



**Digital Commons@**

Loyola Marymount University  
LMU Loyola Law School

---

Theological Studies Faculty Works

Theological Studies

---

3-2004

## Shenoute and the Women of the White Monastery: Egyptian Monasticism in Late Antiquity, by Rebecca Krawiec

Douglas E. Christie

Loyola Marymount University, DEchristie@lmu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/theo\\_fac](https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/theo_fac)



Part of the [Religion Commons](#)

---

### Digital Commons @ LMU & LLS Citation

Christie, Douglas E., "Shenoute and the Women of the White Monastery: Egyptian Monasticism in Late Antiquity, by Rebecca Krawiec" (2004). *Theological Studies Faculty Works*. 15.

[https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/theo\\_fac/15](https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/theo_fac/15)

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Theological Studies at Digital Commons @ Loyola Marymount University and Loyola Law School. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theological Studies Faculty Works by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons@Loyola Marymount University and Loyola Law School. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@lmu.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@lmu.edu).

## BOOK REVIEWS AND NOTES

*Shenoute and the Women of the White Monastery: Egyptian Monasticism in Late Antiquity.* By **Rebecca Krawiec**. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002. xii + 248 pp. \$49.95 cloth.

Shenoute was a hugely important figure in the world of Egyptian Christian monasticism during the late fourth and early fifth centuries. However, his contributions have received much less attention than other key figures in this movement. Part of this lack of attention has to do with the difficulty of Shenoute's writings. Shenoute composed in rhetorically dense and complex Coptic, and the sources themselves are in such disarray that it has been and continues to be difficult to get a clear picture of Shenoute or his world. Rebecca Krawiec's intriguing study aims to redress this neglect and to shed new light on both Shenoute and the monastic community he headed. But while the figure of Shenoute is important to Krawiec's study, it is important to note that he is part of a larger set of concerns. These concerns revolve around the women who took monastic vows as part of Shenoute's White Monastery in Upper Egypt and whose lives unfolded in more-or-less continuous debate with Shenoute, their self-appointed monastic superior. The subject of Krawiec's book—how these women composed their lives within the context of this strict and deeply patriarchal monastic culture—is both timely and important. But it is also, at least at first glance, improbable. Shenoute was a fierce, even harsh disciplinarian, meting out strict punishment (often corporal punishment) to men and women alike. He could be exacting and violent in demanding compliance with his vision of monastic life. This would not appear to be a very promising place to examine women's monastic life and experience.

Still, this is what Krawiec sets out to do. And it is a credit to her that she does so with such scholarly acumen and insight. One of the real achievements of this book is the methodological sophistication Krawiec brings to bear upon an immensely complex subject. Three interlocking methodological issues define her approach to the material, and in each case she is both technically sound and perceptive. The first pertains to textual issues, that is the translation and assessment of the relative value of the letters and fragments of letters with which she is working. Krawiec's work in this area is painstaking and is necessary to all that follows. Only by establishing the letters' value (as well as their limitations) and giving us access to them can she give her attention to the more interesting and substantive questions about Shenoute and the women of the White Monastery that interest her (and will likely interest readers the most). This highly technical textual work is largely hidden from view, but is part of her contribution to our understanding of this monastic community. A second methodological concern is rhetorical. Krawiec carefully considers the rhetorical strategies that Shenoute employs in his letters to ask what these strategies can tell us about the concerns of Shenoute and of the communities for whom he was writing. Finally, she explores certain historiographical questions, namely the extent to which we can reconstruct the life of the community of the White Monastery. All of these elements are significant. Indeed it is a testament to the author's skill as an interpreter that she is able to move from the tiniest minutiae of textual criticism to the larger, interpretive questions—all within the bounds of a single study.

But Krawiec's interests are not limited to textual, rhetorical, and historiographical issues. That is, her work is not merely descriptive, nor does it have as its only aim the retrieval of the story of the women of the White Monastery as part of the larger historical story of early Christian monasticism. She is equally committed to examining issues of power and gender in her discussion of the lives of these women. And it is here that her study makes one of its most significant contributions. Her examination of Shenoute's letters reveals a fundamental and significant tension in the way that life in the White Monastery was imagined and practiced. Shenoute advocated a universal monasticism that he defined in terms of purity of the body, a vision of monasticism that applied equally to men and to women. Those living this "angelic life" became a salvific community, one that created in this life an expression of what Shenoute expected to be more fully realized in the afterlife. Yet this universal vision of monasticism did not translate itself into the day-to-day life of the monastery. Shenoute's need to separate the sexes created a tension between his theological reasoning, which denied difference, and his "actual leadership of the women's community, which relied on social construction of masculinity and femininity to justify the structure of the monastery."

Such a gap between vision and practice is not really surprising, given what we know of similar rifts elsewhere within early Christian monasticism. What is surprising and intriguing is the extent to which the women of the White Monastery continued to articulate their own sense of the meaning of their monastic life in spite of the ambiguous vision and harsh strictures of their leader Shenoute. That is one of the main accomplishments of this fine book, to demonstrate how this happened within the complex and ambiguous context of the White Monastery. A work of painstaking historical reconstruction, this book also offers a sophisticated and original theoretical reading of the way power and gender shaped the life of a particular early Christian monastic community. It is the deft weaving of these two perspectives that makes this work such a valuable contribution to our emerging understanding of ancient Christian monasticism.

**Douglas Burton-Christie**  
Loyola Marymount University

*A History of Women and Ordination, Vol. 1: The Ordination of Women in a Medieval Context.* Edited by **Bernard J. Cooke** and **Gary Macy**. Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow, 2002. xiv + 184 pp. \$55.00 cloth.

The flagship volume in a series well worth watching, this book nicely dovetails two essays.

Gary Macy documents the diversity and frequency with which "ordination" was applied to a variety of ministries fulfilled by women in the early Middle Ages. That application ended only when the Roman Catholic Church came to adopt a much more restrictive and sacramental understanding of the term over the course of the twelfth century.

In a longer essay, John Hilary Martin reports on the persistence of the question of women's ordination—curiously, even after the concept of ordination itself was settled in this new, restrictive sense. The scope of his research is impressive, encompassing as many as four dozen separate commentaries on Lombard's *Sentences* (as well as various canon lawyers) from the