Laughing and humor in ancient Egyptian monasticism

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Abstract

The goal of this article is to analyze laughter and humor in the Egyptian monastic and ascetic movement in the 4th and 5th centuries with a special focus on solitary and non-humorous laughter. The article argues that laughter and humor are part of a strict emotional regime. It shows that several of the monastic stories include a laughter, which is not humorous and where no one else laughed apart from the main character. This laughter was a means to show spiritual excellence and superiority. The other side of the emotional regime was that monastics were scolded for laughing and joking. There is a division between illegitimate laughter caused by humor and frequently connected to eroticism and a legitimate laughter of spiritual insight and authority. The article argues that non-humorous laughter should get more attention in contemporary research.

Introduction

In the stories and rules of Egyptian ascetic and monastic movements in the 4th and 5th centuries, laughter was usually criticized and banned.[1] This attitude was part of a religious regime where the ambitions were to change the individual, strengthen the in-group and ultimately obtain salvation. This, however, neither means that there was no laughter in the monasteries nor that all types of laughter were banned, the situation was more complex. In monastic societies the realms of laughter and humor did not always overlap, and a solitary and non-humorous laughter is sometimes part of monastic stories. This laughter has so far received little attention and will be the focus of this article.

Egyptian cenobitic societies were separated from the outside world by walls and rules, and the monastics were in a transit between this world and the world to come with its hoped-for salvation. Such groups practiced a type of radical religion, which demanded total devotion from the adherents (Feldt 2023). Not laughing was normative for the ingroup, and, with a concept borrowed from William Reddy, part of their "emotional regime." In addition to highlighting the modes of emotional expressions and thoughts that are dominant, the "emotional regime" emphasizes the aspect of power in a community (Reddy 2001: 125-126). Reddy suggests a spectrum of emotional regimes, at "one extreme are strict regimes which require individuals to express normative emotions and to avoid deviant emotions" (Reddy 2001: 125). While Reddy focuses mainly on the normative order for emotions, which a political regime establishes, Ole Riis and Linda Woodhead (2010) include other types of communities as well, such as religious groups.[2] According to them, an emotional regime transcends individuals, "shaping what they can feel, how they can feel it, the way they can express their feelings, and hence the form of social relationship and courses of action that are open to them. In this way they play an important role in shaping and reproducing the structure of power" (Riis and Woodhead 2010: 10). The emotional norm in the group may be imposed by hierarchical authority (Riis and Woodhead 2010: 48), something we certainly witness in the Egyptian cenobitic societies. The use of a specific type of laughter as well as the general

[1] The main sources are biographies of Pachomius (292-348); rules from the Pachomian monastic federation; *Sayings of the Egyptian Desert Fathers* (*Apophthegmata Patrum Aegyptiorum*), and writings by Evagrius (345-399).

[2] See also Plamper 2010: 243; 255-256; Boddice 2017: 72, 79.

opposition against laughter and joking in Egyptian monastic societies will be seen as part of their emotional regime.

Research on laughter in ancient Christianity has discussed the opposition against laughter among church-fathers, such as Clement, Basil, and John Chrysostom (Adkin 1985, Halliwell 2008: 471-519).[3] Laughing among monastics and ascetics in Egypt has got some attention (Steidle 1938; Bremmer 1992) and there are also comments on ancient monasticism in studies of medieval monasticism (Resnick 1987), but a closer study of the management of laughter and humor in the initial and organizing phase of Christian monasticism in Egypt has not been made. In this article, I will combine ancient and modern theories of laughter and humor, especially theories about superiority.[4] These theories focus on the target of laughter and humor and stress elements of power, derision and ridicule and on the feeling of superiority of the one who laughs. Such elements are especially relevant in a study of laughter in a strict emotional regime. The article has three parts and focuses on 1) authority and the laughter of superiority, 2) the evils of laughter and joking and 3) monastic stories and the study of humor and laughter. The article seeks to consider: What types of laughter are describes in the sources? Who was allowed to laugh and why? How was the condemnation of laughter part of the monastic emotional regime? Moreover, since the ancient sources are idealized and normative versions of monastic life, it also leads to the question: How were monastic stories about laughter intended to influence listeners and readers? And finally: How can a study of the management of laughter in ancient Egyptian monasticism contribute to the study of laughter and humor?

