this transformation finally solidified in his most famous work, the *Life of Antony*.⁴ The desert is no longer a temporary haven but a mirrored image of Alexandria made new and devoid of all the corrupting powers of heresy. As we will come to see, the walls of the Alexandrian churches quickly become too dangerous in the hands of Athanasius's enemies. The walls and doors then give way to the safety and, most importantly, the orthodox space of the desert, transformed into a holy city.

HOW TO CONSTRUCT A MODEL CITY: ALEXANDRIA

The actual space from which a bishop is exiled plays a significant role in how Athanasius and other fleeing men imagine themselves and how they will later be remembered. While Athanasius's first two trips into exile took him beyond the Alexandrian city limits, his literary prowess and identity as an exile began to flourish as he moved between Alexandria and the neighboring Nitrian desert.⁵ By the fourth century, Alexandria had already developed a long history in the politics

3. For a discussion of the meaning of the term *politeia*, see n. 40 below.

4. Athanasius, *Vit. Ant.* Edition: PG 26, col. 835–976. Translation: John C. Gregg, *The Life of Antony and the Letter to Marcellinus* (New York: Paulist, 1980) in consultation with Tim Vivian and Apostolos N. Athanassakis, trans., *Athanasius of Alexandria: The Life of Antony. The Coptic Life, and the Greek Life*, with Rowan A. Greer, Cistercian Studies Series 202 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian, 2003).

5. The Nitrian desert is also known as Scetis (an archaic reference) and Wadi el-Natrun (its contemporary name). Coptic monastic communities are still active there today.

of an expansive Roman Empire and an eroding Greek past. Founded by Alexander the Great in 331 BCE, it later became the capital of the Hellenistic world and exemplified the height of civilization, despite being invaded frequently and experiencing significant internal unrest. Between the restoration efforts made by Diocletian (284–305 CE) and the conquest of the Arab armies in the seventh century, Alexandria became a powerful and influential megalopolis within the Roman Empire. As a strategic stronghold, it boasted of its access to both a Mediterranean port and the Nile. That it was surrounded by two immense bodies of water that partitioned it from mainland Egypt no doubt led to its being referred to as “Alexandria ad Aegyptum” (Alexandria next to Egypt).⁶ Alexandria thus sat at the political center of the Graeco-Roman world. The colonnades and statues in the central streets, Canopica Way and the Soma, continued to remind visitors of its rich history.⁷ The city was also an amalgam of intellectual, religious, and economic wealth that captured the literary imaginations of many ancient authors and further bolstered its reputation as a vibrant civic epicenter.⁸

The unified imperial presence in Egypt was also instrumental in promoting its affluence. Egypt’s political structure was systematized due in large part to the reform efforts of Septimius Severus (193–211) and Diocletian (284–305) after him. As Philip Rousseau surmises,

In 199 or 200, Severus decided to allow Alexandria and to each *metropolis* (the urban center of a *nome*, or administrative district) a [*boulē*], or council, of its own. His purpose was undoubtedly to render more efficient the collection of taxes. . . . The districts around the towns were retained under the central control of the provincial government. But members of the new [*boulai*] quickly acquired responsibilities within the *territoria*, at least as agents of that government if not in their own right. The increased status of the towns encouraged in its turn the establishment in them of bishoprics. That ecclesiastical network and the new rapport between town and country paved the way for developments after Diocletian, when the *metropoleis* gained the added responsibility of administering the *territoria* themselves.⁹

6. This epithet is found in numerous ancient sources, including Ptolemy, *Geog.* 4.5.46; Strabo, *Geog.* 5.1.7; Philo, *Prob.* 125; and Athanasius, *H. Ar.* 17.712D.

7. The Canopica Way, a central avenue, cut through the city from the Moon Gate to the Sun Gate (east to west). The Soma was a central street that spanned from the harbor to Lake Mareotis (north to south). For the archeological evidence and excavation efforts, as well as a detailed description of the ancient layout of the urban setting, see Christopher Haas, *Alexandria in Late Antiquity: Topography and Social Conflict* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1997), esp. 18–44.

8. Walter Schneider cites the difficulties posed to reconstructions of the growth process of such a large-scale metropolis in antiquity. He provides a careful study of both the limitations and what sources are available. See Schneider, “Creating a Metropolis: A Comparative Demographic Perspective,” in *Ancient Alexandria between Egypt and Greece*, ed. William V. Harris and Giovanni Ruffini (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 1–31.

9. Philip Rousseau, *Pachomius: The Making of a Community in Fourth-Century Egypt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 3–4. For a thorough assessment of this transference, see Jacqueline Lallemand, *L’administration civile de l’Égypte de l’avènement de Dioclétien à la création du diocèse*

The hierarchical structures set in place by these imperial reforms helped to centralize the Egyptian episcopal authority in Alexandria, although it was not until the fifth and sixth centuries that large-scale construction of churches and monasteries began there.¹⁰

The Alexandrian diocese was coveted and was the site of inter-ecclesial conflict from an early stage in Christian history.¹¹ Control over this valuable city had its advantages as well as its risks. Because Alexandria was known as the breadbasket of the Roman Empire,¹² misuse of the ports and the export of goods to the surrounding regions such as Constantinople and Rome were considered a treasonable act. The bishop of this city was, politically, a broker of stomachs as much as souls within the empire. Indeed, one of the first reasons cited for Athanasius's exile was his rumored meddling in the grain trade.¹³

The civic center was not the only space that captured the heart (or stomachs) of the empire. The Nitrian desert, roughly thirty to fifty miles south of Alexandria, also held its own acclaim. Archeological digs have produced evidence that a vibrant monastic community began to develop during the fourth and fifth centuries.¹⁴ The majority of these early monastic communities developed along the desert

(284–382): *Contribution à l'étude des rapports entre l'Égypte et l'Empire à la fin du III^e siècle et au IV^e siècle* (Brussels: Palais des Academies, 1964).

10. On the evidence available for the material growth and ecclesiastical ownership of land and church property of these sites, see Roger S. Bagnall, *Egypt in Late Antiquity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 289–303. The massive change that takes place during this period is often marked by the infamous destruction of the Serapeum in 392 CE. For a description of this event, see Johannes Hahn, “The Conversion of the Cult Statues: The Destruction of the Serapeum 392 A.D. and the Transformation of Alexandria into the ‘Christian Loving’ City,” in *From Temple to Church: Destruction and Renewal of Local Cultic Topography in Late Antiquity*, ed. Johannes Hahn, Stephen Emmel, and Ulrich Gotter (Leiden: Brill, 2008): 335–63.

11. Athanasius's rise to the patriarchate is intensely debated.

12. Haas, *Alexandria*, 42, estimates, “under the late empire, when Egypt bore the responsibility for provisioning the rapidly growing population of Constantinople, 36 million modii or approximately 220,000 tons of grain were sent annually to the new capital. This comes to roughly 5.5 million sackfuls, which would require 647 average-sized grain ships to sail annually from Alexandria's harbors.”

13. See the interpretation of the charge in Athanasius, *Apol. sec.* 1:5; 9:3–4. For a relatively recent study on the grain trade in antiquity, including an assessment of grain-trade market intervention, see Paul Erdkamp, *The Grain Market in the Roman Empire: A Social, Political, and Economic Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), esp. 258–316.

14. For a review on the growth of Egyptian desert monasticism and its relationship to Athanasius, see David Brakke, *Athanasius and Asceticism* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1998), 80–141; and E. A. Judge, *The Earliest Use of Monachos for “Monk” and the Origins of Monasticism* (Münster: Aschendorffsche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1977). On the complexity of literary evidence concerning Egyptian monasticism, see James Goehring, “The Origins of Monasticism,” in *Eusebius, Christianity, and Judaism*, ed. H. W. Attridge and G. Hata (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1992), 235–55. Desert monasticism, simplistically put, had three types: the eremitical (reclusive), the semieremitical (reclusive and communal), and the cenobitic (communal) life. These three ways of life are traditionally associated with the foundational leaders Antony, Ammoun and Marius, and Pachomius, respectively.

strip adjacent to cultivated land and known as the “outer desert.”¹⁵ Extending even further south is what was known as the “inner desert,” an expanse of land beyond the valley that still contains remnants of ancient mines and quarries.¹⁶ For the most part, those who inhabited this region were criminals or slaves who worked in the mines and quarries; only a few zealous ascetics were said to have dared traverse this difficult landscape.

