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THE CALL OF THE DESERT

Christian monasticism made its earliest traceable appearance in Egypt and Palestine towards the end of the third century. In its primitive form it was a way of life adopted by solitaires, or anchorites, who lived in the desert. The word 'monasticism' itself derives from the Greek word *monos*, meaning 'alone': monks were people, mostly lay people, who had withdrawn from society to pursue the spiritual life in solitude. As Jerome, one of the early Western converts to the monastic life, explained to another convert, Paulinus of Nola, 'If you wish to perform the office of a priest, live in cities and townships, and make the salvation of others the gain of your soul. But if you desire to be what is called a monk, that is a solitary, what are you doing in cities, which are after all the dwelling places not of solitaires, but of the many?'¹

Some monks, in time the majority of them, lived in organised communities of their own kind; but the first in time whose footprints we can trace were the hermits. By the fourth century, the desert of Nitria, on the western edge of the Nile delta, and the wilderness of Judea were peopled by scattered colonies of hermits. For the most part these people were not clergy but lay Christians, who had migrated into the solitude of the waste places from the urban society of late antiquity.

Writers on the subject, both ancient and modern, have suggested two alternative explanations for the movement. Some, including Jerome (c. 331–420), have claimed that the first Christian anchorites were refugees who sought safety in the desert from the persecution launched against the Church under the regime of Decius and Diocletian. Others have argued that the movement was a symptom of a softening of the moral fibre of the Christian community after Constantine had given peace to the Church in 313. Seen from this angle, the asceticism of the

and the careerism that crept into the Church once imperial approval had given it respectability and brought it endowments. The advent of large numbers of merely nominal Christians, which followed upon public recognition of Christianity, impelled those who were more deeply committed to the religious life to separate themselves from their congregations. Both these explanations have some basis in our sources, but neither is completely satisfying in itself.

Ascetical withdrawal from the world – that is, the renunciation of marriage, personal property, and the ordinary pleasures and comforts of life, in order to discipline the senses and free the mind for supernatural contemplation – is a feature of other world religions besides Christianity. Buddhism has its monks; and Judaism, which is not conspicuously ascetical in its ethos, had its Essene tradition, which modern archaeology has done much to elucidate. The study of the Dead Sea Scrolls and excavation of the Qumran site have revealed the existence of a Jewish ascetical settlement at the time of Christ that displayed many of the characteristics of a later Christian monastery.

There was also an ascetical tradition in Greco-Roman philosophy, represented by the Stoics and the Neoplatonists, which counselled the man who aspired to perfect wisdom to avoid the distractions of marriage and social intercourse and live the life of a recluse. As we can see from the career of St Augustine, this pagan image of the sage or philosopher as a recluse exercised a powerful influence over the minds of educated Christians who had been schooled in the classical tradition. Augustine had been a teacher of rhetoric. But the earliest Christian anchorites were not for the most part highly educated men, and we must look elsewhere for the source of their inspiration.

Christian renunciation of the world was rooted in the Gospel. The earliest of the Gospel narratives, that of St Mark, begins in the desert with the prophetic voice of the Baptist crying in the wilderness. Before beginning his public ministry, Christ was led by the Spirit into the desert, where he fasted for forty days. Ecclesiastical tradition saw in this a parable of the conflict within the soul of the Christian: the quest for God involved separation from the world and the conquest of sensuality and human ambition. One of the passages in the Gospels that launched many ascetics on their spiritual career was the invitation of Jesus to the rich young man who asked, 'What must I do to be saved?' He was told, 'Keep the commandments; love your neighbour as yourself.' But he was not satisfied: he had done all this, or so he claimed, and he pressed for more. And in reply he received the devastating advice, 'If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.'

In fact, the desert monks were responding to a vocation which they found in the Christian tradition – to follow the 'evangelical counsels', to renounce property and ordinary human ties in the quest for spiritual perfection. They accepted the challenge of total surrender to Christ through the abandonment of worldly goods and prospects. But the quest for perfection involved more than

this. Renunciation was only the beginning of the journey of the monk. His ultimate goal was union with God through prayer. But man's predicament since the Fall made the journey of the soul to God a hard one. Original sin had left man's reason darkened and his senses in disorder. Human passions choked the life of the spirit. Thus the newness of life, of which the Gospel spoke, could only be realised in this life by the continual mortification of the natural appetites and the progressive purification of the mind. In the solitude, beyond the frontiers of human society and freed from its distractions and temptations, a man might through grace achieve that detachment from created things that led him in prayer to the supreme encounter with God.

In the first centuries of the Christian era, before Constantine proclaimed the peace of the Church, the ascetical spirit of renunciation was fostered by periodic persecution and the very real possibility of martyrdom. Many Christian congregations contained individual ascetics of both sexes, who renounced marriage and devoted themselves to a life of prayer and service to the deprived. This form of idealism was kept alive, too, by the expectations of the early Church, which stressed the need to live in constant readiness for the hour of divine judgement and the second coming of the Lord, an event that was believed to be imminent: '... the appointed time has grown very short; from now on, let those who have wives live as though they had none, and those who buy as though they had no goods, and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the form of this world is passing away.'² But the passage of time gradually dampened the urgency of this appeal. In the fourth century, the change from persecution to imperial recognition of the Church brought a sense of security and creeping worldliness in its train, and in this situation those who hankered for a more intense religious commitment were increasingly attracted by the idea of total withdrawal from the community.

The pull of the desert gained added force from the popular esteem that was accorded to the solitary holy man. For as the age of the martyrs passed into historical memory, their role as the heroes of the faith was increasingly occupied in the eyes of devout Christians by the monks. These were the new confessors, 'the athletes of God', who had renounced the security of property and the ordinary comforts of hearth and home to conquer the spirit of the world and scale the heights of contemplative prayer. As Sulpicius Severus wrote of St Martin of Tours, protagonist of the monastic movement in fourth-century Gaul, 'to fast, to keep unceasing vigil, to lacerate the flesh, this also is a martyrdom.'³ He was echoed in the ninth century by Abbot Smaragdus of Verdun: 'Let no man say, brethren, that in our times there are no combats for martyrs. For our peace has its martyrs also.'⁴

The deserts to which the early ascetics were drawn were those of Egypt, Syria, and Judea. Egypt, in fact, was the cradle of the monastic movement, which gradually spread into all the lands penetrated by the Church. It was on the fringe of the Western Desert, in the hinterland of the city of Alexandria, and

in the fertile lands higher up the Nile valley, that there appeared in the course of the fourth century two variant modes of ascetical life, each of which became the source of a distinct and enduring monastic tradition. The first was the way of life adopted by the desert hermits – the eremitical life of the solitaries, which took its name from *eremos*, the Greek word for a desert. Its acknowledged leader and inspiration was St Antony (c. 251–356), a Coptic-speaking Christian of the Alexandrian region.

The other and commoner way was the cenobitical life, that is the ascetical life practised within an organised community or monastery, which Greek-speaking Christians called a 'coenobium' – from the word *koinos*, meaning 'common'. According to tradition, the originator of the Christian cenobium, the first fully communal monastery, was St Pachomius (c. 292–346), who established a community of monks beside the upper Nile somewhere about the year 320. These two, Antony the hermit and Pachomius the abbot, represent the twin fountain-head of two traditions – the eremitic and the cenobitic – which constantly inspired and reinvigorated distinct types of monastic organisation in the Middle Ages, both in Western Christendom and in the Byzantine East.

The fact that Egypt was the arena for the pioneers of Christian monastic life is readily explicable. It reflects the dominance of the east Roman provinces in the polity of the early Church, and particularly the leading role played by the church of Alexandria in the theological world of the patristic age. Christianity, after all, had arisen and made its first conquests in the teeming cities of the Eastern Empire. Alexandria, with its famous schools of Platonic philosophy and Jewish Rabbinic learning, was a major centre of Christian speculation, a forcing-ground of major heresies, as well as the territory of Clement of Alexandria, Origen and Athanasius, the three greatest of the Greek Fathers. Its large Christian population offered a fertile seed-bed for fresh interpretations of the Christian life. And the intellectual element in the early monastic movement should not be overlooked. For not all the ascetics who fled to the desert were simple and unlearned people. The writings of Origen (184–254) were circulated and read in the desert communities, and Origen, who had had himself castrated for the sake of the kingdom of heaven, provided an ascetical theology of total renunciation. The two worlds of ascetical retreat and doctrinal controversy constantly interpenetrated one another. Athanasius (c. 296–373), patriarch of Alexandria and hero of the struggle against the Arian heresy, when driven from his see, found a refuge among the monks of Pachomius. Later, Alexandria was invaded by mobs of excited monks demonstrating in the cause of orthodoxy.

The desert hermits

We do not really know when the flight to the desert began. Antony first embarked on the life of a hermit shortly before the year 270, but it seems that he had predecessors. The *Life of St Antony*, attributed to Athanasius, makes it clear that he was

not the first of the anchorites. Athanasius tells us that when he experienced the call to the spiritual life, Antony renounced his inherited property, sought aged holy men living as a hermit on the fringe of the village and placed himself under his guidance; and during this phase of his ascetical training he was by other solitaries in the district. He was the heir of an already established tradition. But if he was not the originator of Egyptian monasticism, his life-story, as told by Athanasius, that provided the eremitical life with and most widely read manifesto and attracted a significant number of imitators. After his spiritual apprenticeship, he retired to live in a tomb within reach of a village. Then, as he attracted growing numbers of sightseers, he withdrew to a ruined fortress on the edge of the desert, and lived there in solitude for years. At the end of this period he emerged as a charismatic teacher and leader of monks: 'from that time', says Athanasius, 'there were monasteries in the desert and the desert was peopled with monks'.⁵ In the final stage of his career he retreated from the growing pressure of his admirers to a remote oasis in the Red Sea, where he died in 356 at a great age.