Authority and the laughter of superiority

Laughing was no small matter for Christian monastics. This is reflected in laughter being depicted as something that evil powers tried to trick monastics into doing, as part of their desire to distract the monastics from their spiritual goals. For example, one of the many stories connected to monastic heroes is about Abba Pambo, known as a founder of monasteries, and it describes how demons tried to make him laugh. According to the story, it was said that "his face never smiled," so the ideal of a controlled body that is not laughing nor even smiling is stressed (AP A Pambo 13). One day, "wishing to make him laugh, the demons stuck wing feathers on to a lump of wood and brought it in making an uproar saying, 'Go, go.' When he saw them, Abba Pambo began to laugh and the demons started to say in chorus, 'Ha! Ha! Pambo has laughed!'" Pambo, however, denied it: "'I have not laughed, but I made fun of your powerlessness, because it takes so many of you to carry a wing.'" It is not clear whether the demons wanted the lump of wood to fly or if they were playing with the incongruency of carrying something extremely light like it was a heavy burden.[5] But why did Pambo say that he had not laughed even when the story says that he did?

When Pambo laughed, the demons thought that they had obtained what they wanted, that they had distracted Pambo from his spiritual goal. However, it was Pambo who made a mockery of

[3] It varied how strictly Christian thinkers condemned laughter. Clement of Alexandria (150-212) tolerated a disciplined, restricted, and regulated type of laughter (Halliwell 2008:494; Graham 2022). Clement was more in line with the Stoic attitude to laughter, while John Chrysostom (347-407), was in the main negative to all types of laughter (Halliwell 2008: 495-512).

[4] The term "superiority theories" is an umbrella term for various ideas about laughter and humor associated with Plato, Aristotle and Hobbes.

[5] Another version of the story, found in a biography of Pachomius, suggests the second option (SBo 21). Here the demons fetched a green leaf and a large thick rope, pretended that it was hard to pull, as if it was a big stone, and shouted to Pachomius, so that he should "look and laugh." In this case, however, no one laughed, Pachomius only prayed and sighed, which is easy to understand in a community where non-laughing was an ideal.

them when he pointed out that he had not laughed because of what the demons had done, but because it had taken so many of them to try to accomplish their trick. As such, there are incongruities on two levels in this story, the incongruity intended by the demons, and the incongruity perceived by Pambo. By denying that Pambo had laughed, the story indicates that his laughter was not an expression of humor, it was instead a weapon against evil. According to this view, derisive laughter aimed at the demons was something different from laughter initiated by jokes and funny situations, what we usually think of as humor. In this context, laughter as a response to something humorous was condemned while laughter connected to superiority and monastic authority was accepted. The ambiguity of laughter means that any condemnation of it needs to be carefully reviewed to establish whether it is *all* laughter, or simply *some* laughter, that is being condemned. Often it is the latter.

Albeit in a different context, superiority is further reflected in the laughter of Pachomius (292-348), who is believed to be the founder of cenobitic monasticism in Upper Egypt. His superior spiritual authority was combined with his legal-rational authority, since he was the head of the hierarchy of a federation of monasteries. In one story, Pachomius and his elder brother, John, were throwing reeds in the water to wet them, so that they could later use the reeds to make baskets and mats (SBo 20). Suddenly a crocodile rose in the water. John took fright, warned Pachomius, and ran to the shore. Pachomius just laughed, condemned the crocodile in the name of God, hurled water at it and drove it away. Afterwards, John was full of admiration because of Pachomius' strong faith and said that from that day he would title Pachomius, "Father." The story demonstrates that John recognized the superior spiritual state of his younger brother and hailed him as the head of a budding monastic society. When Pachomius laughed at his brother's lack of insight and the crocodile's lack of power, his laughter reflected his spiritual superiority.