The harsh conditions of the Nitrian desert were not lost on early Christian authors, including Athanasius, for whose ascetic imaginations the outer and inner deserts became a literary backdrop.¹⁷ By the fourth century, these two significant spaces, the city and the desert, experienced both institutional transition and ongoing ecclesiastical conflict. The memory of imperial persecution haunted the avenues of the city and bled out into the surrounding desert sands. The battle over the Christian memory of Diocletian’s persecution in North Africa (302–303), for example, resulted in the creation of two Christian factions based in Alexandria. Meletius, an elected bishop of Lycopolis, became bishop of Alexandria after the patriarch Peter fled into hiding sometime during the Diocletian persecution.¹⁸ In a controversial move,

Antony, as we will soon come to see, crosses these types. Each of the founders is linked to material remains that are still being excavated today.

15. Recent work by the Yale Egyptological Institute continues to uncover the archeological remains of Kellia and Pherme, later (fifth- and sixth-century) ascetic communities that developed further southwest of the Nitrian desert communities. For a working bibliography on these sites, see <https://egyptology.yale.edu/expeditions/current-expeditions/yale-monastic-archaeology-project-north-wadi-al-natron/kellia-and-perhme>. For the results of a survey of the land, see Tomasz Herbach, Darlene Brooks Hedstrom, and Stephen J. Davis, “A Geophysical Survey of Ancient Pherme: Magnetic Prospection at an Early Christian Monastic Site in the Egyptian Delta,” *Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt* 44 (2007): 129–37.

16. Bagnall provides a thorough assessment of papyrological evidence to reconstruct the late antique desert environment. In the chapter where he explores the margins of Egyptian life, he notes the monastic preoccupation with the surrounding deserts and actual use of the desert by Roman officials: “The further reaches of the deserts had uses more commercial than the isolation demanded by the most ascetic monks. For one thing, they contained mines and quarries, sources of gold and of luxury building stone, like the brilliant porphyry beloved of Roman imperial architects” Bagnall, *Egypt in Late Antiquity*, 143–44.

17. Historical memories of the church in Alexandria are prevalent in later texts as well as in those explored in this chapter. In his chapter on the historical memories of the Coptic church, Tito Orlandi, cites the various ancient materials preserved by those in charge of collecting official documents and producing city chronicles: “Eusebius of Caesarea used such materials in his *Ecclesiastical History*, as did other later authors who dealt with the history of the Alexandrian patriarchate. While Sozomen is perhaps the best known and most important of these, other anonymous figures making use of the archive include the authors of the *Historia acephala*, the *Index* to the festal letters of Athanasius, the *Passio Petri Alexandrini*, the *Passio Metrophanis et Alexandri*.” Orlandi, “The Coptic Ecclesiastical History,” in *The World of Early Egyptian Christianity: Language, Literature, and Social Context*, ed. James E. Goehring and Janet Timbie (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2007), 4.

18. Also known as the “Great Persecution” in 303. It is common knowledge that Christians were persecuted in the period, prior to the Edict of Milan established under Constantine in 313. Various

Meletius of Alexandria continued to act as a rival bishop even after Peter returned.¹⁹ As a response to his breach of conduct, a synod was convened, and Meletius was formally deposed by the council in 306. Persecutions soon resumed under Maximinus in 308, and Meletius was condemned to the mines in Palestine. He returned to Alexandria in 311 and started what is frequently referred to as the “Church of the Martyrs.” After persecutions ceased, two competing Christian factions remained and continued to vie for control over the Alexandrian patriarchate. As many scholars have noted, this battle over the blood of the martyrs and the cultural authority of their memory shaped much of Athanasius’s literary output and episcopal career. His story of a localized persecution will work to his advantage as he reads his own story into spaces long troubled by violence, even as he flees from them.

The birth of the Arian controversy in Alexandria also transformed how Athanasius would view the function of the desert over against the city.²⁰ For it is in the desert that Nicaea’s textual legacy was supplanted and received a new literary life. As Virginia Burrus has noted, Athanasius took great pains to condemn Arius’s teaching well after his death and, at the same time, to create the legacy of the famed council of Nicaea in a new (literary) landscape. Burrus remarks: “Only after the crisis of Gregory’s entry into Alexandria in late 338 did Athanasius rediscover ‘Arius’ (who had been dead since 335 or 336) and the usefulness of the label ‘Arianism.’”²¹ Athanasius maligned Arius’s memory and the memories of his supporters and sympathizers in order to construct his orthodox project in and around Alexandria. His subsequent polemical works capitalized on a genealogical rhetoric that pit the “Arian madmen” against the true inheritors of Nicene Christianity.²² This move then amplified the legacy of Nicaea and the fathers of the orthodox faith, a move we will continue to encounter in later chapters. The city of Alexandria and its neighboring desert changed the way later Christians would remember their theological heritage.

sources, both Roman and Christian, depict persecutions as sporadic and localized up until the middle of the third century. Our earliest Roman reference that associates the name “Christian” with persecution is found in a collection of Pliny’s letters to and from the emperor Trajan in the early second century.

19. For Athanasius’s perspective on the ongoing meddling in Alexandrian affairs (that they caused him trouble), see Athanasius, *H. Ar.* 3:78–81. Meletius of Alexandria is not to be confused with Meletius of Antioch, who is discussed in chapter 6.

20. The infamous priest Arius (ca. 256–336), whose controversial teaching regarding the relationship between the Father and Son sparked an intense theological debate on the topic. Arius and his theological ideas were addressed at the ecumenical council at Nicaea in 325. For a detailed review of the development and legacy of Nicaea, see Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

21. Virginia Burrus, *Begotten, Not Made: Conceiving Manhood in Late Antiquity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 60.

22. Athanasius, in *De Synod.* 13 and *Orat. C. Arian* 4, cleverly coins the phrase “Arian madmen” or *Ariomaniacs*, as an effective way to dismiss his enemies.

Much like the Alexandrian city, the famous bishop of Alexandria has his own mythical beginnings.²³ Born into a humble family, Athanasius showed promise from an early age and quickly rose through the ranks of ecclesial office. He became a deacon as soon as his age would permit, and Alexander, bishop of Alexandria from 313 to 328, took him on as a trusted assistant and protégé. He is said to have been present at the Council of Nicaea in 325 and was almost immediately an ardent defender of its decrees. Upon the death of his mentor, Athanasius was named Alexander's heir despite the fact that, according to the *Festal Index*, he had not reached the canonical age for the episcopacy.²⁴ From its very inception, Athanasius's career as the bishop of Alexandria was contested.

Fairly early on, then, Athanasius's enemies sought to oust the young bishop from his position of power. As discussed in the previous chapter, their efforts appeared to have been successful: between the end of Constantine's reign and the early years of Constantius's sole rule, Athanasius found himself in the western part of the empire, first in the city of Trier and then in Rome. Athanasius's first two periods in exile were spent outside of Egypt. Given the contradictory reports found in the primary sources, the precise reasons for these flights are difficult to pin down. What is clear is that Athanasius took advantage of his displacement and its literary possibilities to construct a sympathetic and powerful identity. Exile, Athanasius argued, is synonymous with persecution. He construed himself as a victim, though in reality he was hardly a passive one. It is clear that by adopting the identity of an exile, Athanasius ensured his legacy as an orthodox bishop whose circumstances behind closed walls eventually drove him to the desert.

IF THESE WALLS COULD TALK: *DEFENSE* *BEFORE CONSTANTIUS*

Athanasius's discourse on his exile and the desert begins in his *Defense before Constantius*. The defense is particularly difficult to date, but T. D. Barnes, building on the work of Archibald Robertson (1892) and J.-M. Szymusiak (1958), suggests that the defense was written in two stages: chapters 1–26 between 353 and 355, and chapters 27–35 in 357.²⁵ In the decade prior to his third exile (346–356), Athanasius composed the first stage in order to defend himself against a series of charges, both long-standing and new. The second stage signaled a change in both his dealings with the emperor and his view of the desert.