The saga of Antony represents the earliest traceable age of Egyptian monasticism. By the time of his death, the mountain of Nitria to the west of the delta and the inner desert of Scetis, forty miles to the south, had been settled by colonies of hermits. Similar settlements had also appeared in Palestine and Syria, inspired, according to Jerome, by St Hilarion, who had been instructed in the ascetical life by Antony.⁶ These colonies contained several hundred solitaries living in caves or huts out of sight, and generally out of earshot, of one another. A group of this kind was called a *laura*, a Greek word meaning a path or passage, and apparently derived from the common pathway that connected the caves in the mountain monasteries of Judea. At the centre of the settlement was a complex of buildings, which included bakeries and a church, where the group of hermits gathered on Saturdays and Sundays for common prayer and a weekly celebration of mass. There was also accommodation for guests: something had to be done to provide for the constant flow of pious sightseers of whom might prove to be recruits to the hermitage. Even anchorites required a modicum of food and clothing to stay alive, and the leaders of the movement enjoined their disciples to work for their livelihood. Out of the raw materials available in the region of the Nile they produced baskets, mats, ropes and other things which could be exchanged for basic necessities. The marketing of these products was left to agents in the local villages, so that the monks themselves could serve their solitude.

The life of the anchorite was not structured for him by any monastic authority. The only form of community support was the weekly gathering for common prayer. The abbot, the father-figure who directed the group, was available for counsel. It was he who trained the neophytes, for it was a cardinal principle of ascetical teaching that the beginner should place himself under the guidance of an experienced instructor. But apart from this, the spirit of the *laura*

intensely individualistic: 'Except a man shall say in his heart,' said Abbot Allouis, 'I alone and God are in this world, he shall not find peace.'⁷ The aspirant was taught how to brave the unbroke solitude of his cell, to meditate, and to engage in lonely combat with his own passions and illusions and with the demons of the waste places, who haunt the literature of the desert.

Fasting, deprivation of sleep, and other forms of bodily mortification were the standard weapons of the ascetic's armoury in his struggle for self-conquest. The novice's resolution was stiffened by tales of the feats accomplished by the heroes of this spiritual warfare. In about the year 420 Palladius wrote down what he had discovered about the lives of the desert anchorites in his *Lausiac History*. He had been a monk himself, though he could not stay the course. He still hankered after the fleshpots; but he garnered some good anecdotes from the brethren. One of these was about the Alexandrian Macarius (d. 393), a giant of the first generation among the hermits of Nitria. Macarius had heard of the superhuman austerities practised by the monks of Pachomius in the Theban desert of upper Egypt and he resolved to outmatch them. So he went to the monastery of Tabennesis, disguised as a man of the world, and sought admission as a novice. The abbot was doubtful of his staying powers in view of his advanced age, but was prepared to let him try. As Lent came on, Macarius observed that some of the brethren fasted for two days together, and one of them for a whole week, while others spent half the night standing in prayer. So he made his dispositions to outdo them all. He took up his stand in a corner, and remained there praying and plating mats, without food, drink or sleep, until Easter. This performance caused an outcry among the brethren, who complained to the abbot that this strange old man was making fools of them. But Pachomius fell to prayer, and it was revealed to him who his novice was. All the same, after thanking Macarius for knocking the conceit out of his youngsters, he gently asked him to leave: 'Now therefore return to the place from which you came; we have all been sufficiently edified by you.'⁸

The kind of competitive asceticism that drew a cool response from Pachomius seems to have been a characteristic of the eremitical movement in its early age. Later, wiser counsels prevailed. The classical masters of monastic spirituality discountenanced the more extravagant forms of mortification to be seen in the East. But spectacular feats by individual anchorites continued to excite veneration and feelings of awe among the people. Some of the wildest and most bizarre manifestations of the ascetical spirit appeared in the fifth century among the anchorites of Syria, who inhabited the desert in the region of Antioch and Chalcis. It was here that the most dramatic form of withdrawal from the world was personified by the weird figure of St Simeon the Stylite, who made his residence on top of a pillar, where he remained, exposed to sun and weather, for forty-seven years. Simeon commanded much admiration in the ecclesiastical world of his time, and he even had a few emulators, but his strange feat has no relevance for the history of the monastic tradition.

St Pachomius and the cenobitical life

The example of the desert hermits continued to inspire individuals and groups in the Middle Ages, but the vocation of the hermit was an extremely rare one. Man is a social animal. The life of the solitary was full of difficulties and hazards. Only the strong dare be lonely. Lesser mortals can all too easily sink into mental breakdown or despair. It was easier and safer to pursue the ascetical life of prayer with the support of a community engaged in the same task and within the reassuring framework of a Rule. This, the fully shared life of monks living in an organised community, appeared in upper Egypt almost as soon as the anchoritic movement. Its originator, according to tradition, was Pachomius (c. 292–346), another Coptic-speaking Egyptian, who had been a conscript in the Roman army before his conversion to Christianity. At first, in his quest for self-discovery he was drawn to the life of the anchorites; but after a time the need to organise and direct a colony of disciples that had settled round him persuaded him to create a collective establishment at Tabennesis, the site of a deserted village beside the upper Nile, in the region of the Egyptian Thebes. As recruits multiplied, fresh colonies were planted in the district, some for men, others for women. Each community had its own head, but Pachomius himself presided patriarchally over the whole congregation until his death.

The Pachomian monastery was a large community, numbering several hundred monks or nuns. According to Palladius, the great monastery where Pachomius himself lived, housed thirteen hundred men. Within the walls, which enclosed a wide precinct, a central focus was provided by a church, common refectory, and infirmary. There was also a guest-house, where the Rule required that visitors should be housed in comfort. The residences of the monks consisted of a series of simple houses, laid out with a functional precision reminiscent of the legionary camps Pachomius had known in his youth. Each house contained some twenty monks under the direction of a housemaster or prior, who was responsible for their instruction and spiritual guidance.⁹

The distinctive things about the life of the monastery were its fellowship – the daily round of collective worship in the oratory and the common meal – and an insistence upon total obedience to the commands of the superior. This surrender of personal will to that of a teacher, and the necessity of physical mortification, were things Pachomius himself had learned when, at the outset of his Christian life, he had placed himself under the direction of Palamon, an aged hermit, and both became cardinal principles of the Pachomian asceticism. Another axiom of the founder was the virtue of work. There could be only limited provision for intellectual activities in the Pachomian settlement. Many of the monks were, in any case, unlettered men of peasant origin, who had to be taught to read.¹⁰ But all were required to do manual work. Manual tasks were prescribed because the product could be sold to support the monastery, and because work was a sovereign remedy for the mental state of 'accidie' – that insidious demon of the burning noonday which tempted solitary and cenobite alike to abandon his vocation

through boredom and disgust. The Pachomian monks were grouped in their houses according to their skills. Most of them occupied themselves with manufacturing linen and making mats and baskets from the rushes of the Nile, which were ferried down the river to market – the boatmen figure prominently in the Rules of Pachomius. At regular times, the housemasters led the brethren to work in the cornfields and gardens surrounding the monastery, where the food of the community was grown.

St Basil

An important part in taming the ascetical idealism of the desert monks and integrating it into the organisation of the Church was played by St Basil of Caesarea. Basil represents a new kind of monastic convert. Unlike most of the Egyptian ascetics, he was a highly educated man from a professional family, educated in the schools of rhetoric at Caesarea and the academies of Constantinople and Athens. Drawn to the ascetical life, in the years 357–8 he set out on a tour of Palestine and Egypt in search of a spiritual director. He visited the eremitic colonies of Nitria and Scetis; but the deepest impression seems to have been made on him by the Pachomian communities in the Thebaid. On his return home, he retired to a remote place near Annesi in the north of Asia Minor, where he was joined by other hermits. But after experiencing the solitary life for a few years, he concluded that the organised life of the coenobium offered a better way, and he created a cenobitical community at Caesarea, which became a model for many other monasteries in Asia Minor.

As a writer, and in later years as bishop of Caesarea, Basil not only helped to bring the monastic movement under the control of the ecclesiastical hierarchy; he left a lasting mark upon the monastic tradition. He left no 'rule' in the sense of a blueprint for the interior organisation of a monastery, like the Rule of St Benedict. His so-called Longer and Shorter Rules are really a series of disconnected precepts or conferences, set out in the form of question and answer, the random harvest of the years he spent counselling the monks of Cappadocia and Asia Minor. But these, and his letters, reveal what he considered to be the essential principles on which a monastery should be based. In the first place it should be cenobitical – an integrated community. Basil's monks constitute a spiritual family living under one roof, a kind of villa-monastery, as opposed to the scattered *lavra* of the desert hermits or the huge subdivided Pachomian colony. The significant thing is that, after touring the eremitical settlements of Judea and Egypt and himself trying his vocation as a solitary recluse, he reached the conclusion that the ascetical life followed in community was better than the life of the anchorite. The reason for this was that the community was based upon the social nature of man and alone provided the opportunity of fulfilling the Christian commandment to love one's neighbour: 'Charity seeks not her own. But the solitary life removed from all others has only one aim – that of serving

the ends of the individual concerned. But this is manifestly opposed to the members of one another.' The defect of the solitary life was that it provided occasion to practise the virtues of humility and patience or to perform practical works of mercy: 'If you live alone, whose feet will you wash?'¹¹ Basil did not totally reject the authenticity of the hermit's vocation; he recognised that a man who sought freedom in the desert to be alone with the Alone was fulfilling the first and greatest of the commandments, which was to love God; he regarded the eremitical life as a less perfect fulfilment of the Gospel command than the life of the monk in community, where the spiritual gifts of the more advanced members might be passed on to others.

