



CLOTHES MAKE THE MONK:
THE RHETORIC OF CLOTHING
IN LATE ANTIQUE MONASTICISM¹



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Clothing was a visible means of establishing an ascetic identity in late antiquity. Several examples from hagiography reveal the important link, rhetorically and visually, between clothing and ascetic identity. The rule material associated with the institutionalized setting of monasticism reinforces this link by using clothing as a marker of membership and its values. The abbot of the White Monastery, Shenoute, for example, used clothing to combat difference, especially in terms of economic background, among his followers. In his rhetoric, Shenoute employs a garment of his (first contaminated by blood and pus during a long illness and then destroyed by moths) as a metaphor connecting three letters written to combat a period of unrest, and eventually outright rebellion, in the monastery. In these letters, therefore, clothing signifies not just monastic identity but also the spiritual status of the monastic self, either its purity or pollution. While hagiographies and monastic rules both suggest that monastic deeds became proper clothing, here Shenoute plays with that expectation: the monks' clothing will reveal, through its contamination, the sins they cannot hide.

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