

# The Identity of the Stoic Monk

César Avilés

In this essay, I investigate Maxwell Staniforth's claim that Stoic monks existed before the 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE, and I also suggest a theory that may support it. Additionally, I introduce a Stoic monastic model as a division of the New Monasticism movement initiated by Raimon Panikkar in 1980.<sup>1</sup>

## The Identity of the Ancient Stoic Monk

In his introduction to the *Meditations*, Maxwell Staniforth wrote,

"Just as the Stoic professor was accustomed to withdraw from society and meditate in solitude, his Christian imitators not only followed his example but appropriated his terminology. In the Stoic vocabulary one who went into retreat was an 'anchorite'; one who practiced self-discipline was an 'ascetic,' those who lived apart from their fellows were 'monachi', and the place of their retreat was a 'monasterium'. Each of these borrowed expressions has retained its place and significance in the language of the Church to this day."<sup>2</sup>

Similarly, James Henry Bryant wrote in his book *The Mutual Influence of Christianity and the Stoic School*, "We are reminded by the hermits of the Christian Church of the Stoic anchorites from whom they differed but little<sup>3</sup>." There is a third testimony in the book *Daily Life in a Medieval Monastery*, but it will be omitted here because the author referenced Staniforth as her primary source.

Although Staniforth and Bryant entertain the existence of the ancient Stoic monk, modern Scholars agree the words *monachos*, *anchorite* and *monasterium*,

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<sup>1</sup> Panikkar, Raimundo. *Blessed Simplicity--the Monk as Universal Archetype*. First Edition, Seabury Press, 1982.

<sup>2</sup> "Introduction." *Meditations* (Penguin Classics) by Marcus Aurelius, Penguin Classics, 1995, p. 26.

<sup>3</sup> Bryant, James Henry. *The Mutual Influence of Christianity and the Stoic School*. Nabu Press, 2010, p. 80.

were not used in Stoic circles or anywhere before 324 CE<sup>4</sup>. I consulted leading Stoic scholars Anthony A. Long, John Sellars, Margaret Graver, Brad Inwood, and Tad Brennan, but none could explain Staniforth's claim.

The first monks originated in Egypt with St. Antony and the Desert Fathers. They were "instrumental in the formation of the Coptic Orthodox Church<sup>5</sup>"; thus, we assume that Coptic monasticism was the original form of monasticism. However, back in the 1st century CE, before anyone was called a "monk," Egyptian priests retreated to their temples to enact what we now know as "monastic practices." Porphyry, quoting Egyptian priest Chaeremon, gives us an account,

"Chaeremon tells in his exposé about the Egyptian priests, who, he says, were considered also as philosophers among the Egyptians, that they chose the temples as the place to philosophize. For to live close to their shrines was fitting to their whole desire of contemplation; and it gave them security because of the reverence for the divine, since all people honoured the philosophers as sacred animals. And they could live a quiet life, as contact with other people occurred only at assemblies and festivals, whereas for the rest the temples were almost inaccessible to others. For it was requisite that those who approached them should have purified themselves and abstained from many things. This, too, is as it were a common law of the Egyptian temples. They renounced every other employment and human labour, and devoted their whole life to contemplation and worship of the gods<sup>6</sup>."

Most interestingly, Chaeremon was also a Stoic philosopher. He left Egypt to teach Nero right before Seneca assumed that role in 49 CE<sup>7</sup>. Scholars E. Zeller<sup>8</sup> and M. Frede<sup>9</sup> assume that Chaeremon returned to Alexandria after working for Nero; unfortunately, we know nothing of Chaeremon's life after his work with Nero other than he died ca. 80 CE<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> Wimbush, Vincent. *Ascetic Behavior in Greco-Roman Antiquity* (Studies in Antiquity & Christianity). 1st ed., Fortress Press, 1990, p. 457.

<sup>5</sup> Wikipedia contributors. "Coptic Monasticism." Wikipedia, 7 Feb. 2021, [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Coptic\\_monasticism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Coptic_monasticism).

<sup>6</sup> Van der Horst, P. W. "The Way of Life of the Egyptian Priests." *Studies in Egyptian Religion*, Dedicated to Professor Jan Zandee. BRILL. 1982., Brill Academic Pub, 1982, pp. 63–64.

<sup>7</sup> Van Der Horst. "Introduction." Chaeremon, Egyptian Priest and Stoic Philosopher, Brill, 1984, p. IX.

<sup>8</sup> Die Philosophie der Griechen in ihrer geschichtlichen Entwicklung III L Hildesheim (Olms) 1963 (repr. of the 1923' ed.), p. 712

<sup>9</sup> Frede, Michael (1987). Chaeremon der Stoiker. In Wolfgang Haase (ed.), *Philosophie, Wissenschaften, Technik. Philosophie*. De Gruyter. pp. 2067-2104.