Basil left his mark upon monastic thinking in other ways. His conception of obedience to the head of the community was more subtle and far-reaching than that of Pachomius, and it represented an important refinement of the ascetical tradition. The novice was to renounce his own will and obey the superior in everything; in spirit as well as in act, on the model of Christ, who was 'obedient unto death'. There was no room in Basil's monastery for the individualism and spectacular ascetical feats of the Egyptian anchorites. The only kinds of mortification allowed were those that the superior had authorised. It was only thus that a fanatic who was bent on taking the kingdom of heaven by storm could be saved from falling into the pit of pride. There is a rationality and moderation in Basil's ascetical teaching that is the hallmark of a cultivated Greek intelligence.

Another theme of Basil's teaching that was to be influential was his insistence upon the virtue of work in the monastery. Work was a means of perfecting the soul as well as supporting the community and providing for the poor. He would have the novice taught a trade, if he did not possess one when he joined the community, preferably one of the sort that produced marketable essentials, such as agriculture, weaving, or shoemaking. Perhaps it was from the monks of the Thebaid that Basil derived his high regard for manual work – it was not a practical inclination for a highly educated Greek. At all events, it was a doctrine that made a deep imprint upon the minds of subsequent monastic legislators.

Although he left no systematic Rule, Basil's collected counsels for the organisation of a cenobitical community gave him a unique status in the Eastern Church where he came to be regarded as the father of Orthodox monasticism. Nevertheless, despite his preference for the cenobitical life, in the monastic world of the Byzantine Empire the eremitical tradition continued to hold a prominent place in practice and public esteem, alongside that of the organised coenobium. A long series of Orthodox ascetical theologians, from St Maximos the Confessor in the seventh century to St Gregory Palamas in the fourteenth, bears witness to the persistence of the desert ideal. The major centres of Orthodox monasticism, such as the peninsula of Mount Athos, in northern Greece, and the rocky canyon of the Meteora in Thessaly, were peopled by anchorites living in caves as well as thousands of monks living in cenobitic communities.¹²

The desert tradition transmitted to the West

Knowledge of the monastic movement, which spread across the eastern provinces of the Empire during the fourth century, was transmitted to western Europe through various channels. Interest was awakened by the dissemination of literature about the desert monks, by migration to the West of refugee bishops like Athanasius and of individual ascetics like Cassian, and by accounts brought back by pilgrims and pious sightseers.

It was the literature of Egyptian monasticism that brought the first flood of converts. More than any others, the work that made the deepest and most long-lasting impression upon Western readers was the *Life of St Antony* by Athanasius. He explains that he has written it to give encouragement to the brethren across the seas. And the strange ferment it caused must have fully satisfied his expectations. It was quickly translated into Latin, and by the year 374 Evagrius of Antioch, the friend and patron of Jerome, had improved on the earlier version with a more elegant translation, for, as he explained, 'a literal translation from one language to another occludes the sense and strangles it, as couchgrass does a field of corn'.¹³ It was read with passionate interest in Christian circles at Rome and Milan, and at Trier, where the imperial court was located. It was in his house at Milan, in the summer of 386, that Augustine heard an account of it from a visitor who had come from Trier; and it was the story of the desert anchorites that stirred his conscience and brought on the crisis of his conversion. He was only one of the first of a long line of Western Christians who were to fall under the spell of the Antonian desert.

In the course of the following decades, other literary accounts of the lives of the Desert Fathers became available to Latin readers. Stirred by the success of Evagrius, Jerome wrote a colourful *Life of Paul the Hermit*, and translated the Rules of Pachomius. His friend Rufinus of Aquileia, who had settled in a monastery at Jerusalem, translated the *History of the Monks in Egypt* from Greek into Latin. Like the *Lausiac History* of Palladius, this was an account written by a monk – a member of Rufinus's own community – who had made a pilgrimage to Egypt and gathered recollections from the aged anchorites on the spot. There were other travellers, too, who extracted literary capital from their tours of Nitria and the Thebaid, like Posunianus, who supplied Sulpicius Severus with anecdotes about the desert monks for the first book of his *Dialogues*, which he wrote in 430. As time went on, a mass of oral tradition accumulated and gradually assumed written form in the various versions of *Aphroditagmata* or Sayings of the Fathers – collections of maxims which circulated in Greek and Coptic and were eventually translated into Latin. But more faithfully than anywhere else, the ethos of the desert and the teaching of the famous abbots were encapsulated in the *Confferences* of the Scythian-monk John Cassian.

About the year 385 Cassian left his monastery at Bethlehem in the company of Germanus to tour the monastic settlements of Egypt. He stayed at Nitria and

Scetis, and sat at the feet of the veterans in their cells. He was a good listener, and years later, when the violent controversy over the theology of Origen had driven him from the East, he settled in the south of Gaul and sat down to distil the wisdom of the anchorite-abbots for the benefit of Western readers. In these conferences the reader is given the freedom of the cells of Scetis and is allowed to listen to the aged masters of the contemplative life talking about their experience. Of course, memory is an incorrigible improver. We cannot be sure how much Cassian's recollections improved upon the discourses of the Egyptian abbots, for twenty-five turbulent years intervened before he committed them to writing. But the work became a classic of Latin spirituality – part of every monk's essential reading. Cassian was the maestro whose writing taught St Benedict and his successors the ascetical lore of the East. His *Confferences* provided an inexhaustible treasury of axioms and reflections on the techniques and trials of the interior life of prayer; and the *Institutes*, a treatise he wrote for a community of monks he helped to found at Apt in Provence, contained the first body of instruction on the cenobitic life to be produced in western Europe. Together these two works did much to form the spirit and shape the pattern of early Western monasticism; and they continued to provide daily food for meditation in the cloisters of the Middle Ages.

The first Western monks

According to Jerome, it was the visit of Athanasius to Trier and Rome during his years of exile (335–7 and 339–46) that gave Western monasticism the kiss of life. Certainly, he was an enthusiastic propagandist for the ideals of the Egyptian monks; but the process of cross-fertilisation between the two traditions was too complex to be the work of a single individual.¹⁴ Probably Hilary of Poitiers (c. 315–67) played just as big a part in transplanting Eastern monastic practices to the lands of the Western Empire. Hilary had been driven into exile in Asia Minor by the ascendancy of the Arian heresy at the imperial court, and during his enforced travels he must have encountered the monastic movement. On his return, he sponsored a group of ascetics in his episcopal city of Poitiers, and he became the patron and mentor of St Martin of Tours, who settled in Gaul about the year 360.

Martin is the first major figure in Gallic monasticism. He had had a career in the Roman army before his conversion. Having decided to adopt the life of an anchorite, he installed himself in a cell near Milan, where he remained until the hostility of the Arian bishop persuaded him to migrate to Gaul. The reputation of Hilary drew him to Poitiers, and it was at Ligugé, in the vicinity of the town, that he settled in a hermitage, which became a focal point for like-minded souls. Martin's association with Hilary made him widely known and led to his appointment to the see of Tours, but his elevation to the episcopate in no way diminished his devotion to the monastic life. Even as a bishop he persisted in maintaining the life-style of a hermit; and after the year 372 he organised his disciples as a colony

of hermits at Marmoutier, outside Tours. The settlement of Marmoutier looks very like an Eastern *laura*, but we cannot tell whether Martin had ever been to Egypt or how much he owed to contact with the Desert Fathers. Certainly the *Life of St Martin* by Sulpicius Severus, like the *Dialogues*, betrays the influence of Nitria and Scetis on every page; but Sulpicius was writing after 400, with the enthusiasm of a disciple, and his purpose was to show that the sanctity of St Martin placed him in the same league as the greatest of the Egyptian ascetics: 'You have conquered, O Gaul,' shouted Postumianus, 'all the eremites and anchorites.'¹⁵ The biography by Sulpicius proved to be a classic of medieval hagiography, a 'bestseller'. It stamped the portrait of St Martin upon the imagination of medieval Christendom, and it provided a powerful stimulus to the monastic movement in Gaul.

As the fame of the Eastern ascetics spread, a tiny but growing stream of aspirants from the West began to flow into Syria and Egypt. One among this first generation of converts was the wealthy Roman widow, Melania, who set out to visit the Egyptian anchorites in 372. During her stay at Nitria she met Rufinus, the friend of Jerome, who was on a similar pilgrimage. It was the beginning of a lasting spiritual friendship. Both of them eventually settled at Jerusalem, where they established and directed two cenobitical monasteries, one for men and one for women, on the Mount of Olives. These twin outposts of Latin Christianity were to form the nucleus of an expatriate colony of Western ascetics living in the Holy Land.