A more sinister aspect of Pachomius' laughter is highlighted in a story about monastics who had been talking while they were baking, which was not allowed (SBo 77). An angel told Pachomius what had happened, and Theodore, who oversaw the bakery, got the blame. Pachomius became extremely angry. His reaction was rather peculiar, "straight away he laughed in [Theodore's] face with great anger." The lack of any further explanation of this emotional outburst may indicate that his laughter was a legitimate expression of anger. As Theodore "saw the nature of this laughter," he became very sad, and fasted, prayed, and wept. Why did Pachomius laugh, what was the background of his angry laughter? A model is found in the Hebrew Bible, where Yahweh's derisive laughter signaled his superiority and scorn, for instance in Psalms, "the One enthroned in heaven laughs; the Lord scoffs at them" (Psalm 2: 4, also 37:13 and 59:8; Gilhus 1997: 22-26). In a similar way, Pachomius' angry laughter reflected the divine attitude to those who had sinned and is an example of how dominance can be communicated in laughter (Oveis, Spectre, Smith, Liu and Keltner 2016). The sound of his laughter reflects his superior position in the monastic hierarchy (Ko, Sadler and Galinsky 2015).

One setting for monastic laughter seems to have been the bakeries, where some of the stories about monks who laughed and were duly scolded took place. The *Regulations of Horsiesios* (40) contains a special prohibition for laughing in the bakery: "Let absolutely no one laugh, so that there will not apply to us the reproach of the Scriptures, they make bread for laughter." However, the following story suggests that laughter and talking took place here and that it was sometimes tolerated. The monk Macarius accompanied Theodore to a bakery and warned him that "if you go to the bakery to make bread and you see one of the brothers joking or playing around, do not be scandalized because it is inevitable that you will find all sorts of

people in such a group" (SBo 138). The monasteries were working communities, and it was probably "inevitable", like Macarius said, that monastics were "joking or playing around" when they were working together. The apologetic attitude of this story is probably more in line with how things were in real life than with how the normative and idealizing sources describe it. Seen in this light, the monastic bakery can, with Reddy's term, be regarded as an "emotional refuge", a place where people were released from ruling emotional norms and could be more relaxed (Reddy 2001: 129).[6] That, however, does not make the agelastic[7] attitude of the monastic emotional regime less prominent. Laughing together as monastics did in the bakeries was a way to feel belonging and be part of a group. When the monastic bakers were laughing, they neutralized the system of control, created a feeling of community among themselves, and challenged monastic authority.

The perception of laughter in monastic texts has a biblical background. Combined with the fact that the gospels never mention that Jesus laughed, biblical passages such as those found in Luke: "Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh" and "Woe to you who laugh now, for you will mourn and weep" (Luke 6: 21b and 25b) gave support to the negative comprehension of laughter in this world as something which distracted the monastics from their total devotion (Feldt 2023). Weeping was a much more appropriate response (Gilhus 2023: 121-123). This contrast is, for instance, present in a story about a dying brother where a laughter of superiority is intertwined with the laughter of salvation. According to the story, the brother opened his eyes on his death bed and laughed three times (AP S 11.115, N 279). The weeping monks who surrounded him, asked why he laughed, and the dying man answered that he had three reasons: "'In the first place, I laughed because you are all afraid of death,' he told them; 'secondly because you are unprepared; thirdly I laughed because I am passing from labor to repose.'" Then the old monk died. The reasons for his laughter are interconnected: unlike the other monks, he has an insight, which they do not have, and the others are not prepared like he is. Both reasons show that the dying monk laughed from a superior position. According to the third reason, his laughter was a foretaste of the eternal bliss in contrast to the present state of toil and weeping, in line with the passages in Luke. It can be argued that his solitary laughter was also caused by incongruity, the monastics' lack of knowledge in relation to the dying man's higher insight and by relief of the tension in the face of his salvation. The story of the dying monk also recalls Socrates when he drank the hemlock, and the contrast between his present and future state made him laugh in the face of death, which signaled distance and control.[8] Socrates laughed from a position of superior insight, and his example may have been a distant model for the story about the dying monk.

To connect laughter with superiority is in line with the oldest ideas of humor, associated among others with Plato and Aristotle. Neither Plato nor Aristotle did present unified theories of laughter (Halliwell 2006, Lintott 2016), but they share a strong tendency to highlight the aggressive aspect of laughter and connect it to derision, it is about *laughing at* something and not *with them*.[9] Pambo, for instance, laughed at the ignorance of the demons, in line with

[6] In Reddy's theoretical framework, "emotional refuge" is a way to escape, at least temporary, from "emotional suffering," an acute form of goal conflict (Reddy 2001: 129).

