SAYINGS OF THE DESERT FATHERS:

THE BEGINNING OF A NETWORK

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I began my final project with in interest in the text, *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*. The text is made up of sets of quotes from monastics who inhabited the desert from the 3rd-5th century CE. These quotes were originally transmitted, but were aggregated into a collection of texts in the 4th or 5th century.[[1]](#footnote-1) While scholarly work has been done on the transmission and interpretation of the text, no attempt has been made to conceive of a social network within the text.[[2]](#footnote-2) Building upon theoretical and digital frameworks established by Clark and Michelson, I have tagged the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers* in xml and developed a series of python codes in jupyter notebook in order to establish a base upon which the social network latent in the text might be visualized.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Though the final project did not answer all of the research questions with which I began, the original research questions colored my choice of xml tags and the direction of my coding. So I will list them here before I explain the process of my project. My project began with the following questions: What monks are mentioned in the text? Where are they? How solitary are hermitic monks? Who are the monks talking to (if anyone)? Is there social network between monks mentioned in the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*? How did early Christians conceive of monasticism?

Through close reading, which the process of tagging the text in xml only enhanced, I had seen the relation of monks to each other and I wanted to be able to create a digital visualization. However, the xml and python coding proved to be a little more complicated than I expected. So I ended up focusing on developing a system for xml tags and then spent time learning xpath/xquery in order to extract data using python from the text which I had marked up in xml.

I’ve attached an appendix which includes the details of the xml/tei tagging system I formulated. On my github account, I have uploaded the [xml-tagged text](https://github.com/alexvawter/dh-course-fall-2017/blob/master/isaw-final/sodf-1.xml) as well as a [template](https://github.com/alexvawter/dh-course-fall-2017/blob/master/isaw-final/sodf-template.xml) of xml tags with comments on how to use each set of tags. Because the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers* is rather long, I chose a subset of the text to mark in xml. I selected a group of twenty-four monks and entered their sets of sayings using Oxygen. Ten of the twenty-four are thoroughly marked up (i.e. I made full use of all the tags listed in the appendix), the last fourteen are only partially marked.

When I first began tagging the text, I was confused about how the relationships between the tags would be preserved. I ended up tagging one section of the text and then working with that section in python before tagging the rest. I think that brought clarity to the tagging system I ended up formulating in the end.

I had high hopes for the python coding section of my project (available via [jupyter notebook](https://github.com/alexvawter/dh-course-fall-2017/blob/master/isaw-final/vawter-isaw-sodf-final-1.ipynb)). I enjoyed learning python and working with Sebastian’s amphitheater data to make visualizations using pandas and other imports. However, learning how to move between isolating a section of the text in xml (e.g. writing code to extract all the <persName> tags in a text) and putting that information in pandas dataframe took me a long time to figure out.

I never got to the point of being able to count the number of times a person was mentioned in the text, then create a dictionary, and then a dataframe from the dictionary. So I ended up needing to import .csv files I created, which are also uploaded on github [here](https://github.com/alexvawter/dh-course-fall-2017/blob/master/isaw-final/sodf-refs.csv) and [here](https://github.com/alexvawter/dh-course-fall-2017/blob/master/isaw-final/sodf-places.csv), into my jupyter notebook to link some of the information from xml together. But, I did figure out how to create dataframes from xml and how to visualize some information from the xml.

By the end of working through my xml with python, at first I was a little frustrated with the outcome. No lines were drawn, and no networks visualized. However, relationships that were extant in the text were preserved. I can enter the name of a monk and see how many times he was mentioned in the text or have a list of just his direct quotes. I can see the which monks had conversations and where they traveled. And because I marked the text itself in xml, and did not create a spreadsheet of column-oriented data only, I can write code to extract the text that makes up that conversation or describes the travels of a specific monk.

Bibliography

Branch, Lori. “The Desert in the Desert: Faith and the Aporias of Law and Knowledge in Derrida and ‘The Sayings of the Desert Fathers.’” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, vol. 71, no. 4, 2003, pp. 811–833.

Chryssavgis John. ""The Road from Egypt to Palestine. The Sayings of the Desert Fathers: Destatination and Destiny"." *ARAM Periodical* 15, no. 1 (2005): 97-108.

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Ramphos, Stelios and Norman Russell. *Like a Pelican in the Wilderness: Reflections on the Sayings of the Desert Fathers*. Brookline, Mass.: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2000.

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APPENDIX 1

Use of TEI Tags:

All **element tags** are in bold text with their corresponding attributes, if any, are listed under the **attrib.** section beneath the element tag entry. Below I have described how I used each tag when marking up *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*.

The tags are in alphabetical order.

TEI Tags:

**<desc>** used to describe events. Placed within the <p> tag of the paragraph to which the description relates.

**<div>** marks divisions in the text, each section of sayings attributed to one desert father is marked as its own division

**attrib.**

type: “section” is used to mark every division thus far

n: “name of monk”

**<event>** used within <listEvent> to describe a relationship in the text that deals with places (i.e. a person lived somewhere).

**<geo>** used to add latitude and longitude to the text. Usually within or near a <placeName> tag.

**<listEvent>** used to preserve visitations, travels, and cities of residence mentioned within the text, always with a <relation> tag.

**<listPerson>** (list of persons) contains a list of descriptions, each of which provides information about an identifiable person or a group of people, for example the participants in a language interaction, or the people referred to in a historical source.