Jerome himself did much to promote the ideals of oriental monasticism at Rome. Like Rufinus, he had felt the pull of the desert, and towards the end of 374 he took the plunge and went off to try his vocation as a hermit in Syria. But he could not bear to be parted from his library. His cave in the desert of Chalcis turned into a secluded study, from which his pen maintained an unbroken lifeline to the turbulent world of ecclesiastical politics. His experiment in the anchoritic life lasted upwards of two years and was then abandoned. Back in Rome in 382, he assumed direction of a pious group of wealthy women who had already adopted a quasimonastic life-style. Chief among them were two widowed noblewomen, Marcella and Paula. Marcella had learned about the Desert Fathers through reading the *Life of St Antony* and through conversations with Peter, the exiled patriarch of Alexandria. Now, under the direction of Jerome, she turned her spacious villa on the Aventine into a kind of conventual establishment for a circle of like-minded friends and servants. But Jerome's heart still lay in the East, and in the summer of 385 he set off for Palestine, where he was joined by Paula and her household. Together they toured the Holy Places and the eremitical colonies of Egypt before finally settling at Bethlehem. There Paula financed the construction of a monastery for men and a convent for nuns, where she and Jerome spent the rest of their lives.¹⁶ It was there that he accomplished the extraordinary feat of retranslating the Old Testament into a new Latin version, which gained recognition as the standard text, or Vulgate.

The migration of ascetics was a two-way traffic. While the Latin monasteries at Jerusalem and Bethlehem were constantly reinforced by new arrivals from the

West, the monastic movement in western Europe derived a powerful stimulus from the migration of Eastern ascetics. Many of these, like John Cassian, were driven to seek refuge in the West by the violent theological controversies that had their storm-centre at Alexandria. After staying a while at Rome, Cassian moved to Gaul; and about the year 410 he established twin monasteries, one for men and one for women, at Marseilles. Although he was convinced that the anchorite represented the highest form of Christian life, he regarded the cenobitic life as a necessary preparation – one that differed in degree rather than in kind from the contemplative life of the hermit. So both his communities at Marseilles were organised as cenobitic monasteries; and so too was the monastery he founded later at the request of Bishop Castor of Apt.

Another wanderer, more obscure than Cassian but who left a memorial that became nearly as famous, was Honoratus (d. 429). Hilary of Arles says he sold his patrimony in Gaul to go on a pilgrimage to the East. But soon after 410, about the time when Cassian was organising his communities at Marseilles, Honoratus returned and founded a monastery on one of the islands of Lérins, off the coast of the Riviera. Here the whole range of the desert experience seemed to be institutionalised: there was a central coenobium under an abbot, and also a cluster of satellite hermitages where the elders, who had been trained in the community, could venture out to the solitary struggle of the desert.

With the foundation of Marseilles and Lérins monasticism was firmly rooted in Gaul, and it continued to spread northwards through the fifth century. Lérins came to be a magnet and a school for aspiring monks and monastic founders from the northern parts of Europe, and its role was not confined to training ascetics. It was a flourishing centre of learning in a world from which classical education was fast disappearing. Its scholars provided some heavy artillery in the Pelagian controversy over grace and free will. It was also a nursery of monk-bishops.

The appearance of monks in the ranks of the episcopate signified the assimilation of monasticism into the ecclesiastical organism. At the beginning of the fifth century the monastic movement was still widely regarded as a fringe phenomenon. It had not yet won acceptance by the secular world or even the general approval of the ecclesiastical hierarchy. Those sections of the old senatorial aristocracy that had remained pagan viewed the ascetics of the new imperial religion with incomprehension and disgust. Rutilius Namatianus, prefect of Rome in 414 and champion of the old imperial cultus, referred disdainfully to the monks whose island he passed on his voyage:¹⁷

A filthy island filled by men who flee the light.
 'Monks' they call themselves, using a Greek name,
 Because they will to live alone, unseen by man.
 Fortune's gifts they fear, dreading its harm;
 Mad folly of a demented brain,
 That cannot suffer good, for fear of ill.

Rutilius spoke for the cultivated pagans. But even Christian society at Rome remained cool towards the practice of ascetical withdrawal from society that was advocated by Jerome.¹⁸ Despite the promotion by Athanasius and the example of St Martin, many bishops regarded the monastic movement with mistrust. This was heightened by the conspicuous and sometimes violent part played by monks in the theological controversies that rent the Eastern Church. The increasingly public role that the monks were assuming seemed to pose a threat to the hierarchical order of the Christian community. In 451 the Council of Chalcedon decreed that monasteries were subject to the jurisdiction of bishops, whose approval must be obtained for any new foundations, and insisted that monks should not interfere in ecclesiastical business.¹⁹

The mistrust was not all on one side. In the East, the monastic movement had sprung up alongside the secular Church, but independently of it. The communities of Nitria could call on the sacramental services of priests from the vicinity, but the movement did not derive its inspiration from clerical leadership. As was explained by the monk who wrote the earliest Coptic *Life of Pachomius*, 'our father did not want clerics in his monasteries for fear of jealousy and vain glory'. Although he was deeply versed in the Scriptures, Pachomius remained a layman, and he hid himself away when Athanasius on one of his visits to the Thebaid proposed to ordain him.²⁰ 'The monk', wrote Cassian, 'ought to flee women and bishops';²¹ and he warned the brethren against the diabolical temptation of seeking clerical office out of a desire to bring spiritual help to others. The author of the *Life of St Romanus*, the fifth-century founder of the monastery of Condat in the Jura, was even fiercer. He reserves some of his best invective for monks who get ordained: 'gaining clerical office out of rabid ambition, they are straight away inflated with pride and exalt themselves, not only over their worthier contemporaries but even over their elders – mere youths, who for their juvenile vanity ought to be put in their place and whipped.'²² Ecclesiastical office was regarded as part of that world of secular distractions that the monk had renounced.

All the same, unless it was to suffer the fate of all fringe movements, monasticism had to be domesticated and brought under the roof of the institutional Church. Its authenticity as a divinely ordained paradigm of the Christian life had to be recognised. It needed episcopal approval and encouragement. Athanasius had already pointed the way. At the height of the Arian dispute, when forced to abandon his see, he had found a refuge among the monks of the Thebaid and had become an admirer and devoted friend. Augustine, after his elevation to the African see of Hippo, lent his immense authority to the idea that the proper life-style for a bishop was monastic. And the *Life of St Martin* pointed the same moral. Thus a dangerous dichotomy between the ascetical movement and the ecclesiastical hierarchy was averted. Several monasteries of Gaul and Italy attracted the patronage and protection of bishops. Early in the fifth century, communities of clergy following a monastic regime were serving bishops at Vercelli and Aquileia, and at Rome the liturgical offices in the Lateran basilica were executed by

a community of monks – the first of a group of basilican monasteries – under papal patronage.²³

In fact, despite Cassian's warning, monasteries came to be a favoured recruiting ground for zealous pastors. Honoratus left Léris to become bishop of Arles, and in 429 he was followed in the see by Hilary, who had been one of his monastic disciples. In the following centuries the monk-bishop, from the Irish Aidan to the English Boniface, played a major role in evangelising the Germanic peoples of the North. Monasticism was thus integrated into the structure of the Church. But monks in general remained part of the lay section of the Christian community. It was some time before it became a common practice for those who entered a monastery to be ordained.

By the fifth century then, the ascetical tradition of the Eastern desert had been transmitted to the West. Monasticism had struck roots in Italy and southern Gaul. The writings of Cassian had supplied the Western ascetical movement with a theology. But it was not until the sixth century that the first treatises appeared that offered a coherent plan for a monastic community. The earliest of these were the Rules composed by Caesarius of Arles, St Benedict, and the unknown 'Master' who provided him with a literary model. Those of Caesarius were compiled in Gaul, those of Benedict and the Master in Italy. All of them drew deeply upon the oriental tradition.

Notes

1. *Epistulae*, PL 58, 583.
2. *I Cor.* vii, 29–31.
3. *Sulpicii Severi Epistulae*, CSEL I, ii, 144. For Jerome, the monk's profession was a kind of second baptism; the austerity of the monastic life made it analogous to martyrdom: P. Antin, 'Saint Jerome, in *Théologie de la vie monastique* (*Théologie* 49, Vienna, 1961), pp. 191–9; J. N. D. Kelly, *Jerome: His Life, Writings and Controversies* (1975), pp. 138–40.
4. *Diadema Monachorum*, PL 102, 688.
5. *Vita S. Antonii*, PG 26, 866. For Antonian monasticism see Derwas J. Chitry, *The Desert a City* (1966), chapter 1, and the works there referred to.
6. For primitive monasticism in Palestine see Chitry, pp. 14–16.
7. *Apophtegmata Patrum*, PG 65, 134. For extracts from the Sayings of the Fathers in translation see Helen Waddell, *The Desert Fathers* (1936).
8. *Historia Lausica*, PL 73, 1116.
9. The Rules of St Pachomius are translated by A. Veilleux, *Pachomian Koinonia II* (Kalamazoo, Michigan, 1981), pp. 141–67; for the Lives of St Pachomius *ibid.* vol. 1.
10. Veilleux II, p. 166.
11. *Regulae Fustus Tractatae, Interrogatio vii*, PG 31, 934; translated in W. K. Lowther Clarke, *The Ascetical Works of St Basil* (1925). See also the same author's *St Basil the Great* (1913); and B. Gain, *L'Église de Cappadoce au IV^e siècle d'après la correspondance de Basile de Césarée* (*Orientalia Christiana Analecta* 225, Rome, 1985).
12. On the Byzantine monastic tradition see J. M. Hussey, *Church and Learning in the Byzantine Empire 867–1185* (1937); D. M. Nicol, *Meteora: The Rock Monasteries of Thessaly* (1963).
13. *Eugenii ad Innocentium prologus*, PL 73, 125–6.