[7] Meaning, never laughing.

[8] When Socrates was asked how he wanted to be buried, he replied, "however you please," and added, "'if you can catch me and I do not get away from you.' And he laughed gently, and looking toward us, said: 'I cannot persuade Crito, my friends, that the Socrates who is now conversing and arranging the details of his argument is really I; he thinks I am the one whom he will presently see as a corpse'" (*Phaedo* 84d and 115c, Halliwell 2008: 280-83; Giamario 2022: 7; Naas 2016:25).

[9] Derisive laughter has by some been seen as the original version of laughter (Lorenz, 1963, van Hooff, 1971).

Plato's view of ignorance as the object of ridicule (*Philebus* 48 c-50 b), and in line with Aristotle's views, the angry laughter of Pachomius was a social corrective. Never laughing was another way to show spiritual superiority in relation to others within the monastic community. According to the story about Pambo and the demons, Pambo's face "never smiled." Here too there were models in Greek philosophy, Pythagoras is a well-known example of a philosopher who did not laugh.[10] That the Pythagorean life was sometimes a model for monastics is seen, when Athanasius says that the soul of the desert-father Antonius "was neither constricted by sadness nor loosened by pleasure, nor prone to laughter or grief" (*Vita Antonii* 14. 4), for the passage is taken almost verbatim from the Neo-Platonic philosopher Porphyry's *Life of Pythagoras* (Bremmer 1992: 208). Jan Bremmer aptly observes that "laughter has become one item in a long list of emotions which the saint, in Stoic *apatheia*, was able to transcend" (Bremmer 1992: 208). Some examples are in line with philosophical reasoning about laughter. Evagrius said, for instance, that "uncontrolled laughter destroys a restrained character" (*Exhortation 1 to Monks*, 10, Sinkewicz 2003). Monastic life had a strong competitive aspect, and never to laugh was a way to excel and show that the monk had distanced himself from this world. The *agelastic* attitude could also be used to present monastic self-control as on a higher level than that of contemporary philosophers. According to the desert-mother, Syncletica, while "worldlings" (*kosmikois*) also practice self-restraint (*sophrosyne*), and here she probably refers to philosophers, they sin with their other senses, one example is that they "laugh in a disorderly manner" (AP S 4. 49; A Syncletica 2). While self-control was both a Graeco-Roman philosophical ideal and an ideal in ascetic and monastic Christianity, a more radical break with society was required in Christianity.

More surprising is an example of the opposite extreme, an incessant laughter, which masks spiritual excellence. A monk, who is not named, pretended to be insane by always laughing when he met other brothers, which made them go away (AP S 8. 32; N 408; A Ammonas 9).[11] His superior, Silvanus found his behavior embarrassing and went to see him in his cell. Silvanus managed to take the brother by surprise, asked him to stop laughing and saw that he sat dividing pebbles into two baskets. The brother explained that the pebbles represented the thoughts (*logismoi*), which he had during that day, either good or bad. He would only eat if his good deeds outnumbered his bad deeds. Silvanus then understood that the monastic only feigned madness and that laughing was a cover. It is tempting to see the laughing monk as an early example of the holy fool tradition, which later became prominent in parts of eastern Christianity, but a recent analysis of the story concludes convincingly that "folly does not add to sanctity," instead laughing and folly masked the brother's holiness (Halle 2014: 123).[12] The unstoppable laughter of the monk effectively hindered others from giving him the credit that he deserved. If they had shown him admiration, it could have undermined his virtue, which he tried to hide, and instead made him proud of himself and full of pride. The story suggests that the monk laughed from a superior spiritual position as did Pambo and the dying monk. Though they did not laugh for the same reason, one laughed to hide his spiritual

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[10] The neo-platonic philosopher, Iamblichus (245-325 AD) comments on the Pythagorean maxim, "do not indulge in immoderate laughter" (*The Exhortation to Philosophy* 21) and offers two reasons. One is the need for a philosopher to control one's emotions, the other is that while laughter distinguishes humans from animals to quench laughter and cultivate reason is to aim to be something more than fully human (Heath 2019: 93).