23. Gregory, *Orat.* 21. Edition: SC 247. Translation: *NPNF2* 7. I will discuss this source later in this chapter. See also Rufinus, *Eccl. Hist.* 10.15; Socrates, *Eccl. Hist.* 1.15; and Sozomen, *Eccl. Hist.* 2.17.5–13.

24. For a thorough and recent discussion on the history and difficulty in assessing the *Index* and the assembly of the surviving *Festal Letters*, see David M. Gwynn, *Athanasius of Alexandria: Bishop, Theologian, Ascetic, Father* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 7–8.

25. Barnes, *Athanasius and Constantius*, 196–97. For full biographic reference for Robertson and Szymusiak, and a description of the argument, see Barnes, *Athanasius and Constantius*, 302nn3–4.

By the time Athanasius completed the text, presumably during his third exile into the desert, it became evident that his hopes of securing imperial sympathy would go unfulfilled. The beginning of the text strikes a conciliatory note and is sympathetic to the emperor's position as a misinformed mediator and defender of sacred space. By its end, it is clear that Athanasius's opinion of the emperor has shifted significantly, as have his opinions of where orthodox space might be found.

Written in the form of a letter, the text begins with a detailed response to four charges the so-called Arians laid against Athanasius. First, he is accused of conspiring with the youngest son of Constantine, Constans (chaps. 2–5), and then of seeking an alliance with Magnetius after the conspiratorial death of Constans (chaps. 6–13).²⁶ If these treasonous activities were not worrisome enough, Athanasius's enemies also accuse him of making use of a church in Alexandria that had not yet been sanctioned by Constantius (chaps. 14–18). Finally, Athanasius must answer to the charge that he failed to adhere to a summons to appear before Constantius to answer to these charges and more (chaps. 19–27). It is in response to the latter two charges that Athanasius begins his discussion on the desert. As we will soon see, the further he ventures away from city and moves into the desert, the more his relationship with Constantius deteriorates. The desert is infused with different meanings, as Athanasius lays out his defense. And it is in the desert that Athanasius begins to articulate why the Alexandrian churches are no longer safe for Christian worship and the proof of Christian authenticity.

Athanasius first mentions the desert in chapter 14, where he defends his decision to use the unsanctioned Alexandrian church in the first place. The week prior to the Easter celebration, the crowds had grown too large for the approved spaces of worship. In a moment of desperation, Athanasius decides to turn to the larger space, but only after the worshippers had threatened to go into the desert:

When the churches were too small, and the people so numerous as they were, and desirous to go forth into the deserts, what should I have done? *The desert has no doors, and all who wish pass through, but the Lord's house is enclosed with walls and doors, and brings to light the differences between the pious and the profane.* . . . The charge would have been much greater if we had passed by the place which the emperor was building and went into the desert to pray. (Athanasius, *Apol. Const.* 17, emphasis mine)

As we see here, Athanasius states that the desert is hardly an appropriate place for worship and prayer. It has no doors—anyone might pass through. It does not even have any walls. And we hear the familiar refrain: Athanasius insists that walls do, in fact, make Christians. They are all that separate the pious from the profane.

26. Magnetius was an ambitious general whose rebellion cost him his life. For a description of his role in Athanasius's third exile, see Barnes, *Athanasius and Constantius*, 101–8.

Athanasius goes on to make clear that a church belongs to the emperor whether it is dedicated or not. In a deferential moment, he insists that it is not the faithful who build a church, but the emperor. In fact, the people prove their allegiance to the emperor by worshiping in the church rather than in the desert. He goes on to assure the emperor that it is, of course, also in the emperor's church that the faithful dedicate their prayers to his safety and health. The walls and doors of the church within the city are therefore conducive to (imperial) allegiance and piety. The desert, by contrast, promotes chaos, not least because it lies beyond the view of the imperial authorities.

For they know that here [in the church], prayer is lawfully offered, while a suspicion of irregularity attaches to it there [in the desert]. Unless, indeed, no place proper for it existed, and the worshippers dwelt only in the desert, as was the case with Israel; although after the tabernacle was built, they also had a place set apart for prayer. . . . I am blamed . . . for the keeping of your laws. Heavier had been the blame, and more true had been the charge, had we passed by the place that the emperor was building, and gone forth into the desert to pray. (Athanasius, *Apol. Const.* 17)

This characterization of the desert as a fearful place not controlled by the emperor is particularly striking: in the second half of the defense, written during his exile, Athanasius argues that it is not the desert that is dangerous, but the very same walls he defends here. Those who now control the walls of the Alexandrian church have forced the faithful out, and all that remains is the desert.

Prior to this conclusion, however, Athanasius explains how he has now found himself in that very space he so feared before. He begins by countering the fourth charge: that he refused to adhere to a summons to appear before the emperor. He contests that he never received a formal letter to appear. Still more, it seems that no physical letter was ever delivered. Instead, a simple verbal summons was all that was relayed to him. The absence of something tangible made him highly suspicious: "Seeing they produced no letters from you, [I] considered it improbable that a mere verbal communication should be made to them" (Athanasius, *Apol. Const.* 24). This method of delivery alone caused him to hesitate, but his suspicions were exacerbated because the messengers themselves were questionable: "I confess—I say it boldly—I was suspicious of them. For there were many Arians about them, who were their companions at table and their counselors" (Athanasius, *Apol. Const.* 25). Athanasius concludes that he should not be held responsible for his initial hesitancy. If these messengers had simply produced a written document, he would have happily complied.

In addition to citing the dubiousness of the request, Athanasius declares that he dared not abandon his flock: "You know, for you have read the scriptures, how great an offense it is for a bishop to desert [*katalimpanein*] his church, and to neglect [*amelein*] the flocks of God" (Athanasius, *Apol. Const.* 26). Tertullian's warning and Cyprian's initial concerns regarding flight and cowardice both linger

in the background. Both authors criticize Christian leaders who willingly abandon their charges during times of persecution,²⁷ which would be by far the most heinous of crimes: “For the absence [*apousia*] of the shepherd gives the wolves an opportunity to attack the sheep. And this was what the Arians and all the other heretics desired, that during my absence [*apousia*], they might find an opportunity to entrap the people into impiety” (Athanasius, *Apol. Const.* 26).

In order to stress the perils of leaving his flock, Athanasius invokes the language of flight, a theme he will continue to build on throughout his exilic discourse: “If then I had fled [*phygōn*], what defense could I have made before the true bishops? Or rather before Him Who has committed to me His flock? He it is Who judges the whole earth, the true King of all, our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Would not everyone have rightly charged me with neglect of the people [*amelein tōn laōn*]?” (Athanasius, *Apol. Const.* 26). Here Athanasius lays the groundwork for his ultimate defense. He insists he was reluctant to leave but ultimately could not ignore the summons. Thus, it was only against his better judgment that he decided to depart from Alexandria. Although he knew leaving would result in chaos, he trusted Constantius’s ability to hear him out. His initial intuitions proved to be right. We soon learn that Athanasius never made it to court. En route, he traveled through the desert (*tēn erēmōn exelthontos*), where he heard new rumors that his enemies had begun to persecute his flock, and this led him to abandon his journey altogether.

What remains a mystery is why Athanasius chose to travel through the desert on his way to Constantius. This was hardly a direct route, given that the Nitrian desert was south, not north of Alexandria. Nevertheless, to convey the gravity of the situation, Athanasius once again turns to the desert for inspiration. He recounts for Constantius a particularly gruesome event. In his absence, the people do not pray in a church but once again decide to worship in the desert: “While the brethren were praying during Easter and on the Lord’s day in a desert place outside a cemetery [*en erēmō topō pleion trischiliōn*], the general came upon them with a force of soldiery, more than three thousand in number, with arms, drawn swords, and spears” (Athanasius, *Apol. Const.* 27). The desert quickly dissolves into chaos, as we might expect. The army violently mistreats the women and children of his flock. Furthermore, they violate dedicated virgins and banish many aged bishops. Athanasius emphasizes that these travesties would never have been allowed to happen if he had remained in Alexandria and his charges were permitted to worship behind the safety of the walls of a church. Yet he now finds himself helpless to remedy the situation.