<sup>10</sup> Schneider, T. (2012). Chaeremon. In *The Encyclopedia of Ancient History* (eds R.S. Bagnall, K. Brodersen, C.B. Champion, A. Erskine and S.R. Huebner).

If Chaeremon returned to Egypt and lived another 30 years, he would have been in the perfect place (traditional monasticism originated in that area) at the perfect time (Staniforth claimed Stoic monks lived before Christian monks) among the right people (Egyptian priests who practiced a kind of monasticism [Chaeremon included]).

I asked Pieter van der Horst, the translator of Chaeremon's fragments, about my hypothesis. He told me that there were no Stoic monks in antiquity and that my idea was "utterly improbable." I kept digging and consulting dozens of books, finding no traces of the Stoic *anchorite*.

Perhaps the lack of evidence relates to a problem in communication between Stoic communities<sup>11</sup>. We know that in the 1st century CE, Stoic philosophers were spread out all over the Mediterranean. And yet, "Musonius makes no mention of his near contemporary in Rome, Seneca, and Epictetus and Marcus make no mention of Seneca either<sup>12</sup>." If that's the case, and if Chaeremon was at all related to the existence of the Stoic monk, then they may have flourished alongside Egyptian priests in the first and second centuries CE, suffering a decline during the mid-3rd-century CE<sup>13</sup>.

Another explanation may be that Staniforth and Bryant interpreted the spiritual retreat practiced by ancient Stoics—*anachoresis*, the root word for anchorite—as a "form" of monasticism. Furthermore, they may have had access to documents that are now difficult to find. Bryant wrote in 1866, whereas Staniforth's translation of the *Meditation*<sup>14</sup> was published in 1944. Unfortunately, neither of them provides a source for their claims.

At this point, I want to stress that the controversial existence of the ancient Stoic monk is, or *can be*, independent from a new Stoic monastic movement. Such an organization may well be founded as a division of the New Monasticism movement pioneered by Bede Griffiths and Raimon Panikkar<sup>15</sup>. I now turn to discuss the identity of the new Stoic monk and propose initial

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<sup>11</sup> One scholar believes the Stoics had not problem communicating across the Mediterranean. Boys-Stones, George. "1.3.2. Stoicism as a Textual Community." L. Annaeus Cornutus: Greek Theology, Fragments, and Testimonia (Writings from the Greco-Roman World 42), 1st ed., SBL Press, 2019, pp. 9–10.

<sup>12</sup> Sellars, John. "Marcus Aurelius and the Tradition of Spiritual Exercises." Forthcoming in M. Garani, D. Konstan, and G. Reydams-Schils, eds, *The Oxford Handbook of Roman Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press) (2021): p. 7. Print.

<sup>13</sup> Clarysse, Willy. "Egyptian Temples and Priests: Graeco-Roman." Lloyd / A Companion to Ancient Egypt (2010): 274–290. Web.

<sup>14</sup> See 2

<sup>15</sup> "New Monasticism." Wikipedia, 17 Apr. 2021, [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New\\_Monasticism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_Monasticism).

practices.

## The Identity of New Stoic Monk

To call oneself a Stoic, one must follow and be familiar with Stoic principles. Thus, the aspiring Stoic monk should begin by assimilating Stoic theory and practice. Special treatment should be given to the fundamental Stoic spiritual attitude: *prosoche*, or attention<sup>16</sup>. After undergoing basic Stoic training, the monk-to-be may join a Stoic monastery<sup>17</sup> and begin his probation period. As a branch of New Monasticism, the Stoic monk is akin to the "new" monk, defined as a "lay person who denotes a level of commitment to their spiritual life and lives this spiritual vocation *in* the world."<sup>18</sup> I argue that New Monasticism is compatible with (traditional) Stoicism in two primary ways:

- 1) Both engage *with* the world and prioritize moral actions,
- 2) Both have a conception of the divine that fits under the interspiritual umbrella.<sup>19</sup>

Moreover, how then can we differentiate the new Stoic monk from the Stoic philosopher? The answer is the monk's desire to bring together philosophy and mysticism. The Stoic "mystic" wants to find out "what bearing, if any, does the 'mystical experience' have upon the more important problems of philosophy?"<sup>20</sup> In light of this definition, I suggest the monk begins his integration of philosophy and mysticism with the practice of *anachoresis*, in my opinion, the foundation of Stoic monkhood.

"*Anachoresis* stems from the Greek verb *anachoré*, signifying 'to withdraw, go back, retreat.' Coined as a concept in the Hellenistic period, it commonly designates the religious practice of separating oneself from the worldly community of the *chôra* in order to facilitate a life consecrated to religious

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<sup>16</sup> Hadot wrote, "Thanks to this spiritual vigilance, the Stoic always has 'at hand' the fundamental rule of life: that is, the distinction between what depends on us and what does not." Hadot, Pierre. *Philosophy as a Way of Life*. 1st ed., Wiley-Blackwell, 1995, p. 84.

