

Asketikon

also known as “Rule of St. Basil, Monastic Rule of St. Basil”

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Entry tags: Christian Traditions, Monasticism, Text, Orthodox/Eastern Christian, Religious Group, Early Christianity, Monastic Order, Christian monasticism

The “Asketikon” of St. Basil the Great, bishop of Caesarea in Cappadocia, is a text that aims to define the way of life of the monks in the coenobitic (communal) monastic system and to set conditions of behavior and conduct within the monastery. The text was originally composed for the members of the monastery that Basil founded in ca. 356 on the banks of the river Iris in Cappadocia. Before forming this monastic community, Basil traveled to the great monastic centers of his time in Egypt, Syria, Mesopotamia and Palestine in order to witness for himself the manner of life led by the monks in these countries. He observed that the monastic life tended to become exceedingly seclusive and he felt that there was a danger for this kind of monasticism to fall into extreme habits and practices. He believed that communal life is better than the ascetic-hermitical life. It corresponds better to human nature, for love of neighbor is best lived out in communal life, allowing thus the monks to easily fulfill the commandment of Christ. Hence, upon his return to Cappadocia, Basil formed his monastery and deliberately set himself against these tendencies. The “Asketikon” therefore is a series of rules that regulates the day-to-day life of the monks, down to the smallest detail, settles practical affairs and solves questions and issues of the monastic practice. With the “Asketikon” Basil laid down principles which guide both the abbots (or superiors) and the monks in their conduct. The Bible is the basis of all monastic legislation, the true Rule. The “Asketikon” is divided into two parts: the “Greater Monastic Rules” (*Regulae fusiis tractatae*) and the “Lesser Rules” (*Regulae breuius tractatae*). In 397, Rufinus, the translator of the “Asketikon” into Latin, united the two into a single Rule under the name of “*Regulae sancti Basilii episcopi Cappadociae ad monachos*”. From the 5th century Eastern monasticism generally modelled itself almost exclusively on Basil’s Rules. Moreover, the Rules were a major source for the Rule of St. Benedict of Nursia (AD 480–550), who is regarded as the founder of Western monasticism.



Date Range: 358 CE - 364 CE

Region: Cappadocia

Region tags: Turkey, Cappadocia

Cappadocia, the land where Basil of Caesarea was born and where he wrote his *Asketikon*.

Status of Readership:

✓ Religious Specialists ✓ Non-elite (common people, general populace)

Sources and Corpora

Print Sources

Print sources used for understanding this subject:

- Source 1: Anna Silvas, “The *Asketikon* of St Basil the Great”, Oxford University Press 2005
- Source 2: *The Rule of St Basil in Latin and English, A Revised Critical Edition*. Translated by Anna M. Silvas, Liturgical Press 2013

– Source 3: E. F. Morison, "St. Basil and his rule; a study in early monasticism", London, New York, H. Frowde, 1912

Online Sources

Online sources used for understanding this subject:

- Source 1 URL: <https://www.newadvent.org/cathen/02322a.htm>
- Source 1 Description: Rule of St. Basil
- Source 2 URL: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Basilians>
- Source 2 Description: Basilians

Online Corpora

Relevant online Primary Textual Corpora (original languages and/or translations)

- Source 1 URL: <https://www.stnicholasoca.org/files/basil.pdf>
- Source 1 Description: NPNF2-08. Basil: Letters and Select Works

General Variables

Materiality

Methods of Composition

- Written



Inked

- with Ink

Medium upon which the text is written/incised

- Papyrus

Was the material modified before the writing or incising process?

- Physical preparation

Was the text modified before the writing or incising process?

- Corrections

Location

Is the text stored in a specific location?

[Note at which point in time, for reference, if known; select all that apply]

– No

Is the location where the text stored accompanied by iconography or images?

– No

Is the area where the text is stored accompanied by an-iconic images?

– No

Production & Intended Audience

Production

Is the production of the text funded by the polity?

– No

Is the text considered official religious scripture?

– No

Written in distinctly religious/sacred language?

– No

Intended Audience

What is the estimated number of people considered to be the audience of the text
This should be the total number of people who would serve as the intended audience for the text.

– Field doesn't know

Does the Religious group actively proselytize and recruit new members?

– No

Are there clear reformist movements?

(Reformism, as in not proselytizing to potential new conservative, but "conversion" - or rather, reform - to the "correct interpretation"?)

– Yes

Notes: Reformist, in the sense that Basil proposed a program of cenobitic-monastic that aimed to eliminate the tendency towards extreme forms of eremetical-solitary life. There were, in fact, monks that never slept or never spoke, reclusives, stylites, forest-dwellers, wanderers, beggars and other forms of independent life. Basil's "reformation" was based on the fact that communal life corresponds better

to human nature, for it easily can fulfill the commandment of Christ. Since the purpose of the monastic life is to be like God, therefore one should not practice on his own in prayer and work, but towards others by word and deed.

