

# Christian monasticism in Africa and Asia

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It is almost impossible to pinpoint the origins of Christian monasticism in time and place. Recently it was common opinion that it started in 4th-century Egypt, where Antony (251–356) was considered to be the founder of anchoretic monasticism, while Pachomius (292–348) was credited with the foundation of the first monasteries stressing community life. But this theory turned out to be too simplified.

Since Christian monasticism has been extremely pluriform from the beginning and must have gained popularity in various regions simultaneously (especially in Egypt and the eastern Mediterranean), it is more correct to speak of 'the monastic movement' than a single point of origin.

Early monasticism has a number of aspects that could be represented as partially overlapping spheres, but a clear definition of what it actually comprised is difficult to give. Withdrawal from society and asceticism are two of these spheres, but neither are exclusive to monasticism. Asceticism, abstinence and celibacy have been advocated by various authors, Christian and non-Christian,

and for many, such as Origen (c. 184–c. 253) and Athanasius (c. 297–373), they were considered a virtue. *Anachoresis* (Greek for 'withdrawal') is the root of the word anchorite, meaning a religious recluse, but not all those who turned their back on society in late antiquity did so for spiritual reasons. Some tried to escape from taxes or criminal prosecution, and Christians sometimes tried to avoid persecution in this way, while indeed many others saw a life of solitude as the only route to salvation of the soul, especially after the persecutions of Christians ended under Constantine (r. 306–337) and martyrdom as a guarantee for salvation thus ceased to exist.

# Revering the bones of the dead: relic worship in Buddhism and Christianity

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As Buddhism and Christianity spread across Afro-Eurasia during the early 1st millennium CE, missionaries and pilgrims took religious messages, manuscripts and sacred relics to newly proselytized regions. While Buddhist pilgrims from central and east Asia travelled to India to seek the relics of the Buddha, Christians transferred relics throughout Europe of events concerned with the life of Jesus, such as parts of the True Cross, as well as remains of saints ranging from apostles such as Saint Peter to lesser-known martyrs.

There were striking similarities in the formality of the rituals of relic worship between the two religious traditions.

Śākyamuni (5th century BCE), the historical Buddha, did not name a successor of authority to his disciples. The community, called *sangha*, gathered periodically around stupas, earthen burial mounds covering the relics found after the cremation of Śākyamuni, to meditate and discuss doctrinal and disciplinary matters. While the *sangha* had no permanent residences, stupas remain as landmarks showing the extent of the spread of Buddhist teachings. King Aśoka (r. c. 268–c. 232 BCE) of the Maurya empire (c. 322–180 BCE), the first royal

patron of Buddhism, had stupas built to promote the faith to the peripheral regions of his empire. By the beginning of the 1st millennium CE, Buddhism had spread northwest and stupas were built along the trade routes of the Hindu Kush and Pamirs [see box on p. 164]. From here the religion moved into the oasis kingdoms of the Tarim basin and into China. Chinese monks made pilgrimages to India and by the 7th century there was an itinerary with accommodation, and a guidebook was available. Meanwhile, Buddhism also spread south and across to Sri Lanka and southeast Asia by sea [see box on p. 158]. A monastery in the mountains of Sri Lanka held Buddha's tooth relics.