In the second half of the defense, the desert slowly comes into sharper focus, for it is in this space that Athanasius finds himself sequestered when he learns that Constantius has sent out an order for his arrest. He includes two letters as proof.

27. See the prologue for a more developed discussion on the views of both Tertullian and Cyprian on flight during times of persecution.

The first letter from Constantius is addressed to the citizens of Alexandria, and in it, the emperor encourages the Alexandrians to abandon their alliance with “that pestilent fellow Athanasius” (Athanasius, *Apol. Const.* 30) and pledge to follow Athanasius’s rival, the venerable George—namely, George of Cappadocia, a rival (and an Arian bishop at that) who has taken control of the Alexandrian see.²⁸ Athanasius finds himself trapped between a hostile emperor and his Arian enemies.

In the second letter, composed to the princes of Auxumis (in the northeastern territory Africa), Constantius depicts Athanasius as a deplorable character who corrupts the lowly and whose loyal followers have been consistently condemned by the emperor. Constantius then calls for Fermentius, the bishop of Auxum, to appear before the venerable George in Alexandria to defend his right to the appointment given to him by Athanasius. It is a wonder that Athanasius includes the letter at all. The emperor again impugns Athanasius and states he is nothing short of a pestilent criminal. He describes Athanasius as “a man who is guilty of ten thousand crimes; for he has not been able fairly to clear himself of any of the charges brought against him, but was at once deprived of his see, *wanders about destitute of any fixed abode, and passes from one country to another, as if by this means he could escape his own wickedness*” (Athanasius, *Apol. Const.* 31, emphasis mine).²⁹ Curiously, it is Athanasius’s wanderings, or flights into exile, that serve as evidence for his unstable character.

Prior to this point, Athanasius has described his flight into the desert as an obedient act: he was simply obeying orders. He will consistently make the argument for his earlier flights into exile as well. Constantius, on the other hand, interprets his flight as evidence of his criminal activity and questionable character. Athanasius is a wanderer, a fugitive who is incapable of escaping his crimes. Sylvia Montiglio argues that the wanderer (*planetes* or *aletes*) is an all-encompassing identity that can mean someone who moves about in an unstructured manner, a person who moves away from a path, or one who moves outward or away from a particular center. The latter interpretation, according to Montiglio, describes someone who is expelled from his or her home, community, and belongings; in other words, the wanderer is an exile. This distinction differentiates between those who wander and those who travel in the ancient world.

28. The link to Cappadocia is significant for Athanasius. George is an outsider, as is his replacement, Gregory, who is also from Cappadocia. It appears as if no good can come from this part of Asia Minor. In another discussion, Athanasius also notes that Auxentius of Milan comes from Cappadocia (Athanasius, *H. Ar.* 75.1). In each case, “Cappadocia” is used as a signal for “outsider.” Prior to the Cappadocian fathers, this location appeared to be a seedbed of so-called Arian theology. Later ecclesiastical historians picked up on this language of location when discussing Eusebius of Nicomedia. In the minds of the pro-Nicene writers, one’s homeland makes all the difference in the battle over orthodox landscape. See chapter 5 for fuller discussion of the city of Nicomedia.

29. This description alludes to a number of infamous classical characters, such as Oedipus, Tydeus, Peleus, and Telamon.

Constantius's vilification of Athanasius's flight involves allusion to classical motifs concerning the suspicious nature of such wanderers. The wanderer carries both positive and negative characteristics in classical literature. While Odysseus typically stands as the archetype of praiseworthy wandering, Oedipus is the anti-wanderer.³⁰ Odysseus often tells lies, but he does so for noble purposes, as, for example, when he returns to his homeland and disguises himself as an old man and an exile in order to win back his home from his wife's suitors. He is cunning and careful and gains knowledge through his travels. Oedipus, however, is doubly abhorrent. He not only wanders, but he also wanders without knowledge. He wanders about Thebes and is expelled from his homeland only after he kills his father and mistakenly marries his mother. Like Oedipus, Athanasius's guilt is confirmed by his rootlessness. He too has no fixed abode but wanders (*alatai*) and, like Oedipus, moves from one place to the next as if he could escape his crimes, which, the emperor insists, he is clearly incapable of doing.

In order to counter such a damning conclusion, Athanasius invokes the language of persecution to reinterpret his sinister wandering as a righteous exile. He, like Odysseus, is cunning and carries with him the truth. The heretics are the real criminals. They persecute the faithful and take full advantage of Athanasius's absence. Still worse, these heretics dare to use imperial forces to support their activities. By making this point, Athanasius implies that it is under Constantius's directive that such persecution is necessary.

These men alone not only did not fear to strip and to scourge those undefiled limbs, which the virgins had dedicated solely to our Savior Christ; but, what is worse than all, when they were reproached by everyone for such extreme cruelty, instead of manifesting any shame, they *pretended that it was commanded by your piety*. Such a deed as this was never heard of in past persecutions: or supposing that it ever occurred before, yet surely it was not befitting either that virginity should suffer such outrage and dishonor, in the time of your majesty, a Christian, or that these men should impute to your piety their own cruelty. Such wickedness belongs only to heretics, who blaspheme the Son of God, and who do violence to His holy virgins. (Athanasius, *Apol. Const.* 27, emphasis mine)

While the abuse of virgins is certainly a crime, the misuse of the emperor's words in order to justify the cruel treatment of the faithful is more deplorable. Constantius is far from innocent, however, as the letters above imply. Yet Athanasius reserves any overt criticism. He merely presumes that the emperor is simply ill advised and has been duped.

Athanasius then further mobilizes the chaos of the desert to his advantage in the concluding chapters of the defense. The heretics corrupt the city as they continue to push the faithful into the desert. While the emperor does encourage the

30. Sylvia Montiglio, *Wandering in Ancient Greek Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

expulsion of bishops to the outskirts of the city (in hopes of quelling civic unrest), the Arians and their civil counterparts go a step further and force the bishops into the desert, those “unfrequented and frightful places” (Athanasius, *Apol. Const.* 32). Even if Constantius is not fully aware of the level of abuse the Arians take against the faithful, a full-scale imperial persecution has once again begun.

Finally, Athanasius reinforces his argument by building on the language of persecution. He alludes to Paul’s flight from Damascus (Acts 9:25) and states that he should hide for a time, as the scriptures dictate.

O blessed and pious Augustus, what would you have wanted me to do? Should I have come to you while my enemies were inflamed with rage against me and were seeking to kill me; or, as it is written, to hide [*apokrybēnai*] myself a little, that in the meantime they might be condemned as heretics, and your goodness might be shown to me? . . . It would neither have been becoming in me to surrender and give myself up that my blood might be shed, nor in you, as a *Christian emperor*, to have the murder of Christians, and those bishops, imputed to you. . . . It was therefore better for me to hide [*krybēnai*] myself and to wait for this opportunity. (Athanasius, *Apol. Const.* 34–35, emphasis mine)

Athanasius still appears to give the emperor the benefit of the doubt, stressing that Constantius must be ignorant of the events that are transpiring. For Athanasius’s purposes, Constantius’s misguided actions suggest he is guilty only of attempting to restore order and certainly not of direct persecution. Or is he? Athanasius’s repeated stress upon the epithet “Christian” starts to lose its meaning as the language of persecution recalls an all-too-present past of imperial persecutions.³¹ Whether or not the emperor is one among the many wolves in sheep’s clothing, he has certainly lost control of his Alexandrian representatives.

In Athanasius’s *Defense before Constantius*, then, we see the slow development of his use of the desert to think through his defense of his flight from Alexandria. The text begins with a hard line: the desert is a dangerous place and certainly no place for Christian worship. By the end of the text, the chaos of the desert serves as proof of the unruly state of the Alexandrian city and the churches found within its care. The faithful are forced out and flee to the desert under threat of persecution. Although a dangerous place, the desert begins to take on new meaning, and flight becomes the only means of survival.