Is the text in question employed in ritual practice?

– No

Is there material significance to the text?

– No

Context and Content of the Text (Beliefs and Practices)

Context

Is the text itself accompanied by art?

– No

Are there multiple versions of the text?

– No

Notes: Not exactly. Its author in fact, Basil of Caesarea, kept updating and reworking the text according to the needs and/or the questions of the monks and his experience as a simple priest at first; as a bishop later. Thus, although the core and the objectives of the text did not change substantially, there were rearrangements and additions.

Reference: Anna Silvas. *The Asketikon of St Basil the Great*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. isbn: 978-0-19-927351-5.

Is the text part of a collection of texts?

– Yes



Is there a sense of canonization?

– No



Is the text part of a series of volumes?

– No

Notes: Originally yes. The "Greater Monastic Rules" and the "Lesser Rules" were two distinct texts. They were merged however in what we know today as the "Asketikon" by Rufinus, the Latin translator of the text.

If the text is not explicitly scripture, is it part of another important literary tradition?

– Yes

↳ Cultural with religious implications?

– No

↳ Behavioral literature?

– Yes

↳ Other

– Other [specify]: Ascetical (monastic) works. In fact, the text sort of inaugurates the genre of monastic rules, since several authors/monks relied on the work of Basil, such as Benedict of Nursia (c.480–550), Theodore Studite (760-826), St. Athanasius of Athos (+ 1000). He composed the Rule of the Holy Mountain (Mount Athos), St. Theodosius of the Caves († 1074) etc.

Content

Is the text - or does the text include - a ritual list, manual, bibliography, index, or vocabulary?
(Select all that apply)

– Ritual manual

Are there lineages or a single lineage established by the text?

– No

Does the text express a formal legal code?

– Yes

↳ Are there formal institutions merged with the state or polity of the religious group?

– Yes

↳ Is there an institutionalized police force whose behavior is dictated by the legal code?

– No

↳ Is there an institutionalized judicial system whose behavior is dictated by the legal code?

– No

↳ Does the text in question specify institutionalized punishment?

– Yes

↳ Execution?

– No

↳ Exile?

– Yes

Notes: In the sense of banishment from the monastic community (brotherhood) of a reluctant or a disobedient monk.

↳ Corporal punishments?

– No

↳ Ostracism?

– No

↳ Seizure of property?

– No

↳ Are there any established institutionalized rewards specified in the text?

– No

Notes: The only reward that could be considered as "institutionalized", in the sense that it is part of the belief of the Church, is the salvation of the soul.

Formulating a specifically religious calendar?

– No

Beliefs

Is a spirit-body distinction present in the text?

– No

Notes: Not explicitly at least.

Is belief in an afterlife indicated in the text?

– Yes

↳ Is the spatial location of the afterlife specified or described by the religious group?

– No

Notes: However, the afterlife is described as the enjoyment of the Divine Glory.

↳ Is the temporality of the afterlife specified or described by the religious group?

– No

↳ Is there debate in the interpretation of the language of the afterlife?

– No

Is belief in reincarnation in this world specified in the text?

– No

Are there special treatments for adherents' corpses dictated in the text?

– No

Does the text indicate if co-sacrifices should be present in burials?

– No

Does the text specify grave goods for burial?

– No

Are formal burials present in the text?

– No

Are there practices that have funerary associations presented in the text?

– No

Are supernatural beings present in the text?

– No

Previously human spirits are present

– No

Non-human supernatural beings are present

– No

Does the text attest to a pantheon of supernatural beings?

– No

Are mixed human-divine beings present according to the text?

– No

Is there a supernatural being that is physically present in the/as a result of the text?

– No

Are other categories of beings present?

– Other [specify]: Angels

Does the text guide divination practices?

– No

Supernatural Monitoring

Is supernatural monitoring present in the text?

– No

Notes: Only indirectly. The purpose of the text is to define the context in which the monk will be able to live harmoniously and peacefully within the monastic community, so that he can unhinderedly achieve his salvation. The spiritual progress of the monk is therefore supervised by the abbot (the superior). This latter is in a way a representative of God, in the sense that he has under his responsibility and under his spiritual supervision the spiritual progress of the brotherhood.

Do supernatural beings mete out punishment in the text?

– No

Do supernatural beings bestow rewards in the text?

– No

Messianism/Eschatology

Are messianic beliefs present in the text?

– No

Is an eschatology present in the text?

– No

Norms & Moral Realism

Are general social norms prescribed by the text?

– Yes

Notes: The term "social" however applies only within the social context of the monastic community

Is there a conventional vs. moral distinction in the religious text?

– Yes

↳ What is the nature of this distinction?

– Present & clear

↳ Are specifically moral norms prescribed by the text?

