

Temptation and the Other: Christian Monks, Sex, and Saracens in the Late Antique Sinai

The emergence of Christianity as an Empire-wide religion had a transformative effect on numerous communities throughout the south-eastern Mediterranean. The Sinai Peninsula, in particular, was profoundly changed from a relatively unknown region and into one of the most important spiritual locations in the Greco-Roman world. Christian monks began settling the area in the second half of the fourth century CE. The rise of asceticism in the desert attracted pilgrims, such as Egeria and the Piacenza pilgrim, both of whom wrote accounts of their travels.

But, the Sinai was not uninhabited. The Christians encountered a population of nomadic tribes whom they called “Saracens.” Christian sources describe an antagonistic relationship between the monks and the “Saracens.” For example, Ammonius and pseudo-Nilus describe attacks committed by the Saracens against the monks of the Sinai in gruesome detail. Pseudo-Nilus also provides the ethnographic details concerning the Saracens and creates a dichotomy of lifestyles between the holy monks and the demonized Saracens.

One aspect of this dichotomy was developed by stories of pagan sacrifice of both animals and humans committed by the “Saracens.” These sacrifices had a sexual element to them, as they were made to the Morning Star, associated with the worship of al-Uzza and Aphrodite by the “Saracens.” Pseudo-Nilus narrates how his son Theodulus was almost sacrificed. Pseudo-Nilus describes the sacrifice in terms of despoiling the previous chaste Theodulus and describes him as the victim of a “demon of lust.” Importantly, he mentions how this sacrifice was set to occur on “rocks,” likely betyl stones known from Nabataean worship.

The temptations of monks were common themes in Hagiographic literature. For example, Antony, commonly described as the first monk, encountered demons disguised as naked women. Occasionally, these descriptions had a racial or ethnic connection, as children described as

“Blacks” often approached monks offering pederastic sex. Pseudo-Nilus can therefore be seen in this tradition. However, his description would have a lasting impact because John of Damascus describes Muhammad and the Ka’aba using terms remarkably similar to those used by Pseudo-
Nilus.