[11] For nonsense as a symptom of insanity in antiquity, and laughter as a reaction, see Kidd 2014: 40-43.

[12] It is a tradition about Democritus as the laughing philosopher. Hippolytus, for instance, writes that Democritus, "turned all things into ridicule as if all the concerns of humanity were deserving of laughter" (*Refutatio*, 1.11.4, Hankinson 2019: 55). However, it is unlikely this Democritus was a model for the laughing pose of the monastic.

eminence, the second in a mockery of demons, and the third because he contrasted his state of impeding salvation with life in this world.

Laughter happened from a position of superiority and spiritual authority and was aimed at people, demons and a crocodile because of their lack of insight and/or power. In these stories, no one else laughs, the laughter of the characters is solitary. Except for the story of Pambo and the demons, which might have inspired laughter in the audience, there is also no indication that anyone was expected to laugh when they heard or read the stories. The audience was instead expected to admire monastic excellence and learn to adhere to the norms of the monastic regime. This means that the stories do not, in the main, present humorous laughter. The examples of a monastic laughter of authority, of monks who never laugh and of one monk who laughs incessantly show in various ways spiritual excellence and happen from positions of superiority. Their laughter does not, or only to a small degree, include humor.

3. The evils of laughter and joking

How did the emotional regime work on ordinary monastics? They were neither encouraged nor allowed to laugh. There are several stories about monastics who were scolded by their superiors, because they joked and laughed together. Pachomius rebuked a young monastic for his boisterous laughter, for he "became negligent and laughed frequently" (G^1 104) and threatened that he might be forced to leave the monastery and return to secular life, because he was not fit to be a monastic. Occasionally divine beings intervened as the angel did in the story about Theodore and Pachomius (see above). In another story, four brothers "began to tell jokes to one another, to make fun and to laugh out aloud" (*A Letter of Bishop Ammon* 23). The Holy Spirit told Theodore what they had done, and Theodore rebuked the four brothers with a general condemnation of joking and laughter based on biblical quotes such as the passages in Luke (6:21b and 25b), which immediately made the culprits wail and weep. Another story describes some brothers who launched a boat with much joking, but Theodore threatened them, "if you continue to behave so stupidly, you are going to weep and weep and weep again with groans" (SBo 192). Most of the brothers immediately began to weep, for they, as well as the readers, understood that Theodore referred to the eternal weeping of those that were damned. The reactions to laughing and joking are attempts to restrict such outbursts.

The prohibitions against laughing in the Pachomian rules are linked to specific situations, contexts, and spaces: speaking and laughing during psalmody, prayer or reading were punished (*Precepts* 8); there were penance for speaking and laughing during meals (*Precepts* 31); and, more specifically, "laughing and playing with boys and having friendships with those of tender years" was not allowed (*Precepts and Judgements* 7, see below). *The Regulations of Horsiesios* (11) observes that he "who needlessly looks his neighbor in the face usually provokes laughter on the face or a smile, which bring no profit and [even] causes indignation." The last regulation contains the apt observation that laughter is contagious. In addition to the special prohibition for laughing in the bakery (see above), there is a precept, which says that the monastic shall not be overcome with the laughter of fools (*Precepts and Institutes* 18). Here it refers to meaningless laughter as mentioned in *Ecclesiastes* 7.6 and says something about the scale and type of laughter, which is condemned – it is a laughter, which is too loud, too involving, and generally too much (also *Sir* 21.20). Basil of Caesarea (330-379), whose Rules later inspired Western monasticism, condemns "a cackling laughter in a loud din" (*The Rule of St Basil* 27).[13]

[13] While there are sayings, which suggest that playing the fool was an ideal, such as "Either make a clean break with humankind or make a mockery of the world and of men by playing the fool (*moròn*) most of the time." (AP