– Yes

↳ Specifically moral norms are implicitly linked to vague metaphysical concepts

– No

↳ Moral norms are explicitly linked to vague metaphysical entities

– No

↳ Linked to impersonal cosmic order (e.g. karma)

– No

↳ Linked in some way to an anthropomorphic being

– Yes

↳ Specifically moral norms are linked explicitly to commands of anthropomorphic being

– No

↳ Specifically moral norms are have no (sic: have no?) special connection to the metaphysical

– Yes

↳ Moral norms apply to (select all that apply)

– Only specialized religious class

Notes: The ethics applied in monastic society are different from conventional ethics. A characteristic example of this kind of ethics is laughter: the text advocates that it is necessary to keep laughter in check. That because laughter, according to the text, merits no small vigilance on the part of ascetics. For to be overcome by unrestrained and unchecked laughter is a sign of intemperance, of a failure to steady the emotions and of a frivolity of the soul unchecked by strict reason.

Are there centrally important virtues advocated by the text?

– Yes

↳ Honesty/trustworthiness/integrity

– Yes

↳ Courage (in battle)

– No

↳ Courage (generic)

– Yes

↳ Compassion/empathy/kindness/benevolence

– Yes

↳ Mercy/forgiveness/tolerance

– Yes

↳ Generosity/charity

– Yes

↳ Selflessness/selfless giving

– Yes

↳ Righteousness/moral rectitude

– Yes

↳ Ritual purity/ritual adherence/abstention from sources of impurity

– Yes

↳ Respectfulness/courtesy

– Yes

↳ Familial obedience/filial piety

– No

↳ Fidelity/loyalty

– Yes

↳ Cooperation

– Yes

↳ Independence/creativity/freedom

– Field doesn't know

↳ Moderation/frugality

– Yes

↳ Forbearance/fortitude/patience

– Yes

↳ Diligence/self-discipline/excellence

– Yes

↳ Assertiveness/decisiveness/confidence/initiative

– Field doesn't know

↳ Strength (physical)

– No

↳ Power/status/nobility

– No

↳ Humility/modesty

– Yes

↳ Contentment/serenity/equanimity

– Yes

↳ Joyfulness/enthusiasm/cheerfulness
– Field doesn't know

↳ Optimism/hope
– Yes

↳ Gratitude/thankfulness
– Yes

↳ Reverence/awe/wonder
– Yes

↳ Faith/belief/trust/devotion
– Yes

↳ Wisdom/understanding
– Yes

↳ Discernment/intelligence
– Yes

↳ Beauty/attractiveness
– No

↳ Cleanliness (physical)/orderliness
– Field doesn't know

↳ Other important virtues
– Yes

Advocacy of Practices

Does the text require celibacy (full sexual abstinence)?

– Yes

Does the text require constraints on sexual activity (partial sexual abstinence)?

– Yes

Notes: The text advocates that it is necessary to renounce everything and then come to the monastic way of life. That includes the cravings of the flesh, bodily relationships and human friendships and any manner of life at war with the strict way of the Gospel of salvation. Any kind of sexual relationship therefore is forbidden. That applies for both males and females who wish to pursue this way of life.

↳ Monogamy (males)

– No

↳ Monogamy (females)

– No

↳ Other sexual constraints (males)

– Yes

↳ Other sexual constraints (females)

– Yes

Does the text require castration?

– No

Does the text require fasting?

– Yes

Notes: According to the text, fasting should be joined with zeal.

Does the text require forgone food opportunities (taboos on desired foods)?

– Yes

Notes: According to the text, it is most necessary for one who would give himself to the life of piety (and religion) to practise self-control. Yet, self-control does not at all mean complete abstinence from food, since this would indeed be the violent dissolution of life. On the contrary, the text advocates but abstinence from pleasures, i.e. from foodstuff that can lead to gluttony and consequently to behaviors incompatible with monastic life. Nevertheless, concerning food, the text admits that different people have different needs and they vary according to age and occupation and in proportion to bodily condition (strength and debility), so too the measure and kind of food should vary; it therefore allows the superior to make the necessary arrangements to meet individual circumstances.

Does the text require permanent scarring or painful bodily alterations?

– No

Does the text require painful physical positions or transitory painful wounds?

– No

Does the text require sacrifice of adults?

– No

Does the text require sacrifice of children?

– No

Does the text require self-sacrifice (suicide)?

– No

Does the text require sacrifice of property/valuable items?

– No

Notes: On the contrary, according to the text, the person that considers to follow the monastic life oughts not to relinquish his property as he pleases, but he should rather try to keep a careful account of everything, since from the moment he chooses this way of life he and his belongings are consecrated to the Lord, and he should administer it with all piety as far as it can be done. The text allows the person to do such thing either personally, if he has the capacity and experience, or through those who have been chosen for the work after extensive testing and have given proof of their capacity for trustworthy and wise administration.