As the meaning of the desert evolves, so does Athanasius’s interpretation of his exile. At first, he abhors the idea of leaving his beloved city and flock. He

31. Athanasius, *H. Ar.* 68–71, would later develop a more damning picture in which his characterizations of Constantius are very similar to those made by Hilary of Poitiers, namely, that Constantius is a villain akin to biblical villains, such as Pilate. Exile is again cited as a particularly horrible act. Richard Flower also makes this connection in his “The Emperor’s New Past: Re-Enactment and Inversion in Christian Invectives against Constantius II,” in *Unclassical Traditions*, volume 1, *Alternatives to the Classical Past in Late Antiquity*, ed. Christopher Kelly, Richard Flower, and Michael Stuart Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 34–35.

protests that his departure would be akin to abandonment. Yet his deference to the emperor compels him to leave his post. His flight is an obedient act. But obedience quickly turns into defiance as he slips beyond the reach of his enemies. In the end, he decides, walls and doors will do him no good, but the desert will provide him all the safety he needs.

A WALL-LESS DESERT: *DEFENSE OF HIS FLIGHT*

Constantius is rarely mentioned in Athanasius's *Defense of His Flight* (c. 357). Athanasius is now beyond the emperor's line of sight, and this second polemical text responds directly to all those who might feel abandoned by the fleeing bishop by invoking a long-standing biblical tradition of men who flee into the desert during times of persecution. Athanasius is focused on rebutting the charge of cowardice and placing blame upon his persecutors, whom he claims are false Christians. As before, heresy is intertwined with imperial politics: Athanasius appeals to the empire to identify his enemies. Those who abuse imperial power, he concludes, do not have the right to the title "Christian."

Athanasius counters the charge of cowardice by accusing his Arian enemies of filial impiety (*asebeia*), framing the accusation with the commandment "Honor your father and your mother" (Athanasius, *Fug.* 2.9). Burrus has previously pointed out that pious obedience to the tradition of the fathers serves as a litmus test for Athanasian orthodoxy, which reveals one's true identity as either a Christian or a heretic.³² According to Athanasius, those who reveal themselves as disloyal sons risk incurring divine judgment: "He that curses his father or his mother—let him die the death" (Athanasius, *Fug.* 2.9).

He then begins this defense by arguing that the so-called Arians dishonor (*atimian*) the memory of the martyrs by mimicking the violence of imperial persecution. George of Cappadocia, Athanasius's chief rival to the Alexandrian patriarchate, for example, uses imperial troops as well as heretics to enforce religious obedience: "George, that abandoned person . . . stirred up against them the commander Sebastian, a Manichee; who straightaway with a multitude of soldiers with arms, drawn swords, bows, and spears, proceeded to attack the people, though it was the Lord's day" (Athanasius, *Fug.* 6.21). Here we see multiple causes for alarm. Not only do the Arians collude with imperial officials and attack the defenseless, but they do so with the aid of a Manichean and on the Lord's day. To further stress this heinous behavior, Athanasius briefly recounts his competitor's atrocious treatment of a group of virgins, saying, "Having lighted a pile, he placed certain virgins near the fire and endeavored to force them to say that they were of the Arian faith; and when he saw that they were getting the mastery and cared not for the fire, he immediately stripped them naked and

32. Burrus, *Begotten, Not Made*, 63.

beat them in the face in such a manner that for some time they could hardly be recognized" (Athanasius, *Fug.* 6.24). Just as in the previous letter, imperial thugs conspire with heretics.

This conspiratorial relationship and continued excessive violence against the most vulnerable should be reason enough to support Athanasius's decision to flee, but he does not stop there. In the second half of the treatise, Athanasius stresses that the authority of the martyr's body, once the paradigm of Christian orthodoxy, is capable of saying only so much; the bishop (and all those who have fled before him) must continue to confess and, more importantly, enforce the truth. Much like his earlier allusion to Paul's flight from Damascus, Athanasius points to other scriptural examples of fleeing saints in order to reconstruct a tradition of flight worthy of emulation:

What will they do when they see Jacob fleeing from his brother Esau, and Moses withdrawing into Midian for fear of Pharaoh? What excuse will they make for David, after all this idle talk, for fleeing from his house on account of Saul, . . . [and] the great Elijah, after calling upon God and raising the dead, hiding himself for fear of Ahab and fleeing from the threats of Jezebel? At which time the sons of the prophets, when they were sought after, hid themselves with the assistance of Obadiah and lay concealed in caves, . . . the disciples also withdrew and hid themselves for fear of the Jews; and Paul, when he was sought after by the governor at Damascus, was let down from the wall in a basket, and so escaped him. (Athanasius, *Fug.* 18)

The implication in this passage is that these men survive so that others might follow their behavior rather than suffer the same fate of the martyrs who remain victims rather than models to live—or die—by.³³

Athanasius invokes these exemplary men in flight to intentionally undercut the authority of the martyr. Those beaten or cruelly treated are presented as helpless victims. He describes the abuse of these men and women in detail in order to highlight the base nature of their abusers. The passive victims are to be pitied but not necessarily emulated. Conversely, the actions of the saintly fathers, or those who survive, stand as the superior example of Christian piety. In a bold statement, Athanasius writes:

The flight to which they [the saintly fathers] submitted was rather a conflict and war against death. For with wise caution they guarded against these two things; either that they should offer themselves up without reason . . . or that they should willingly subject themselves to the reproach of negligence, as if they were unmoved by in the tribulations they met with in their flight, and which brought with them sufferings *greater and more terrible than death*. (Athanasius, *Fug.* 17.18, emphasis mine)

33. James Ernest points to Athanasius's use of *paradeigma* as the primary tool with which to bolster his defense: "His exempla are taken not simply from past events and definitely not from events he made up himself but almost always from the paradigmatic narrative of scripture." Ernest, *The Bible in Athanasius of Alexandria* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 196.

The masculine virtue of fortitude is thus cultivated under the pains of persecution and, according to Athanasius, this suffering is much greater than that of the martyrs.

As a bishop in exile, Athanasius's authority is built on the shoulders of all those saintly fathers who fled before him. Paternal generativity, as Burrus states, relies on a set of discursive strategies and rhetorical performances that blur gender roles and create queer crossings.³⁴ His flights into exile serve as only one type of performance used to forge a distinctly orthodox patrilineal legacy over and against an effeminate heresy. In short, orthodoxy is concretized by the paternal generativity that is born in exile.

In his other polemical texts, paternal generativity is also linked to the legacy of Nicaea.³⁵ Burrus touches on Athanasius's third flight into exile to state that his development of the city in the desert in the *Life of Antony* is particularly effective. His "'flight' from the city can always be retooled as the ascetic 'withdrawal' through which the city is produced anew (*Apologia de fuga*); 'exile' helps create a flexibly transcendentalized sense of place."³⁶ As we will come to see, this transcendentalized sense of space is of central importance to Athanasius's larger exilic discourse.

In this particular text, however, Athanasius invokes paternal generativity to place himself among a male lineage of holy men who have fled during times of persecution, men such as Abraham, Moses, David, and, most importantly, Christ. These saintly men fortify their manly courage through the ongoing trials of persecution while in exile, and their authority is strengthened by the proper use of that time and space. Athanasius continues:

Behold, therefore, in that they were thus engaged in conflict with their enemies, they passed not the time of their flight unprofitably, nor while they were persecuted did they forget the welfare of others—but as being ministers of the good word, they grudged not to communicate it to all men, so that even while they fled, they preached

34. Burrus examines Athanasius's exiles in the context of her discussion of how Nicene orthodoxy took shape through the gendered language of the aptly named "church fathers," noting that "'Nicaea' enters Athanasius's texts on the heels of 'Arianism,' but initially with faltering steps" (Burrus, *Begotten, Not Made*, 61). Nicaea only enters into Athanasius's polemical works after Gregory, his rival, enters into Alexandria.

35. It is outside of the *Defense of His Flight* that Burrus most clearly sees the link between patrilineal lineage and claims to doctrinal purity. She first sees the development of Athanasius's defensive stance in the *Encyclical Letter of the Council of Egypt* (a letter that was circulated widely during his third exile). Nicaea is juxtaposed with Tyre in a way that couches Athanasius's own experience within his imaginings of a so-called orthodox tradition. *On the Council of Nicaea* is the first text to identify those who attended Nicaea as "fathers." The introduction of paternal terminology is a key factor in the evolution of Athanasius's concept of Nicaea: "Since those who attended Nicaea are in a conspicuous sense the transmitters and agents of the divine 'tradition' or 'paradosis,' that is, of the 'teaching' or 'didaskalia' that is handed down from 'Fathers to Fathers,' they themselves are designated with this title, which is surely the highest that Athanasius has to bestow" (Burrus, *Begotten, Not Made*, 61).