These prohibitions against laughter are rather pragmatic. The contexts where laughter was not allowed were spiritual services, religious education, and meals, which means that the prohibitions were connected to the daily routines and rituals in the monasteries. Monastics should keep their spiritual focus, concentrate on what they were doing, and not tempt others into laughing. The prohibitions do not present a specific reason why laughter was not permitted, and they do not appeal to religious and theological views for legitimation, but more generally, the impression is that the sound of laughter disturbed didactic situations and challenged authority. The *Sayings of the Desert Fathers* are more explicit than the Pachomian rules about why laughter is destructive: it drives away the fear of God (AP S 3. 51, N 54) and should be quenched because of the fear of the final judgement: "We are going to have to render an account of the whole of our life before heaven and earth, and you are laughing?" (AP S 3. 41; N 139). According to a rather comprehensive list of potential evil consequences of laughter, it destroys spiritual life and affects the relationship to the divine as well as to the body, soul, and human virtues:

> Now hear about laughter: laughter throws out the blessedness of sorrow. Laughter does not construct nor protect; it destroys and demolishes what has been constructed. Laughter grieves the Holy Spirit, is of no benefit to the soul, and corrupts the body. Laughter chases off the virtues; it has neither remembrance of death nor contemplation of the punishments.
> (AP S 3. 55)

Did the monastic emotional regime succeed in banishing laughter from the monasteries? Were laughter and joking *really* extinguished among ancient Egyptian monastics? The repeated prohibitions show that monastics were indeed joking and laughing, otherwise there would have been no need for prohibitions in the first place. In some settings it was obviously more objectionable to laugh than in others, as when one brother who was sitting at the ritual meal of agape began to laugh, where he, according to the text, should have wept (AP A John the Little 9). Laughter was also more excusable outside ritual situations. A brother tended to laugh together with others when he was outside his cell, but experienced a lack of peace when he was back, obviously because his mood had been changed by his joking and laughing. He got the advice: "Be watchful inwardly; be watchful outwardly" (AP A Poemen 137), which is a warning, but not a strict prohibition.

In addition to being disturbing, a joking laughter had a more sinister side, and was sometimes regarded as part of a slippery slope to damnation:

> For example, to speak jocosely, does not seem an acknowledged sin, but it leads to acknowledged sin. Thus, laughter often gives birth to foul discourse, and foul discourse to actions still more foul. Often from words and laughter proceed railing and insult: and from railing and insult, blows and wounds; and from blows an wounds slaughter and murder.
> (John Chrysostom, *Concerning the Statues*, Homily XV)

According to these words by John Chrysostom laughter has the potential to initiate violence. Another version of the slippery slope, more prominent in monastic texts, saw joking and laughter in relation to eroticism, sexuality, and women. Indecent laughter was condemned in Pauline letters, which were part of the scriptural background for connecting laughter to sexual frivolities and sin (Halliwell 2008: 476-479). Clement of Alexandria, for instance, made a link

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S 8. 31; N 320; A Or 14), the saying refers to 1 Cor 4: 10, "we are fools for Christ's sake" and implies to live an ascetic life. It does not mean to joke about and divulge in incessant laughing.

between sex and laughter (*Exhortation to the Heathen* 2.13, Graham 2022: 55-56). The link is also explicit in monastic literature, as seen in a story about an anchorite who wove and sold linen and had a nun as his customer. It could have been a rather sweet love story, but in an ascetic context, it was not. The anchorite and the nun frequently met, began to speak with each other, and finally, according to the anchorite, the I-person in the text, “there came holding of hands, laughter, and delighting in the company of each other – until we travailed and brought forth iniquity” (AP S 20. 15, N 132 A).