Does the text require sacrifice of time (e.g. attendance at meetings or services, regular prayer, etc.)?

– Yes

Does the text require physical risk taking?

– No

Does the text require accepting ethical precepts?

– Yes

Does the text require marginalization by out-group members?

– No

Does the text require participation in small-scale rituals (private, household)?

– Yes

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- ↳ What is the average interval of time between performances?
 - Field doesn't know

Does the text require participation in large-scale rituals?

– Yes

- ↳ On average, how many participants gather in one location?
 - Field doesn't know

Notes: That depends from the number of the monks participating in the monastic community.

- ↳ Interval of time between performances (in hours)
 - Field doesn't know

- ↳ Are there orthodoxy checks?
 - Field doesn't know

- ↳ Are there orthopraxy checks?
 - Field doesn't know

- ↳ Does participation entail synchronic practices?
 - Yes

- ↳ Is there use of intoxicants?
 - No

Are extra-ritual in-group markers present as indicated in the text?

– Field doesn't know

Does the text employ fictive kinship terminology?

– No

Does the text include elements that are intended to be entertaining?

– No

Does the text specify sacrifices, offerings, and maintenance of a sacred space?

– No

Institutions & Production Environment of Text

Society & Institutions

Society of religious group that produced the text is best characterized as:

– Other

Notes: A bishop of the Eastern Orthodox Church.

Are there specific elements of society that have controlled the reproduction of the text?

– Other

Notes: Monastic communities.

Are there specific elements of society involved with the destruction of the text?

– Other

Notes: No specific element(s) of society involved with the destruction of the text.

Welfare

Does the text specify institutionalized famine relief?

– Yes

Notes: The text insists on the fact that man is a domesticated and sociable animal, not a solitary and wild one and advocates that nothing is more characteristic of the human nature than to have fellowship with one another, need one another and love one another. Since the Lord gave the seeds of these things in anticipation, he therefore seeks fruit from them, i.e. the love for the neighbours. For this reason Basil institutionalized poverty relief due to the great famine of 368-9.

Does the text specify institutionalized poverty relief?

– Yes

Does the text specify institutionalized care for elderly & infirm?

– Yes

Notes: The text refers to a hospice, where monks serve the infirm and, most probably, elders in need.

Other forms of welfare?

– Yes

Notes: Care for the orphans.

Education

Are there formal educational institutions available for teaching the text?

– Field doesn't know

Are there formal educational institutions specified according to the text?

– Yes

Notes: The text explicitly refers to the need of a school. Basil in fact was the first to organize monastic schools, where children could pursue a religious education.

Does the text make provisions for non-religious education?

– No

Does the text restrict education to religious professionals?

– Yes

Does the text restrict education among religious professionals?

– Yes

Is education gendered according to the text?

– No

Notes: The school accepted both male and female students.

Is education gendered with respect to this text and larger textual tradition?

– No

Does the text specify teaching relationships or ratios? (i.e.: 1:20; 1:1)

– No

Are there specific relationships to teachers that are advocated by the text?

– Field doesn't know

Are there worldly rewards/benefits to education according to the text specified by the text itself?

– Field doesn't know

Bureaucracy

Is bureaucracy regulated by this text?

– No

Public Works

Does the text detail interaction with public works?

– No

Taxation

Does the text specify forms of taxation?

– No

Warfare

Does the text mention warfare?

– No

Food Production

Does the text mentioned food production/disbursement?

– Yes

Notes: The text regulates the way in which the products of the monks's work should be sold, while there are references to the monk responsible for the maintenance and distribution of these goods to the rest of the fraternity. It was necessary for the monastic community to produce the food for its needs through cultivation.

↳ Does the text in question dictate how the religious group in question provide food for themselves?

– Yes

↳ Characterize the forms/level of food production [choose all that apply]

– Small-scale agriculture/horticultural gardens or orchards

↳ Does the text celebrate/restrict food provided to the group's adherents by an institution(s) other than the religious group in question?

– Field doesn't know

↳ Which of the follow are forms of ritual food production [choose all that apply]?

– Small-scale agriculture/horticultural gardens or orchards

Bibliography

General References

Reference: Anna Silvas. *From Edessa to Casino: The Passage of Basil's Asketikon to the West*.

Reference: Philip Rousseau. *Basil of Caesarea*. Berkeley: University of California Press. isbn: 9780520213814.

Reference: Augustine Holmes. *A Life Pleasing to God: The Spirituality of the Rules of St Basil*. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press. isbn: 978-0879076894.

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Reference: Philip Beagon. *The Cappadocian Fathers, Women, and Ecclesiastical Politics*. doi: <https://doi.org/10.2307/1584393>.

Entry/Answer References

Reference: Anna Silvas. *The Asketikon of St Basil the Great*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. isbn: 978-0-19-927351-5.