14. For the process by which the monastic lore of Egypt and Syria was transmitted to the West see R. Lorenz, 'Die Anfänge des abendländischen Mönchtums im 4. Jahrhundert', *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* 77 (1966), pp. 1–61; Owen Chadwick, *John Cassian* (1950).
15. *Sulpicii Severi Dialogi* i, CSEL 1, ii, 186.
16. Kelly, pp. 129–40.
17. *Claudii Ruffini Namatiani De Reditu Suo*, ed. L. Mueller (Leipzig, 1870), 11, 440–8. For a translation see H. Isbell, *The Last Poets of Imperial Rome* (1971), p. 233.
18. Kelly, pp. 104–15.
19. *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, ed. G. Alberigo and N. Tanner (Georgetown, 1990) I, p. 89.
20. Veilleux I, pp. 47–8, 51–2.
21. *Instituta* xi, 18, CSEL 17, 203. On Cassian's view of clerical office as a form of temptation see *Collationes* i, 20; CSEL 13, 31.
22. *Vita S. Romani in Vie des pères du Jura*, ed. F. Martine (*Sources chrétiennes* 142, Paris, 1968), p. 262. The whole question of the relationship of the early monastic movement to the ecclesiastical hierarchy has been investigated by P. Rousseau, *Ascetics, Authority and the Church, in the Age of Jerome and Cassian* (1978).
23. G. Jenal, *Italia Ascetica atque Monastica. Das Asketen und Mönchtum in Italien von den Anfängen bis zur Zeit der Langobarden* (Stuttgart, 1995) I, pp. 134–6. This is now the authoritative account of early monastic foundation in Italy.

2

THE RULE OF ST BENEDICT

St Benedict and his biographer

For many centuries in the medieval West the Rule for Monks composed by St Benedict provided the standard pattern of monastic observance. Richly endowed, and sometimes exploited by lay rulers, the great Benedictine abbey came to occupy a prominent position in the social landscape of Europe as lauding corporations, ecclesiastical patrons, employers of labour, and centres of learning. But we have to be on our guard against a tendency to project images of a later period backwards upon the earlier age when the Rule was slowly establishing its reputation. In his own day, St Benedict (c. 480–550), patriarch of Western monks, was a quite obscure Italian abbot, and we know surprisingly little about the origins of his Rule.

In many ways the first half of the sixth century, when he lived, is a bad period for literary sources. The Roman Empire in the West had been succeeded by a cluster of unstable barbarian kingdoms ruled by Germanic warlords. Italy had been subjected to a century of settlement by the Ostrogoths, at the end of which the peninsula was plunged into a prolonged and destructive war by Justinian's effort to recover it for the East Roman Empire. Siege and counter-siege had gone far to reducing the city of Rome to ruins, inhabited by a much shrunken population. During this troubled period the West produced little in the way of historical writing that could be compared with the literary histories of antiquity. 'Among all our people', lamented Gregory of Tours, when he took up his pen to fill the gap, 'there is not a man to be found who can write a book about the happenings of today.' By contrast, Gregory's contemporaries produced a rich crop of 'biographies' in the literary genre that had been pioneered by St Athanasius and Sulpicius Severus – the hagiographical Lives of saints, designed to promote their

cultus and stimulate popular devotion. It is to a work of this kind that we owe what little we know about the author of the Benedictine Rule.

We depend in fact upon a single source – a *Life of St Benedict* written by Pope Gregory the Great about the year 593–4,¹ some forty-five years after Benedict's death. Attempts have sometimes been made to reconstruct a kind of identikit character study by examining his Rule, but modern textual criticism has shown most such efforts to be worthless: the very passages that were once thought to express the personal ideas of the author have been shown to be derivative. For St Benedict's life-story we have no alternative but to rely upon the 'biography' which constitutes the second book of Gregory's *Dialogues*. These are a collection of Lives of Italian abbots and bishops cast, according to a well-established literary convention, in the form of dialogues between a questioner and his informant.

It was the *Dialogues* that launched the cultus of St Benedict, for the book enjoyed immense popularity in the Middle Ages; and it is the earliest reference to him that we have. It evidently contains all that was known about him in Rome at the end of the sixth century; possibly rather more than was known. For Gregory's work is a piece of hagiography. It represents Benedict as both a holy man and a powerful wonder-worker or thaumaturge. His prayers conjure a spring from a barren cliff-top, enable his disciple, Maurus, to run on the surface of a lake, and restore to life children who have died by mishap. By contrast with the miraculous matter, there is a shortage of verifiable detail and a frustrating absence of chronological landmarks, except perhaps for an alleged visit of Cassino by the Goth Totila shortly before his entry to Rome.² These failings, and the lack of any contemporary source to corroborate Gregory's account, have caused some scholars to dismiss it as a work of allegory or pure fiction, and even to question the historical existence of St Benedict.³

Such comprehensive scepticism is unjustified. We must not allow Gregory's concern with miracles to distort our evaluation of his work. His purpose in writing the *Dialogues* was, of course, didactic; and the miraculous anecdotes were an integral part of his message. His object was to record and celebrate the conquests made by Christian asceticism in Italy in the early decades of the sixth century, when the country was under Gothic rule – to show that Italy, too, had its saints and heroes of the ascetical life, like Egypt. In fact, he was doing for Italy what Sulpicius had done for Gaul in the previous century, and the work of Sulpicius suggested a literary model. There, too, were to be found anecdotes about holy abbots and, as the centre-piece, an extended *Life of St Martin*. The heroic saga of the Desert Fathers was being repeated in Gaul. Gregory's *Dialogues* carried the same message for Italy. The Roman population, impoverished and humiliated under a barbarian regime, and further demoralised by plague and by Justinian's short-lived *reconquista*, was to understand that it had not been abandoned by God. The sanctity of its monks and bishops, and the marvels God had worked for them, were grounds for hope in the future. The theme gained added poignancy from

Gregory's own regret for his lost monastic vocation and his lament for the collapse of the old social order.

Thus miraculous signs were essential to Gregory's purpose. The more sophisticated part of Gregory's readership, consisting of the clergy and more would have recognised their symbolic significance. For less cultivated readers they simply accorded with a popular conviction, widespread in late antiquity that the holy man wielded mysterious powers over the forces of nature. For historian, the important part of the miracle stories is their context, and that is no reason to think this was fictitious. Gregory, after all, was writing oral history for a live Italian readership. If his readers were to accept his message, could neither invent the topographical setting of the anecdotes, nor could invent personalities who had existed within living memory. Author and reader alike were surrounded by the visual evidence of the recent past. Cassino and Subiaco were lying ruinous and deserted, as St Benedict had prophesied. They were still living those who could remember the life at Cassino before the Lombards burnt it, and who had known the founder. Some of them are named Gregory as the source of his information.

Gregory tells us that Benedict was born in central Italy in the province of Nursia – the conventional date of 480 is pure surmise – and was sent to Rome for his education in liberal letters. But, distressed by the debauched life of his fellow students, he abandoned the schools, 'knowingly ignorant and wisely untaught and fled with his nurse to the village of Afide, some twenty miles away. From there he withdrew to the solitude near Subiaco, a deserted spot in the Sabine Hills, where he lived in a cave for three years. In ascetical tradition, this initial retreat into solitude became a topos – a necessary phase in the process of dissonation from society and the reorientation of the personality towards God.

During this time Benedict was supplied with bread by a monk named Romanus from a nearby monastery, who also instructed him in the practices of ascetical life. Gradually, disciples settled round him, and he organised them into groups of twelve, appointing an abbot over each group. Finally, he migrated to the hilltop of Monte Cassino which towers above the Via Latina midway between Rome and Naples, and there he constructed a fully cenobitical monastery, which he directed for the rest of his life.

He died, Gregory seems to indicate, some time between the years 546 and 550 and was buried at Cassino. In the *Dialogues* Gregory makes only a single reference to St Benedict's Rule: 'He wrote a Rule for monks remarkable for its discretion and the lucidity of its language. If anyone wishes to know more about his teaching and conversation, he can find all the facts of the master's teaching in this sacred institution of the Rule, for the holy man could not teach otherwise than lived.'⁴ This is the earliest known reference to the Rule and it is all that Gregory has to say about it. He may himself have read it, but there is nothing else in *Dialogues* to show that he had done so.⁵

The Rule and its sources

Among the innumerable manuscripts of the Rule, the earliest extant is probably one that was copied in Anglo-Saxon England about the year 750, which is now at Oxford in the Bodleian Library. But a more precious copy is one that survives in a manuscript of Saint-Gall. This is a copy made at Aachen early in the ninth century from a codex that Theodemar, the abbot of Monte Cassino, had sent to Charlemagne. Charles had written to request an authentic text for use in his dominions, and the codex that Theodemar sent him was copied at Cassino from the manuscript that was believed to be St Benedict's own autograph. It seems then that we have in the Saint-Gall manuscript a text derived at only one remove from the author's original – a rare thing for a widely disseminated text of such antiquity.

Although we cannot be sure when Benedict compiled it, there are internal signs that the work in its existing form was not composed all at once, but was amended and expanded over a period of some time in the light of his experience. This is indicated by a number of dislocations in the logical sequence of the subject-matter and by the fact that the last seven chapters appear to have been added to the original conclusion as an afterthought. The Rule in fact consists of a prologue and seventy-three chapters, and, apart from the occasional discontinuities in the argument, it sets out a coherent and detailed plan for the organisation of a monastic community. The monastery it describes is a fully cenobitical society, living in a single building or complex of buildings, under the direction of an abbot, who is elected by the brethren. Those who seek admission to it are required to pass a year in the novitiate to test their suitability and perseverance. Following this, they totally renounce all personal property, and take vows binding them to observe the rules of the monastic life and to remain in the community until death.