That positive relational joking predicts positive romantic relations, is in line with recent research (Miczo and Averbeck 2020), but the ancient sources also make a strong connection between laughter and eroticism. In his educational system for aspiring monastics in Lower Egypt, the learned intellectual, Evagrius warned monastics against women and their sexual allures and against a laughter, which led to damnation. In his treatise, *On the Eight Thoughts*, in a chapter labelled “Fornication,” he advised the monk to “flee encounters with women if you want to be chaste, and never allow them the familiarity to be bold with you” (*On the Eight Thoughts* 2.8 in Sinkewicz 2003: 76). Evagrius continues his deliberations on the topic: At the first meeting with a monk, women will show pious reverence, real or pretended, be modestly dressed, and keep their eyes lowered; next time they meet him, they will look up a little; the third time, “they look directly at you without shame, you smile, and they laugh heartily.” After that they will adorn themselves and show the promise of their passion and continue until they have conquered the soul of the monk. And Evagrius warns, “these are the hooks laid out to catch you in death and the entangling nets that drag you to destruction. May they not lead you astray with their nice words, for the evil poison of beasts is concealed in these women” (*On the Eight Thoughts* 2.8 in Sinkewicz 2003:76-77). The hearty laughter of the women is the turning point, from where erotic passion rapidly develops, and Evagrius equates the situation with a trap.[14] He encourages the monastic: “Take no delight in jests, nor find enjoyment with women who make them, for the Lord has abandoned them” (*Exhortation to a Virgin*, 49 in Sinkewicz 2003: 134). Laughter was regarded as a direct channel to lust, and sometimes as a prelude to sexual behavior. In this capacity, it threatened the very roots of ascetic life, which was celibacy. For that reason, eroticized laughter was explicitly and harshly condemned.

Laughter was also linked to same-sex relations. The connection is mentioned in the Pachomian rules as well as in narrative sources.[15] The *Sayings of the Egyptian Desert Fathers* contains a warning against immoral behavior towards the young. Like other types of sexual acts, it is initiated by laughter: “Laugh not with a youth lest your soul be lost; do not sit beside him or go for walks with him or get close to each other” (N. 592. 64). The intertwining of laughter with abuse of children is referred to in the Pachomian Rules, which say that “laughing and playing with boys and having friendships with those of tender years” is not allowed (*Precepts and Judgements* 7).[16]

[14] Evagrius returns to the metaphor of the trap in another passage about laughter, but here it is the woman who will suffer: “She who draws forth a man’s words in laughter is like one who puts a noose around her own neck” (*Exhortation to a Virgin*, 46 in Sinkewicz 2003: 134).

[15] Shenoute too argues against same sex relations both for men and women and connects laughter to such desirous passions (Layton 2017: 58 and 504).

[16] In a similar way Shenoute says that children should avoid laughter (Layton 2017: 564) and warns that the “lord shall curse any older person who jokes or laughs with little ones” (Layton 2017: 568). According to Caroline T. Schroeder, “the language of forbidden ‘friendship’ in monastic literature typically serves as code for sexual, same-gender relationships” (Schroeder 2021: 147).

According to Freud's classic study of *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconsci*ous, obscene jokes or tendentious jokes "have sources of pleasure at their disposal besides those open to innocent jokes" (Freud 1983: 145). Among the traditional objections to humor, John Morreall mentions that it is hedonistic and that it is pursued for pleasure and that it in many cultures has been associated with sexual license (Morreall 2010: 5-6). In antiquity laughter and eroticism were intertwined in creation myths and regenerative rituals in Egypt, in Palestine with the cult of Baal, and in Greece with cults of Demeter and Dionysus (Gilhus 1997: 19-21; 33-37).[17] Because of the connection between joking and erotic laughter already prominently present in ancient sources, and because of the demand of total sexual abstinence in monasticism, the special connection between joking and erotic laughter were singled out and condemned in the monastic sources.

4. Monastic stories and the study of humor and laughter

Laughter and joking were regarded as a disturbing element in didactic contexts where the focus was on spiritual instructions, listening, meditating, reading and writing, memorizing Scripture, and learning passages by heart (Graiver 2022, Watts 2016). A monastic community had a strict emotional regime with strong prescriptions for normative emotions, which should be cultivated, and deviant emotions, which should be avoided (Reddy 2001: 125). When people joined a monastery, they moved into this emotional regime and had to develop new maps of normative and deviant emotions. Rules and stories contributed to mold and sustain their emotional maps and helped in the acculturation and education of the monastics. According to Riis and Woodhead, "Much emotional training occurs through observation and imitation rather than through overt instruction." (Riis and Woodhead 2010: 48). And Sarah Iles Johnston points out that "it is easier to get people to believe in things that they cannot experience through suggestions than by persuasion through authority and that a significant means of persuasion through suggestion is the telling of vivid engaging stories" (Johnston 2017: 154). The large number of sayings and stories about ideal monastics were tools for shaping, handling and training the emotions of the adepts, and they contributed to the creation of their identity as part of the process of making monasteries into ascetic emotional communities (Watts 2016: 48, 50). By stimulating the monastics cognitively and emotionally, stories about past masters contributed to implant emotional standards and helped them to transform and conform to the emotional regime of ascetic life. While playful laughter and joking were restricted, and mostly forbidden, and laughter of erotic passion was strictly condemned, the solitary laughter of superiority and insight was in some cases admired. It was the accepted version of laughter. The stories in monastic texts, which included a laughter of superiority, were intended to kindle feelings of subordination, respect, and perhaps of repentance in the audience. This laughter was a didactic tool and a social corrective, intended to engage the audience.