36. *Ibid.*, 75.

the Gospel and gave warning of the wickedness of those who conspired against them, and confirmed the faithful by their exhortations. (Athanasius, *Fug.* 21.14)

These fathers do not suffer silently, nor do they waste their time in exile. They openly proclaim the gospel, speaking not just with their bodies, as the dead martyrs do, but with their lively tongues. The saintly fathers are preserved so that their testimony might affirm the message of right belief.

It is unsurprising, then, that Athanasius identifies the divine *logos* as among the exemplary characters of flight. The *logos* hides himself within flesh for the sake of humanity and flees from his enemies in order that others might follow his example: "Thus the Lord acted, and thus he taught" (Athanasius, *Fug.* 13.7). James Ernest argues that, for Athanasius, the Son is the primary *exemplum*, the principal source of human conduct; he is the *logos* of the Father enfleshed.³⁷ By taking on the human body, he experiences persecution just as the saints do. The Son's flight is thus paradigmatic of the flight of all who are persecuted, and the slanderous charge of cowardice is a charge made not against Athanasius but against the divine *logos* himself. Episcopal flight is once again confirmed as an act of filial allegiance to those saintly men who have come (and gone) before him and, more importantly, to the Son who affirms his role as an authentic witness to the truth.

By way of contrast, Athanasius stresses that the Arians disinherit themselves from this past of persecution. They are worthy of blame because they conspire and collude with the empire: "For the Arians were mixed with the soldiers in order to exasperate them against me" (Athanasius, *Fug.* 24). The Arians not only mimic the past of imperial persecution but also take a leading role as the new persecutors of the faith.

Despite these criticisms of imperial mimicry, Athanasius does not wholly discount the language of civic authority. Athanasius easily transitions from being disciplined to being a disciplinarian. He appropriates a political rhetoric that corresponds with the very same violence of empire that his adversaries appear so eagerly to abuse.³⁸ In so doing, he redefines the ecclesiastical office in terms of civic leadership. The new alliance between civic and ecclesial authority speaks to the very divisive performance of the bishop in the text, first evident in his displacement of the authority of the martyrs. The complicit relationship with empire is clearly an ambivalent one: Athanasius both profits and suffers under its recognition. Consequently, he is split between what Rebecca Lyman characterizes as "the old ideals of a separate Christian identity and the new social realities of a public, imperial church."³⁹

37. Ernest, *Bible in Athanasius of Alexandria*.

38. For a more recent discussion on the role of violence in Christian polemic, see Thomas Sizgorich, *Violence and Belief in Late Antiquity: Militant Devotion in Christianity and Islam* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), esp. 12–18 and chapter 4, for an examination of fourth-century explorations of Christian religious violence.

39. Rebecca Lyman, *Christology and Cosmology: Models of Divine Activity in Origen, Eusebius, and Athanasius* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993), 126.

Athanasius thus emphasizes filial piety in order to lay claim to the authority of orthodoxy. The orthodox subject displays an image of the appropriate relationship between Father and Son. The heretic, however, mocks this heavenly relationship by acting impiously. The distinction clearly has both a theological and a political function. David Brakke points to Athanasius's use of the term *politeia* in order to articulate how the bishop distinguishes the pious from the impious. Those who correctly imitate the saints bear the image (*eikōn*) in their way of life (*politeia*).⁴⁰ Athanasius, as an imitator of the saints in flight, bears the image of those saints who have gone before him: "For since the manner of our *withdrawal* [*tēs anachōrēseōs*] was such as we have described, I do not think that any blame whatever can attach to it in the minds of those who are possessed of a sound judgment: seeing that according to holy scripture, this pattern has been left us by the saints for our instruction" (Athanasius, *Fug.* 26.8, emphasis mine).

Athanasius once again affirms that the saints, in their imitation of the Son's flight, model themselves after his image. They are, therefore, correct to imitate the heavenly civic life on earth and, more importantly, in the desert. It is in this moment that Athanasius equates flight with an ascetic withdrawal. Brakke also notes how Athanasius plays upon the ambiguous nature of the Greek verb *anachōrein*, "to withdraw." He uses the term to present his flight, and the flight of those before him, as an ascetic practice.⁴¹ The imitation of flight is, again, both a theological and a political act. It unites the true Christians with the heavenly *politeia* now realized in the desert.

In *Defense of His Flight*, it is the Arians who mimic imperial persecution. They persecute the saintly fathers, making a mockery of their true alliance. Athanasius is careful here to blame the heretics and not the empire for his flight, even when Constantius, the emperor most known for his Arian sympathies, is rhetorically set up as the dupe of Arian impiety: "He compelled then the people in every city to change their party; . . . he proceeded to act entirely in accordance with the designs and suggestions of the heretics; or rather they acted themselves, and receiving authority from him, furiously attacked everyone" (Athanasius, *H. Ar.* 30–31). Their impiety (*asebeia*) exposes their abuse of civic authority and eventually undermines their claim to the identity Christian. Yet, as Burrus and Daniel Boyarin point out, Athanasius is "reduced to mimicking the very mockery he attributes to the Arians, his own strident claims to authority are both exposed and subtly destabilized

40. "This ethic of imitation exploited the double meaning of the terms *politeia* ('civic life'), which referred both to an individual citizen's behavior and to a city's shared life and institutions: individual imitation of a saint's *politeia* contributed to the formation of the Church's *politeia*" (Brakke, *Athanasius and Asceticism*, 164).

41. Athanasius, *Fug.* 6.22; 10.20; 12.12; 13.14; 19.5; 20.24; 24.6, 23, 27, 28; 26.5; and Brakke, *Athanasius and Asceticism*, 106n123.

by their very excessiveness.”⁴² The space of authority thus functions discursively within Athanasius’s account of personal suffering in exile.

Yet Athanasius must project his own mimicry of empire back upon his oppressors by inhabiting the rhetorical space of both a civic and an episcopal leader. On the one hand, the dishonor supports Athanasius’s textual claim that persecution “is a device of the devil” (Athanasius, *Fug.* 23.8). Those who persecute conspire with their father, the devil, and make a mockery out of the commandment to honor your father and your mother. On the other hand, Athanasius does not hesitate to occupy the position of despot when force is necessary: “*He who curses his father or his mother—let him die the death*” (Athanasius, *Fug.* 2.9, emphasis mine). The strategic splitting of imperial discourse results in a discursive doubling: Athanasius condemns the Arians, just as they condemn him in order to preserve the integrity of civic authority. His use of piety, moreover, projects his own despotic language back onto the Arians while claiming absolute power to cast judgment on them: “But there is a common blot that attaches to them, in that through their heresy, they are enemies of Christ and are no longer called Christians, but Arians” (Athanasius, *Fug.* 27.2).

Athanasius capitalizes on this new identity of civic and ecclesial authority in the most unlikely of figures: a *desert* monk. Antony functions for Athanasius as a mirrored spiritual ruler of the new city, the exiled *politeia* of the desert. This unlikely hero creates a heterotopic vision of a new city in the desert where the truth now resides. It is in his vita that Athanasius once again reconfigures himself in the desert landscape in the guise of another withdrawing saint.

A MODEL CITY WITHOUT WALLS: *LIFE OF ANTONY*

It is the geographical periphery that allows Athanasius to establish his own authority as the author of one of the most famous stories of flight into the desert. The *Life of Antony* is one way in which Athanasius authorizes himself through the genre of (auto)biography and therefore sets up a particular definition of orthodoxy that will be repeated in both the Greek East and the Latin West. By telling the story of the saintly monk who flees into the desert, Athanasius not only legitimizes the desert space which he now inhabits but also establishes the literary paradigm for how he imagines his own exile: as a desert *askesis*.

The *Life of Antony* traces the life and movements of the famous monk Antony, who abandons the life of the polis for the desert. His strict practices serve as a model for ascetic discipline and exemplary Christian life. The biography was vastly popular and by the fifth century had been translated into many languages.⁴³ For our

42. Daniel Boyarin and Virginia Burrus, “Hybridity as Subversion of Orthodoxy? Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity,” *Social Compass* 52 (2005): 435.