The prologue and first seven chapters of the Rule comprise an exhortatory treatise on the ascetical life, explaining its aims and the characteristic virtues the monk should strive to cultivate, foremost among which are obedience and humility. The following thirteen chapters contain detailed instructions for the order of divine service – the regular round of prayer, readings, and psalmody, which constituted the framework of the monk's day. After this there is a series of chapters dealing with such constitutional matters as the election of the abbot and the role of other monastic officers, regulations for the hours of sleep, manual work, and reading, and for meals; and intercalated among these various instructions is a penitential code, which lays down penalties for breaches of the monastic discipline. Much attention is given to the reception and training of recruits. It is impossible to do justice in a few words to the wealth of detail and the subtlety of insight contained in Benedict's treatise. Some of his cardinal ideas will be examined below. As a whole, the Rule offered a realistic and eminently practical guide both to the government of a cenobitical community and to the spiritual

Although internal evidence suggests that the Rule was composed soon after 535, we know very little about the circumstances in which it worked. The sources of his teaching pose a special problem. At least has been made clear by modern critical scholarship: it is no longer to regard the Rule as the isolated work of an original genius. It is a group of closely interrelated monastic Rules that were composed in southern Gaul in the first half of the sixth century. Close to it in time are two Rules – the one for women and the other for men – written in Arles (c. 470–542).

Like most Gallic bishops of his time, Caesarius was an offspring of Roman aristocracy. He had taken monastic vows at Lérins as a lad and his health could not stand the life. He was sent to Arles, where he remained at Lérins. They had to drag him out of hiding to make a community of nuns outside the walls of the city. It was for them the first and longer of his Rules after persistent nagging by their superiors.

The document he produced consisted of a rather disorganised set of instructions on such matters as the novitiate, the renunciation of property, and lifelong stability, were cardinal principles adopted by St Caesarius. But the borrowing was not all in one direction. Caesarius drew on the Rules of Pachomius, and he had clearly read the *Master*, a text which, as we shall see in a moment, provided the major literary source. These complex literary relationships show that Italy and Provence formed part of a single monastic world, a common body of ascetical doctrine.

Some of the literary products of this milieu have been identified by scholarship, such as the Rule for monks composed by Euphrosius of Trèves, abbot of a monastery at Lucullanum near Sorrento. His other work, *St Severin*, was written some twenty years before St Benedict founded his community at Cassino. It was probably in one of the monasteries soon after the year 500, an unknown abbot wrote the *Rule of St Benedict*, now generally accepted by scholars that this text was St Benedict's source.

Benedict's debt to the anonymous *Master* was a heavy one. It is clear that he not only most of his basic principles and organisational details, but also the most famous passages in the Rule, such as the chapters on the grades of humility, were taken over verbatim; and many other passages were transplanted with little change. In fact, all the essentials of St Benedict's Rule can be found in the work of his unknown predecessor who, to judge from the internal evidence, was writing some forty years earlier. Appro-

people's work without acknowledgement was commonplace among medieval writers. To us it is plagiarism; to them it was a mark of humility and deference to superior wisdom. When Benedict decided to compile a book of instruction for his monks at Cassino it would have seemed perfectly natural to model his Rule on a treatise composed by some other acknowledged and admired veteran of the ascetical life.

St Benedict emerges then not as a solitary genius with a unique gift for monastic legislation, but rather as the representative of a school of ascetical teaching current in sixth-century Italy, which derived its primary inspiration from Egypt. He does not stand alone. Behind him we can dimly discern a shadowy company of abbots and hermits inhabiting the hill-places east and south of Rome and the offshore islands, who were linked to one another by personal contact and the exchange of books. Nevertheless, it was his Rule, and not that of the anonymous Master, that gradually won universal recognition in western Europe. What were the reasons for this?

Gregory's biography was certainly a major factor. It made him famous and aroused interest in the Rule. But its success cannot be explained solely by Gregory's propaganda. The intrinsic merits of Benedict's treatise can have been no less important in promoting its circulation. For he was no slavish copyist. Both structurally and stylistically his Rule is better than the model he used. He and the Master both wrote in the *lingua vulgaris* – the native Latin spoken and written in southern Europe in the sixth century, as opposed to the literary Latin of the classical age. But Benedict's language, where he is not copying from his source, is terser and his phraseology is more finely chiselled than the Master's. It is tinged with the juridical vocabulary of the law courts.⁹ Again and again he arrests and pleases the reader with a lapidary phrase or epigram: 'Idleness is the enemy of the soul'; 'Wine is certainly not suitable for monks'; or 'Let nothing have precedence over divine service.' By contrast, the Master's treatise is rather verbose, rambling, and poorly co-ordinated.

It was not only stylistically that Benedict improved on his source. His thought is more refined and his argument is less cluttered with irrelevant detail. Also, at several points where he is discussing the government of the monastery, he reveals a more genial spirit than the Master's and a greater tolerance of human weakness. 'We hope', he writes, 'we shall ordain nothing that is harsh or burdensome.'¹⁰ In both treatises the sheet-anchor of the community is the personality of the abbot, and here both authors were clearly influenced by Roman notions of paternal authority. But the authority of Benedict's abbot is less autocratic. In decision-making he is instructed to solicit the opinion of the whole community, including its most junior members, whereas the Master insists that no one is to proffer advice unless it is asked for. And Benedict's abbot is elected by the brethren, whereas the Master's abbot is given the power to designate his successor. Urquestioning obedience to the will of the superior is demanded by both Rules, but Benedict tempers this doctrine with a repeated emphasis upon the bond of

mutual love between head and members. All in all, his Rule is gentler and more humane than its prototype.

The monk's profession according to the Rule

St Benedict's idea of the monastic life is completely cenobitic. His community of monks is a spiritual family living under one roof, or at any rate round one patio, under an abbot who is father to the community – in fact, a villa-monastery. Indeed, the classical layout of the Benedictine abbey and priories of the Middle Ages was descended from the plan of the Roman country villa of late antiquity.

Following the Master, Benedict allows for the vocation of the hermit, but he obviously considers it a rare one, fraught with particular dangers. Those who are called to it must first undergo their training by sharing the life of the monastic community – 'who not in the first fervour of the ascetical life, but in the daily testing of the monastery have been taught to fight the devil, and go out well armed from the battle-line of the brethren to the solitary combat of the desert.'¹¹ The military imagery is a pervasive feature of early monastic literature. The spiritual life of the monk was a ceaseless warfare against demons, who roved the world seeking to exploit the weaknesses of man's fallen nature. The anchorite needed to be well equipped for his lonely confrontation with the rulers of the world's darkness.

Benedict's cautious approval of hermits was not lost on his disciples of later times. It was not unusual for a Benedictine abbey of the Middle Ages to have one or two members of its community who were living as hermits at some remove from the parent monastery. As late as the fourteenth century, the cathedral priory of Durham dispatched a series of monk-solitaries to occupy a cell on the island of Inner Farne, off the Northumbrian coast. But it was not for people like this that Benedict composed his Rule. He was writing for the cenobites – 'the brave race who conduct their warfare subject to a Rule and under an abbot.'¹²

There are several hints in the Rule that he had a wider monastic public in mind than his own community at Cassino. But although he included advice for other communities living in different conditions from his own, he did not envisage anything that could be called a monastic order. The kind of monastery described by the Rule was an autonomous unit, economically self-supporting, and having no constitutional links with any other religious house. A man who sought to become a monk must needs knock on the gate of a particular community and if, after a period of trial lasting not less than a year, he was admitted to membership, he promised to remain in that establishment until his death.

The ritual set out in the Rule for receiving new brethren throws much light on Benedict's thoughts. The postulant was not to be allowed easy entry. He had to persist in his request for four or five days before the door was opened to him, and he had then to complete a year's probation in the cell of the novices. If he stayed the course, he made his profession in the oratory in the presence of the

assembled community. He took a vow of stability, undertaking to persevere in the same house for the rest of his life, a vow to embrace the religious life, and a vow of obedience. He then prostrated himself before each member of the community in turn. If he had any property, he was required either to distribute it to the poor or to confer it on the monastery by a solemn deed of gift.

Benedict's insistence on the need for stability was not novel. 'A monk out of his enclosure', said St Antony, 'is a fish out of water.' And Caesarius agreed with him. What was new was the incorporation of the principle into the monk's vows. Its importance for Benedict is apparent from the fierceness with which he condemns the *gyrovagi* – the wandering monks, who were constantly on the move, trading on the hospitality of other houses, 'concerning whose wretched way of life it is better to be silent than to speak'. The Master had been less reticent: his Rule includes a Rabelaisian picture of the gluttonous wanderers descending upon their impoverished host and picking him bare before moving on. The professional guest – whether he was a wandering monk or a vagabond clerk – was a constant nuisance to the medieval Church. For centuries bishops and councils fulminated against him in vain.