<sup>17</sup> This may be an online monastery. Stoic monks can be spread out all over the world, and an online community should facilitate the nurturing of this vocation.

<sup>18</sup> McEntee, Rory, and Adam Bucko. "Why New Monastics?" *New Monasticism: An Interspiritual Manifesto for Contemplative Living*, Kindle ed., ORBIS, 2015, loc. 225.

<sup>19</sup> McEntee, Rory, and Adam Bucko. "Interspiritual Revolution: How the Occupy Generation Is Re-Envisioning Spirituality and [New]Monasticism." *HuffPost*, 6 July 2013, [www.huffpost.com/entry/interspiritual-revolution-occupy-generation-re-envisioning-spirituality-and-newmonasticism\\_b\\_3164356?utm\\_hp\\_ref=religion](http://www.huffpost.com/entry/interspiritual-revolution-occupy-generation-re-envisioning-spirituality-and-newmonasticism_b_3164356?utm_hp_ref=religion).

<sup>20</sup> Stace, W., and Huston Smith. *Mysticism and Philosophy*. First Paperback Edition, Jeremy P. Tarcher, 1987, p.5.

spirituality<sup>21</sup>. “*Anachoresis* does not require absolute physical distancing from other humans; it should rather be seen as a particular principle for organizing everyday life<sup>22</sup>.”

At its essence, *anachoresis* is the recognition that our soul is not subordinated to the body. Marcus Aurelius retreated within<sup>23</sup>. So did Seneca and other ancient Stoics who meditated<sup>24</sup>, wrote notes to self (*hypomnemata*), and repeated maxims (*mneme*) as a way to keep Stoic principles at hand. Furthermore, I propose the novice Stoic monk may also benefit from retreating within himself to:

- \* connect with their own *Daimon*<sup>25</sup>
- \* reflect on "brief and fundamental truths<sup>26</sup>,"
- \* wash away distress<sup>27</sup>
- \* maintain equanimity
- \* identify with good behavior
- \* build moral character
- \* contemplate the divine, etc.

After a period of self-examination and retreating within (*anachoresis*), the monk can move on to more rigorous training. He could try to embrace a simple lifestyle, arguably *the monastic principle*. Also, the monk may consider the practice of social *oikeiosis* as suggested by Hierocles the Stoic<sup>28</sup>.

At the time of this writing, it is only possible to give the identity of the new monk direction, for different theories have to be tested, practiced, and developed before a more definite identity of the new Stoic monk can be established. Nevertheless, I think the sketch I propose is well-grounded and ready to flourish.

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<sup>21</sup> Stene-Johansen, Knut, et al. *Living Together: Roland Barthes, the Individual and the Community* (Culture & Theory). Transcript-Verlag, 2019, p. 31.

<sup>22</sup> Stene-Johansen, Knut, et al. *Living Together: Roland Barthes, the Individual and the Community* (Culture & Theory). Transcript-Verlag, 2019, p. 32.

<sup>23</sup> *Meditations* 4.3.

<sup>24</sup> This author attempts to reconstruct Stoic meditation: Buzaré, Elen. *Stoic Spiritual Exercises*. lulu.com, 2012, p.77.

<sup>25</sup> “Also they [the Stoics] hold that there are daemons (δαίμονες) who are in sympathy with mankind and watch over human affairs. They believe too in heroes, that is, the souls of the righteous that have survived their bodies.” *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, vol. II, bk. VII, 151

<sup>26</sup> Sellars, John. *Marcus Aurelius (Philosophy in the Roman World)*. 1st ed., Routledge, 2020, p.21.

<sup>27</sup> Sellars, John. *Marcus Aurelius (Philosophy in the Roman World)*. 1st ed., Routledge, 2020, p.21.

<sup>28</sup> Ramelli, Ilaria. *Hierocles the Stoic: Elements of Ethics, Fragments, and Excerpts* (Society of Biblical Literature Writings from the Greco-Roman). Sanderson Books Limited, 2009, p.xxxii-xxxiv

## Conclusion

The Stoic monk of antiquity is a mysterious agent whose existence cannot be corroborated with current documentation. Its modern counterpart can exist, I argue, as a division of the New Monasticism movement. The Stoic monastery may operate as a school of metaphysics, encouraging its monks to explore and research Stoic cosmology, consciousness, and other mysteries from the perspective of Stoicism.

In the end, I think Stoic monkhood is a calling, an urge to unite Stoic philosophy with the study of the divine. I am sure this new path will resonate with many contemporary Stoic practitioners and instill the pursuit of those obligations endowed to us<sup>29</sup> with the privilege of being human.

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<sup>29</sup> "The Four Roles We Play: Cicero On Duties 1.107-115." [Http://People.Wku.Edu/](http://People.Wku.Edu/), 2003, people.wku.edu/jan.garrett/302/4persona.htm.

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