I’ve use it to mark spoken interactions/conversations between monks, while using <listEvent> for visitations, traveling, and residence. Usually with a <listRelation> tag.

**<listRelation>** used to list relationships, always with the <relation> tag.

**<p>** corresponds to paragraphs within Benedicta Ward’s text (which she marks by number). Usually marked within <div> tags, often contains quotes + relationship information so that any quote or relationship can be viewed within its context if the parent tag is called in python.

**<persName>** used to mark the names of people and groups of people. Each persName contains a “ref=” attribute/ID which is explained in detail below.

**<person>**  only used so <persName> tag can be used when using the <listPerson> tag to preserve a conversational/spoken relationship within the text.

**<placeName>** used to mark the mention of a place in the text. Often followed by a <geo> tag.

**attrib.**

ref: ID number

**<q>** used to mark direct quotes/active speech in the text. Usually with a “who=” attribute

**attrib.**

who: marks who is speaking the quote by using their specific ID number (e.g. m1, g8, a9)

**<relation>**

(relationship) describes any kind of relationship or linkage amongst a specified group of places, events, persons, objects or other items.

**attrib.**

type: supplies the type for the kind of relationship of which this is an instance.

- “conversation” – A conversation between two people occurred, but no travel, movement, or place was mentioned

- “said-to” – A monk spoke and there was no reply in the text.

- “visited” – A person or group of people traveled to see another person. The interaction with between the two (or more) people is preserved in the text.

- “traveled-to” – A monk left a place and traveled to another one.

- “lived-in” – A resident lived in a place.

name: supplies a name for active participant in the relationship.

- I have used the following:

- monk – if a monk is speaking

- visitor

- traveler

- resident

active: identifies the ‘active’ participants in a non-mutual relationship, or all the participants in a mutual one.

- monk ref# here

mutual: supplies a list of participants amongst all of whom the relationship holds equally.

- have not used, but may use for “conversation” relationship later

passive: identifies the ‘passive’ participants in a non-mutual relationship.

- monk ref# here

Example:

<relation type="visited" name="visitor" active="m1" passive="m2 "/>

This indicates that the monk with identifier m1 was the visitor of monk m2.

IDs for Attributes:

I created a system of URIs so that each person, group of people, or place mentioned in the text could be noted. Any quote or indirect reference to the same person or place is marked with the unique id of that person or place. Currently, there is also a .csv file which contains this list, and I will add future ids there. But I have retained to preserve the thought process behind the numbering system. Each place also includes a mention of where I found the latitude and longitude online. The key is as follows:

Key: m = monk; g = group of people; a = anonymous single; n=named non-monk, p=place, numbered by order of sayings and then numbered by first appearance

m1 – Abba Anthony the Great

m2 – Abba Bessarion

m3 – Abba Benjamin

m4 – Abba Daniel

m5 – Abba Zeno

m6 – Abba Zacharias

m7 – Abba Elias

m8 – Abba Theodore of Pherme

m9 –Theodore of Enaton

m10 –Theodore of Eleutheropolis

m11 – Theophilus the Archbishop

m12 – John the Cenobite

m13 – Isidore the Priest

m14 – Joseph of Panephysis \*\*restart adding <p> tags here

m15 – John the Persian

m16 – Hilarion

m17 – Cassian

m18 – Cyrus

m19 – Lucius

m20 – Longinus

m21 – Macarius the Great

m22 – Matoes

m23 – Poemen

m24 – Pambo

- then by order of appearance

m25 – Joseph (when not sure if it’s Panephysis or Thebes

m26 – Doulas

m27 – Ammoes

m28 – Arsenius

m29 – Abraham of Iberia

m30 – Moses

m31 – Agathon

m32 – Saba

n1 – Cyril, Bishop of Alexandria

g1 – anonymous group of brothers

a1 – anonymous hunter

a2 – man possessed with a devil

a3 – brother

a4 – one of the brethren

a5 – Abba Benjamin’s sons

a6 – A brother

a7 – The devil

a8 – Some brothers

a9 – The Faster

a10 – another old man

a11– old men

a12 – A brother

a13 – Egyptian brother

a14 – a brother

a15– a brother

p1– Scetis, 30.35 30.20, wikipedia

p2- Lycopolis, 31.5 30.57, wikipedia

p3 – Alexandria, 37.66817236 62.18384678, pleiades

p4 – Syria, 37.5 37.5, pleiades

p 5 – Palestine, 32.5 37.5, pleiades

p6 – Iberia, 41.836468 44.6891385, pleiades

p7 – Eleutheropolis 31.6123197, 34.8919445667 pleiades

p8 – Egypt, 30.2 31.13, Wikipedia (representative point = Cairo)

p9 – Pherme/Kellia 30.776003, 30.368868, pleiades

1. Benedicta Ward, *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Alphabetical Collection* (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian Publications, 1975). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Lori Branch, “The Desert in the Desert: Faith and the Aporias of Law and Knowledge in Derrida and ‘The Sayings of the Desert Fathers,’” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* (2003): 811–833; John Chryssavgis, "The Road from Egypt to Palestine. The Sayings of the Desert Fathers: Destatination and Destiny,” *ARAM Periodical* (2005): 97-108; Stelios Ramphos and Norman Russell, *Like a Pelican in the Wilderness: Reflections on the Sayings of the Desert Fathers* (Brookline, Mass.: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2000). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Elizabeth Clark, *The Origenist Controvers: The Cultural Construction of an Early Christian Debate*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992. Dave Michelson’s work on syriaca.org. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)