Benedict's uncharacteristic sharpness on the subject is understandable: the wanderer not only disrupted the cohesion of the brethren by his restlessness; by abusing hospitality he exploited one of the most solemn obligations imposed by the Rule, for Benedict insisted that a monastery should receive a guest as though he were Christ himself. A guest-house was an adjunct of every abbey. Of course, a monk might be sent elsewhere under higher orders without detriment to the general principle of stability. So Abbot Hadrian was dispatched to England by the pope with Archbishop Theodore of Tarsus to make sure he introduced none of his dubious Greek customs into the English Church, and the Irish monks, who were notorious wanderers, evangelised Northumbria and planted monasteries across the face of Europe from Saint-Gall to Bobbio.

Another feature of Benedict's thought that is highlighted by the instructions for novices is his thoroughly Roman insistence upon the absolute sovereignty of a written Rule. The law of Rome was a written law – at the time that the Rule was taking shape in his mind the jurists of the Emperor Justinian were busy codifying the great mass of classical legislation and jurisprudence. So it was that he ordained that the would-be monk should have the Rule read to him repeatedly during the year of his novitiate, and after two months he was to be told, 'Here is the law under which you wish to fight; if you can observe it, enter; if you cannot, depart freely.'¹³ In other monasteries the customs of the house were determined by the superior; but in Benedict's plan the Rule is sovereign, and even the abbot is allowed no discretion to depart from it. He is warned of his duty to maintain it in every detail. Because the Rule reflected the social customs and liturgical practices of the sixth century, there were bound to be later modifications. But the essence of Benedict's idea impressed itself upon the Western ascetical tradition. Men came to think of monks as people whose religious life

was governed by a written code: the monastic life came to be described as 'regular life' – life according to a Rule.

When the monk made his profession he was required to renounce personal ownership completely: 'from that day he will not even have proprietorship in his own body.'¹⁴ All property was held by the community in common. Individual must regard nothing as his own. Even the possession of a stylus writing-tablets required the abbot's permission. Property is an extension of personality. Its renunciation was a radical act of self-negation that the Gospel had commended to those who sought spiritual perfection. But it did not involve destruction where it was made within the context of a society enjoying corporate ownership.

Benedict makes it clear that he expected a monastery to possess buildings and land. He assumes that in most cases the labour on the estate will be performed by tenants or servants, though where poverty forced the monks to help gather harvest they are told to do so without grumbling, 'for then are they truly monks when they live by the labour of their hands as the Apostles and Fathers did before them.'¹⁵ But it is unlikely that he visualised monasteries possessing great wealth from pious benefactors. Yet the poverty of the individual living in a spacious and wealthy institution tended to be psychological rather than material. Centuries of landed endowment turned many abbeys into rich and powerful corporations displaying all the characteristics of group acquisitiveness. Was wealth on that scale compatible with the Rule? In the twelfth century, the question was posed to Cluny by St Bernard and other monastic reformers. 'In saying any property writes Peter the Venerable defensively, 'the Rule makes no exception. Moral hold these things in a quite different way . . . they exist as having nothing, possessing all things.'¹⁶ It was a stock answer. But the question could not be easily silenced in a society where those vowed to personal poverty enjoyed the security and comfort of palatial surroundings and good food, while most those in the outside world were living at subsistence level.

Following the teachings of the Eastern masters, Benedict makes obedience the cardinal principle of the monastic life. Along with stability and 'conversion ways', it was the subject of the monk's threefold vow. Its significance for Benedict is shown by its place in the opening words of the Rule: 'Hear, O son, the precept of the master: so that by the labour of obedience you may return to Him from whom, through the sloth of disobedience, you fell away.' So the monk's task was to undo the primeval act of man's disobedience to the divine will by modelling himself on Christ, who 'was obedient unto death'. The monastic life began with the intention to renounce self-will and to place oneself under the will of a superior, who represented the person of Christ. What was demanded was not mere outward conformity, but the inner assent of the will to the commands of the abbot. Obedience must be prompt, willing, and without murmuring. The sixty-eighth chapter of the Rule raises the question of what a brother should do

if he is ordered to undertake something too burdensome or impossible. He is told he should receive the command gently and obediently; and if the task required seems utterly beyond his powers, he is to explain patiently to his superior the reason for his inability to carry out the instruction, but without resisting or contradicting. If, after his explanation, the superior persists, the monk is to obey, trusting in the help of God. The *conundrum* was a classical one in the training of ascetics. Total docility to the will of the master was the essential safeguard against spiritual pride.

It followed from such an uncompromising doctrine of obedience that the personality of the abbot was the linchpin of the monastic community. St Benedict's abbot cannot lawfully command anything that is contrary to the law of God or to the Rule, but otherwise his discretion is absolute. He can appoint and dismiss subordinates, allocate punishments, and direct the relations of the monastery with the outside world as he thinks best. The Rule urges him to take the advice of the brethren before making policy decisions, but he is not bound by it. Constitutionally then, St Benedict's monastery is a paternal autocracy tempered only slightly by an obligation to listen to advice.

Nevertheless, the abbot is much more than an absolute ruler. He has a pastoral role towards his community. He is the teacher, confessor, and spiritual guide of his monks. This side of his role is illuminated by Benedict's instructions for Lenten observance. Each monk is to decide what form of mortification he is going to undertake; he must then propose it to the abbot and only undertake it with his permission. Thus, by performing his ascetical acts under obedience the monk is protected against spiritual pride or complacency. As the pastor of his community, the abbot is reminded that at the Judgment he will have to render account for their souls. The Rule constantly warns him against ruling tyrannically or harshly. He is to regard himself as the servant of the brethren rather than their master; he should study to make himself loved rather than feared.

The authoritarian character of the regime is softened not only by St Benedict's insistence upon governing with counsel but also by his provisions for selecting the head of the monastery. The abbot is to be chosen by the brethren themselves and, usually, it is implied, from their own number. Even the most junior member of the community is to be considered eligible if his prudence and learning make him suitable. Once elected, the abbot is presented to the bishop for consecration, and he holds office for life. Benedict allows for active intervention by the bishop or by neighbouring abbots only in an emergency situation, where a lax or disorderly community has elected a candidate who is obviously unworthy. In such a case, they may have an abbot imposed upon them, but otherwise the choice remains with the monks.

In a community of any size the abbot would need assistants to help him govern the monastery. The Rule refers to a provost or prior, and several other officers – deans, a cellarer, who is in charge of provisioning the establishment, a gatekeeper, a novice-master, and brethren to manage the guest-house and the

infirmary. Benedict's main concern here seems to be to preserve the monastic regime of the abbot from any dilution. All the monastic officers are to be chosen by him and directly subordinated to him.

In the great Benedictine abbeys of the Middle Ages, where the abbot prelate constantly taken from his community by public duties and the numerous supervise daughter-houses, the effective head of the brethren was the cellarer. But in the Rule St Benedict contemplates the prior with some misgivings as a possible source of discord: 'some there be, puffed up with the malice of spirit of pride, who reckon themselves second abbots'.¹⁷ He prefers a system of deans, each of whom is placed by the abbot in charge of a group of ten monks. The deans were, so to speak, non-commissioned officers – name and rank in fact derived from the imperial army, and the system was adopted in Pachomian monasteries of Egypt. The Abbot Smaragdus, commenting on the Rule in the ninth century, observed that the deans were not merely rulers of their sections; they were their spiritual mentors and should know the thoughts of their charges. Smaragdus wrote from experience, for the system still practised in the Carolingian monasteries, but it hardly outlived him. In the reformed abbeys of the eleventh century, the devolution of authority followed different lines, determined by economic and administrative convenience.

The monk's life according to the Rule

'We must', wrote Benedict in his preface, 'create a *scola* for the Lord's service. In the language of the sixth century the word *scola* had a military as well as an academic sense. It meant a special regiment or *corps d'élite*. In the early Middle Ages the borgo of Rome – the region of the city that lay outside the Aurelian walls between St Peter's and the Tiber – was defended by *scolae* or units of monks supplied by the various nationalities settled in the district. Benedict was using the word in this sense. His monastery was not a place of quiet retreat or leisure, nor a school in the academic sense; it was a kind of combat unit, in which recruits were trained and equipped for his spiritual warfare under an experienced commander – the abbot. The objective was the conquest of sensuality and will so as to make a man totally receptive to God.

For this purpose the Rule prescribed a carefully ordered routine of prayer, work, and study, which filled the day, varying only according to the liturgical year and the natural seasons. It was a regime of strict discipline but, within Benedict, casting an eye over his shoulder at the fiercer austerities of the Eastern ascetics, there was to be 'nothing harsh or burdensome'. His was 'a little Rule for beginners'. And in fact the timetable made no intolerable demands. It allowed eight hours of sleep in the winter and six hours, with an afternoon siesta, in summer. The allowance of food, if not lavish, was adequate. The eating of food was forbidden except to the sick, but a meal could include two or three dishes of cooked vegetables, with bread and a measure of wine. If however the brethren

lived in a region where wine was not to be had, they were to accept the fact without grumbling. 'We read', observed Benedict, 'that wine is certainly not for monks.'¹⁸ Yet here, as elsewhere in the Rule, he was willing to make concessions to human weakness.

The first task of the monastic life was prayer in common – the singing of divine service in the oratory, what Benedict calls the *Work of God* or *Opus Dei*. This provided the basic framework of the day and everything else was fitted round it. Following the Rule of the Master, but with significant variants, Benedict gives elaborate instructions for the celebration of these daily services, which are of great interest to the historian of Christian worship, as they are the earliest detailed description of the divine office that we have. It had long been the common practice in the greater churches to conduct public prayers daily at dawn and in the evening; these were the offices of Lauds and Vespers. By St Benedict's time, the monastic communities had added to these services and evolved a daily round of eight offices that were recited in common at certain hours of the day.