The sources considered also offer a special view of what the accepted version of laughter *was*. Pambo rejected that he had laughed, even when he had, because he made a division between laughter and humor. The text categorizes a joking laughter as illegitimate, and a laughter which was caused by derision aimed at demons, and therefore by superiority, as legitimate, but not as laughter *per se*. In this way, Pambo made his special type of laughter acceptable for monastic consumption. A similar division between acceptable and non-acceptable laughter is also made in a story about Apa Pammon and Theodore who were told by God that emperor Julian, who supported Pagan religion and whom the Christians described as the Apostate, had died. "Theodore looked at Apa Pammon and smiled" (*emeidiasen*), and "Apa Pammon nearly

[17] Two passages in Pauline letters, Ephesians 5.3-5 and Colossians 3.8 condemn indecent speech and joking.

laughed (*schedon gelasantos*)" (*A Letter of Bishop Ammon*, 34). Though a younger monk asks why Pammon laughed, the text is careful to stress that his reaction was only "nearly (*schedon*)" laughter, and later characterizes the same reaction as smiling.[18] The moving between the three terms, "laughing", "nearly laughing" and "smiling" reflects attempts to make the laughter of a monastic acceptable and establish a division between the two types of laughter. It is also striking how the monastic sources make a division between illegitimate laughter caused by humor and legitimate laughter, which expresses spiritual insight and authority. This suggests that the sources make a division between humor on the one side and a laughter of superiority on the other.

Research on humor and laughter has pointed to a distinction between stimulus-driven and emotionally valenced laughter (Duchenne) and self-generated and emotionless laugher (non-Duchenne) (Gervais and Wilson 2005: 396). Change and incongruity are causes for the first type of laughter, but not for the second. The examples of a laughter of superiority in monastic texts have more in common with the second type of laughter than with the first. While ideas about laughter in antiquity stressed derision and feelings of superiority, the impression is that in modern research, neither the aspect of superiority nor the meaning and function of a non-humorous laughter have got the attention that they deserve. Different from ancient ideas of humor and laughter, there is a tendency in contemporary research to focus on the constructive and positive functions of humor and laughter (Morreall 2010).[19] To study laughter in various historical and cultural settings means to get different views of laughter. The conceptions of laughter and humor in ancient Egyptian monasticism were part of an ascetic and rather authoritarian emotional regime. These conceptions were partly based on and interacted with biblical models and Greek ideas of laughter and humor and were built on various aspects of superiority.[20] This laughter of superiority was connected to spiritual authority and distinguished from humorous laughter, which was connected to joking and especially to eroticism. The monastics were chastised by the former and should shun the other. Both types of laughter were part of the monastic emotional regime and had social references, the monastic community versus life outside that community, and temporal references, the present world versus the future salvation.

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[18] One redactor of the text changed *schedon* ("nearly") to *semnon*, which means "godly, solemn" to make the laughter into something serious (Goehring:1986: 291).

[19] This has recently been criticized by Mikita Brottman who has examined laughter which is not associated with mirth and humor (2002).

[20] Some of the texts in the thirteen codices found at Nag Hammadi in Upper Egypt, in 1945, in a place close to the Pachomian monasteries, promote a laughter of superiority and derision as a legitimate expression of insight and holiness (Gilhus 2022). One motif is about Jesus who laughs at the crucifixion, another motif is about the spiritual Eve, (distinguished from the carnal Eve), who laughs at the futile attempts of the evil rulers of this world to rape her. The two laughter motifs have in common that they present a higher form of knowledge, which could have been shared among those who thought that they had a superior insight.

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