43. For a detailed analysis of the afterlife of the *Life of Antony* and its many translations, see Vivian and Athanassakis, *Athanasius of Alexandria*.

purposes, it is worth stressing that Athanasius composed this text during his time in the desert in 357.⁴⁴ The basic structure of the text includes a description of Antony's early life, a detailed account of his discipline (*askesis*), and a narration of his death.

It is now generally accepted that Athanasius's soteriology is worked out in this tale of the life of the fleeing monk.⁴⁵ As is clear in Athanasius's first work, *On the Incarnation*, the first human beings were created out of nothing (*ex nihilo*).⁴⁶ Athanasius's soteriological claims are tangibly embodied in the very genetic makeup of humanity. With the introduction of sin, humanity is condemned to a life of dissolution, both in body and in mind. Athanasius states: "Transgression of the commandment was turning them back to their natural state, so that just as they have had their beginning out of nothing, so also, as might be expected, they might look for corruption into nothing in the course of time" (Athanasius, *Inc.* 4.4). In the *Life of Antony*, Athanasius works this theological understanding of the state of humanity and its salvation into the very movements of the monk. Antony flees further and further into the desert to rediscover and renew the primordial state of humanity.

As Dag Øistein Endsjø notes, the Greek understanding of the original human is found in border areas, such as the *eschatia*.⁴⁷ Although the term *eschatia* is absent from Athanasius's *Life of Anthony*, Endsjø makes a strong argument for why it is

44. Some scholars still debate the authorship of this text, which was first questioned by H. Weingarten, "Der Ursprung des Mönchtums im nachconstantinischen Zeitalter," *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* 1 (1877): 11–35. Weingarten argues that Athanasius could not have been its author and that Christian asceticism began well after Antony's death. The transmission and translation has also caused some scholars to question Athanasius's involvement in the composition of the Greek life. Other scholars have questioned why Antony seemed to be all but absent in Athanasius's other works. While these are certainly good questions to ask, I nevertheless follow the convention that this text was written by Athanasius. In addition to other scholarly arguments, the thematic links highlighted in the two other texts explored in this chapter prove to be too compelling for this reader.

45. Robert C. Gregg, *Athanasius: Life of Antony and Letter to Marcellus* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1977), xiii–xxi.

46. For a more developed argument concerning the intersection between Athanasius's soteriology and cosmology, see Lyman, *Christology and Cosmology*, esp. 124–59, and Burrus, *Begotten, Not Made*, 40–58.

47. See Dag Øistein Endsjø, *Primordial Landscapes, Incorruptible Bodies: Desert Asceticism and the Christian Appropriation of Greek Ideas on Geography, Bodies, and Immortality* (New York: Lang, 2008). Endsjø insists that Athanasius is working within a Greek tradition of biography. His intervention counters an unproblematized assumption too often made by Athanasian scholars that the bishop was not classically educated or knew little of traditional Greek *paideia*. Endsjø repeatedly points out that Athanasius was well within the bounds of a Greek worldview and used a common language and structure in his writings, especially in his use of the biography genre: "The very structure of the hagiography reveals the author's familiarity with the classical genre of biography . . . the description of Vita Antonii 14.3–4 is clearly modeled on a section of Porphyry's *Vita Pythagorae*" (ibid., 28). Athanasius, contrary the claims he makes about himself, was an educated bishop familiar not only with literary genres such as biography but also with the rules of argument and rhetoric, as we saw in the previous exploration of his apologies.

useful here. He describes the concept of *eschatia* as a shared literary understanding of those borderlands that serve to constitute the polis. *Eremos*, “desert,” the term favored by Athanasius, describes the desert as an uncultivated and untamed wilderness outside of Egypt proper. Athanasius uses this term interchangeably with *oros*, “mountain.” Due to the loose way in which Athanasius deploys these terms, as we saw in his *Defense before Constantius*, Endsjø rightly argues that Athanasius is, for the most part, invoking the broader concept of the *eschatia* used by other Christian writers (such as Gregory of Nazianzus, whom we will discuss in further detail in the next chapter) to describe the desert. The *eschatia* is that area outside of the polis, where the human and the divine meet. It is also where the two intermingle. This conception of desert thus expands its meaning and function for Athanasius and allows the desert to take on a new life as a literary theme, as the monk journeys into the desert and away from the city walls. This familiar Greek worldview distinguishes between polis and borderlands by introducing physical borders as well as temporal ones.

The Greek city exists in the present tense, whereas the *eschatia*—as a place where the proper polis has never been established and the land has never been properly cultivated—forever reflects the past. This was how any part of the Greek periphery could be considered to reflect something like an eternal continuation of a primordial golden age. By deserting the city for the wilderness, one not only left civilization behind; one turned back time. Take away the city, and not only is the essence of humanity removed, but even the aspect of present time.⁴⁸ As Antony ventures further into the desert, for example, he quite literally stops the movements of his biological clock. His body is suspended in time as he embodies the very place in which he resides.

In the early part of his *askesis*, Antony flees merely to the catacombs outside of the city (Athanasius, *Vit. Ant.* 8). After he conquers this challenge, he goes further into the mountains and takes up residence in an abandoned fortress (Athanasius, *Vit. Ant.* 12). In a particularly revealing passage, witnesses are amazed at the sight of Antony’s body. As he ascends out of the deserted fortress in the desert, they are shocked to find that “his body had maintained its former condition, neither fat from lack of exercise, nor emaciated from fasting and combat with demons, but was just as they had known him prior to his withdrawal” (Athanasius, *Vit. Ant.* 14). At the height of his withdrawal, Antony moves from the outer and to the inner desert, which is a no-man’s-land (Athanasius, *Vit. Ant.* 49). This final phase of his ascetic retreat into the desert ensures that Antony’s body neither suffers from mortal decay nor is changed by age. Even at the point of death his body is miraculously well preserved.

He never succumbed due to old age, to extravagance in food, nor did he change his mode of dress because of frailty of the body, nor even bathe his feet with water, and

48. Endsjø, *Primordial Landscapes*, 47.

yet in every way he remained free of injury. For he possessed eyes undimmed and sound, and he saw clearly. He lost none of his teeth—they simply had been worn to the gums because of the old man's great age. He also retained health in his feet and hands, and generally he seemed brighter and of more energetic strength than those who make use of baths and a variety of foods and clothing. (Athanasius, *Vit. Ant.* 93)

Here we see Athanasius's soteriological claims being worked out in Antony's body. Due to his strict discipline and Christlike appearance, his body is perfected. It has begun to take on the likenesses of immortality rather than of dissolution. Embodiment is intimately linked to landscape.

James Goehring has argued that the desert functions for Athanasius as a Greek landscape steeped within a literary imagination of the Graeco-Roman culture.⁴⁹ The desert functions as a rhetorical tool that subverts civic ideologies. Goehring remarks, "Antony flees to the desert because truth resides in the desert."⁵⁰ Antony thus sets up a dichotomy that sees the polis as a place of corruption over against the desert, which allows the monk access to truth. Yet the desert is not just where truth naturally resides. The inhabitant of this abstract desert landscape must also embody truth in order for truth to inhabit the space. According to Athanasius, it is Antony, not just any monk, who flees into the desert. And it is this monk alone who brings the truth with him. Antony is certainly the hero of the text, and his death appears to be the end of the story—or at the very least the natural consequence of the human condition. Yet there is another incarnation of truth in the text, one that has been with the reader for the entirety of the monk's life.

Athanasius self-consciously bookends the monk's tale, inserting himself into the text in the prologue and surfacing yet again on the lips of Antony as he dies. We learn in those last moments that it is Athanasius who clothed the monk. And on his death bed, Antony commands his followers to return his tattered clothing to Athanasius: "To Bishop Athanasius give the one sheepskin and the cloak on which I lie, which he gave to me new, but I have by now worn out" (Athanasius, *Vit. Ant.* 90).⁵¹ The reader is reminded that the monk has been clothed in the bishop's mantle for the entirety of his journey into the desert, a detail that does not escape the notice of Jerome, who records that the ascetic monk requests to be buried in Athanasius's cloak (Jerome, *Vit. Paul.* 12). As the monk disrobes himself at the point of death, it is the bishop who is exposed. Burrus vividly points out that it is Athanasius who is the "exile sometimes seen lurking within city limits with the

49. James Goehring, "The Dark Side of the Landscape: Ideology and Power in the Christian Myth of the Desert," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 33, no. 3 (2003): 437–51.

50. James Goehring, "The Encroaching Desert: Literary Production and Ascetic Space in Early Christian Egypt," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 1, no. 3 (1993): 284.

51. We might also read a passage found in the middle of the text as another reference to this cloak: "He subjects himself to an even greater and more strenuous asceticism, for he was always fasting, and he had clothing with hair on the interior and skin on the exterior that he kept until he died" (Athanasius, *Vit. Ant.* 47).

unworldly scent of the desert on his ragged sheepskin cloak.”⁵² While we know how the monk’s story ends, the pungent mantle of authority lives on in the literary fabric of the exiled bishop who also now finds himself in the desert-turned-city.

Brakke asserts that the *Life of Antony* epitomizes Athanasius’s ascetic program,⁵³ and I argue that it also legitimizes his exile. What Athanasius will come to call a “withdrawal” (*anachōrēsis*) into the desert does important work for the bishop. In a letter to fellow bishop Dracontius, he differentiates between two types of withdrawal: “The surprising unanimity about your election in the district of Alexandria will necessarily give way to schism because of your withdrawal [*anachōrēsis*], and the episcopate of the district will be grasped at by many. . . . Think of the Church, lest because of you many of the little ones be harmed and the others receive a pretext for withdrawing [*anachōrēsis*]” (Athanasius, *Ep. Drac.* 1.3).⁵⁴ Monks withdraw in order to dedicate their lives to discipline and to seek out an individual path to the contemplative life. Bishops are also permitted to withdraw, but they must take extra care. Their lives are much more demanding. The monk has to care only for himself, but the bishop must recognize that he lives for the good of his flock.⁵⁵ Brakke states: “Athanasius argued that the moral discernment that must accompany ascetic withdrawal should take into account the welfare of the Church, full of ‘little ones’ and endangered by people who are ‘crooked,’ because the Church and its episcopate were essential to the monastic life. There would be no monks, Athanasius tells Dracontius, without the church and its bishops.”⁵⁶ Athanasius’s own withdrawal into the desert, then, is interpreted as a benefit for the desert ascetic community. But his ascetic withdrawal must only ever be temporary. Ultimately, his flight into the desert is reimagined as a temporary ascetic retreat into a heterotopia.

I refer here to Michel Foucault’s notion of heterotopic spaces to elucidate Athanasius’s theory of the desert because Foucault helpfully captures how alternate spaces or other spaces reflect back to us certain ideals. A heterotopia—such as a garden, a prison, or a museum—acts as a mirror between built space and the human imaginative space around which it is constructed:

In the mirror, I see myself there where I am not, a sort of shadow that gives my own visibility to myself, that enables me to see myself there where I am absent: such is the utopia of the mirror. But it is also a heterotopia in so far as the mirror does exist

52. Burrus, *Begotten, Not Made*, 38.

53. Brakke, *Athanasius and Asceticism*.

54. Edition: PG 25. Translation mine unless otherwise noted.

55. This work is an intellectual biography of Athanasius as well as a thorough history of asceticism in the fourth century, as noted by Brakke, *Athanasius and Asceticism*.

56. Brakke, *Athanasius and Asceticism*, 106. Athanasius argues that there would be no Christians without bishops: “For if everyone were of the same mind as your advisers now are, how would you have become a Christian since there would be no bishops? And if those who come after us receive this state of mind, how will the Church be able to hold together?” (Athanasius, *Ep. Drac.* 2, trans. Brakke, *Athanasius and Asceticism*, 99–101).

in reality, where it exerts a sort of counteraction on the position that I occupy. From the standpoint of the mirror I discover my absence from the place where I am since I see myself over there. Starting from this gaze that is, as it were, directed toward me, from the ground of this virtual space that is on the other side of the glass, I come back toward myself; I begin again to direct my eyes toward myself and to reconstitute myself where I am.⁵⁷

Foucault holds that the ideals of societies are found in the heterotopic places. These spaces both reflect the space a person occupies and hold the image of a space from which a person is absent. The function of a heterotopia is to create a space of illusion or a space that is other—a perfected space of *compensation*. Athanasius's use of desert is compensatory in just this fashion. The desert is infused with multiple meanings that allow Athanasius to reconstitute his displacement as a relocation into a counterspace full of generative possibilities. The desert is remade into an alternate city that reflects the one from which he is so frequently absent.

A heterotopia reflects both a specific location, that place at which a person is not, and the myth of a location, that space in which a person sees himself or herself. As we have explored, Athanasius's use of the desert counteracts the space that the bishop in flight actually occupies during his exile. The role of the heterotopia, according to Foucault, "is to create a space that is other, another real space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed, and jumbled."⁵⁸ The desert becomes the city that Alexandria could not be.

CONCLUSION

The myth of the desert functions for Athanasius as this counterspace to which he has been banished.⁵⁹ The desert transforms into a heterotopia as the bishop, as monk, moves deeper into it. As Athanasius seeks to escape the polis, the polis is paradoxically recreated in the desert. This is evident when Athanasius remarks that Antony's popularity and devoted imitators grew so large that the "desert was made a city" (*Vit. Ant.* 14). The *politeia* is not only the location of civilization, but it is also, for Athanasius (by way of Antony), a shared way of life. That shared way of life is not found in Alexandria proper but is reflected in the heterotopic city of the desert.

As Antony draws deeper into the desert, and into the truth, his entire being is transformed. This withdrawal and transformation not only supports Brakke's observation that this text successfully synthesizes Athanasius's ascetic program, but it also supports Athanasius's larger project—namely, reconfiguring his exile as desert *askesis*, which authenticates his claim to orthodoxy. The remaking of the

57. Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," *Diacritics* 16, no. 1 (1986): 24.

58. *Ibid.*, 27.

59. Goehring, "Dark Side of the Landscape," 437–51.

desert into a new *politeia*, as we saw in the *Defense of His Flight*, allows Athanasius to reimagine this heterotopic space as a counterspace, a countercity.

To state it another way, the remaking of the desert into a new *politeia* provides an alternative vision to the corruption rampant in the neighboring city. This desert turned city is notably free of heresy and walls. The rhetoric of political legitimacy requires that the vision of an ideal *politeia* be removed from the confines of heretical influence.⁶⁰ Alexandria is, as Burrus remarks, “a city that traces a horizontal path of transcendence into the desert, where it is reconceived as a harmonious community of fathers, sons, and brothers, overseen by the orthodox bishop, to whom Father Antony himself had bequeathed one sheepskin and the garment that Athanasius had given him long before.”⁶¹

Athanasius thus capitalizes on ascetic Christianity as a way to legitimize his own position as an exile. As we will soon see, Gregory of Nazianzus’s own (auto) biographical reflections will draw a similar conclusion. In the next chapter, I will show how Gregory uses Athanasius’s desert exile *qua askesis* as a way to amplify the Alexandrian bishop’s own success as an orthodox figure in the desert. Gregory’s *In Praise of Athanasius*, however—like Athanasius’s reflection on his return to Alexandria in his *History of the Arians*—must retrieve the exiled bishop from the desert. It seems that Athanasius does not live on in a heterotopic desert but returns and lives on firmly seated within the walls of the city. The desert is once again reread as an alternate space, but for Gregory, it is only a temporary residence. The civic centers of the empire, and the walls and the doors of its churches, are where true orthodoxy must be found.

60. Cicero makes a similar move when he describes the *res publica* as being in exile alongside of Marcus Claudius Marcellus after the Pompeian revolution and Caesar’s occupation of Rome; see Cohen, “Cicero’s Roman Exile.” Cicero concludes, much like Athanasius will later, that one’s exile is not dependent upon a physical location.

61. Burrus, *Begotten, Not Made*, 76; she has in mind here Athanasius, *Vit. Ant.* 91.