The monk's routine of worship began during the hours of darkness, at 2 a.m. or shortly after that time in winter, and at 3 a.m. or shortly after in summer, with the singing of the office of Vigils or Nocturns (later called Matins). Lauds was sung at first light, and there followed the relatively short offices of the day, sung at the first, third, sixth, and ninth hours, and the evening office of Vespers. The day ended with the brief office of Compline, which was sung at sundown or before retreating to bed. The night office was the longest and most elaborate of the services. It was divided into parts called Nocturns, each of which consisted of six psalms and four lessons together with responsories, or meditative verses, relating to the subject of the lessons. On Sundays and major feast-days the night office contained three Nocturns, and it must have taken nearly two hours to complete; on ferial days it would have lasted a little less than an hour.

Benedict's Rule laid down detailed instructions for the order of psalmody so as to ensure that the entire psalter was recited in the course of each week. The lessons were drawn from the Bible and the Scriptural commentaries of the Fathers and the recorded acts of the martyrs. In the course of the following centuries the office was greatly elaborated, musically as well as textually, but the basic pattern as it is outlined in the Rule persisted and came to be the standard framework of daily worship in the Western Church. Its traces are clearly visible in all the service-books, Protestant as well as Catholic, that are derived from the medieval tradition.

Rather surprisingly to the modern reader, the Rule, which provides in such detail for the daily prayer of the community, has only a few and incidental references to eucharistic prayer. This was because the order of the eucharistic liturgy was determined by the bishop; it was not something on which an abbot could legislate. And St Benedict was observing the custom of the early Church, which was still maintained in his time, by which the celebration of mass was reserved to Sundays and feasts of the Lord.

As the whole community would attend the weekly eucharist, the monach would not need more than one or two men in priest's orders to celebrate it. Those to be ordained for this purpose by the bishop were to be selected by the abbot. Those chosen are sternly warned against arrogance: they are to do nothing except on the abbot's instructions and they must remain in the rank allotted to them in the community. Benedict assumed that the majority of the community – possibly the abbot himself among them – would not be ordained. In this he reflected a common assumption of the early monastic world. Monks were not clergy. Gregory the Great considered clerical office to be incompatible with the monastic profession. 'No man', he wrote to the bishop of Ravenna, both serve under ecclesiastical obedience and also continue under a monastic rule, observing the strict regime of a monastery when he is obliged to remain in the daily service of the Church.'¹⁹ He must choose one or the other. A monk, of course, become a monk, but if he did so, he must cease to exercise priestly functions outside his monastery.

For all this, Gregory was prepared to use monks for the task of evangelizing the barbarian peoples of northern Europe; and the pressing needs of the mission made it necessary to relax his principle in order to provide the newly converted peoples with the sacraments. Perhaps for this reason it became a growing practice in the seventh century to ordain men in Western monasteries.²⁰ But the ancient tradition died hard: it was not until 826 that a Roman synod required abbots to be ordained to the priesthood.²¹ The Gregorian principle was sometimes resuscitated for polemical purposes. As late as the twelfth century, Theobald, Bishop of Exeter, reminded Archbishop Thurstan of York that monks were not permitted to preach to the people, to baptise, or to absolve penitents.²² In fact, they were expressly forbidden to exercise the pastoral care or to celebrate mass in public churches by the First Lateran Council of 1123.

The community did not go back to bed after Nocturns; there was a short interval, after which the office of Lauds was sung at first light, and then the office of Prime followed at sunrise. The monks then processed out of church and went about the day's work. The timetable varied like the tides in response to the rhythm of the seasons. The computation of time that was followed was that of classical antiquity, which was still observed in the sixth century. By reckoning the periods of daylight and darkness were each divided into two hours of equal length. Thus in winter the night hours would be longer than in summer, and the day hours would be correspondingly shorter; conversely, in summer the day hours would be longer, and the night hours shorter. The job of getting everybody out of bed at the correct time for the night office and ringing the bells for the canonical hours must have posed problems before the advent of the mechanical clock in the fourteenth century. Before this, water clocks or hour-glasses were widely used. Some monastic customaries recommend astronomical observation as a check during the night hours. Clearly, somebody had to stay awake during the night to rouse the community at the prescribed times.

the Master's Rule the duty falls upon each tithing of the brethren in turn. They watch the clock in pairs, lest one of them should fall asleep, and when the hour comes, they go to the abbot's bed and say 'Lord, open thou my lips', tapping his feet gently until he wakes.²³

Outside the hours of community prayer the Rule divided the monk's day into periods of manual work and periods of reading. The summer timetable, which began at Easter, allocated upwards of seven hours to work and three hours to reading; in winter the period of work was shortened and the time for reading increased. In the longer summer days the Rule provided for two meals, the first shortly after midday and the second in the early evening; whereas the winter timetable allowed only a single meal, which was served at about 2.30 in the afternoon, or later still in Lent. No talking was permitted during meals; the brethren ate in silence while a member of the community read to them. Silence, in fact, was enjoined at all times, but especially during the night hours.

The thing most conspicuously absent from the Rule is any provision for leisure. 'Idleness', Benedict observes severely, 'is the enemy of the soul.' His insistence upon the value of manual work is in the Eastern monastic tradition. It had an ascetical as well as an economic function; it kept men humble, and it provided for the material wants of the community. Any of the monks who were craftsmen were to ply their skill at the abbot's discretion, and their artefacts might be sold. The rest of the community would go to work in the fields or be occupied with house duties. Benedict's careful balance between periods of manual work, prayer and study, was destroyed by later developments of the Middle Ages. The addition of a daily chapter mass and the increasing elaboration of the liturgical offices, which reached its climax at Cluny, encroached upon the rest of the day; and the acquisition of great estates meant that growing numbers of monks in the Benedictine abbeys were preoccupied with managerial tasks. But Benedict's simple plan offered a model that later monastic reformers constantly sought to revive.

What did St Benedict intend his monks to read during the many hours of each week that were allocated to study? Did the phrase he used – *lectio divina*, or sacred reading – include literary or intellectual pursuits? Here was one of the enigmas of the Rule over which later commentators spilt much ink. The ninth century was an age of learned abbots, when the Benedictine monasteries of the Meuse and the Rhineland played a major role in transmitting the literary culture of antiquity to the medieval world. In fact, until the scholastic movement of the twelfth century, most of the leaders in the world of learning were monks. But did this tradition represent an authentic interpretation of St Benedict's plan? In the seventeenth century, Rancé, the founder of the Trappist reform, had no doubt that it did not, and charged the learned Benedictines of St Maur with subversion of the Rule: 'St Benedict and the whole of antiquity is on my side . . . what is called study has only been established at a period of relaxation.'²⁴ Rancé displays all the blind rigidity of the self-appointed dogmatist; and the chief merit of his shrill polemic was that it provoked the great monk-scholar Jean Mabillon to

write his magnificent apologia for monastic scholarship. Nevertheless, from viewpoint of the sixth century, Rancé had a point.

Churchmen of the sixth century displayed an ambivalent attitude towards classical letters. Christianity had conquered the Empire, but the pagan world which haunted the poets and orators of antiquity were still too close to be truly dead. Venus and the Muses were dangerous beguilements for the men who heard the Gospel call to renunciation. It was this that gave the *coup de grâce* the ancient schools of rhetoric. They had lingered on in Italy and Gaul after the collapse of the imperial civil service, only to be finally smothered under a ceiling of ecclesiastical disapproval. But the poets and orators were not so easily exterminated. The Latin Fathers who failed against them most had been reared on them, and their prose betrays their debt on every page. There were some who sought a reconciliation, like the old Roman aristocrat, Cassiodorus, who was a contemporary of St Benedict. After serving the Ostrogothic king, Theodoric, he returned to a monastery which he had created on his own estate at Vivarium, in southern Italy, and composed a programme of studies for his monks which included classical orators and the logic of Aristotle. The programme was to be divided into two parts, or *Institutes* – one of divine and one of secular letters – and, as he explains, the purpose of studying the pagan classics was to equip the student with a better understanding of the sacred Scriptures.²⁵ It was the strategy Augustus had approved: as the Israelites had plundered the Egyptians before they fled, Christian education might exploit the classics for its own purposes.

The *Institutes* of Cassiodorus were much read, but his educational scheme did not win general approval among early monastic legislators. The learned leisure of Vivarium owed more to the classical tradition of the scholar-recluse than it did to the ascetical spirit that was blowing from the East. That spirit was more fully encapsulated in Jerome's account of a dream he had after he had decided to embrace the ascetical life. He was on his way to the Syrian desert to become a monk, but he could not bring himself to leave his Cicero out of his luggage. One night, during a bout of illness, he dreamed he was brought before the divine tribunal of judgement and asked his profession. His protestation that he was a Christian produced the stern response: 'Thou liest. Thou art no Christian, but a Cicero man; where the heart is, there is thy treasure also.' And he was sentenced to a cruel flogging.²⁶ In his fright he vowed never to read the pagan authors again, and for some years at least he seems to have kept his promise.

The anecdote, which was intended to warn one of his spiritual protégés, reading Horace and Virgil, is a paradigm of the attitude of the early monastic world towards the classics. Apart from the Old and New Testaments, the only works that St Benedict expressly commends to his monks are the books of the Catholic Fathers, the Lives of the Fathers, Cassian, and the Rules of St Basil. It is the ascetic's quintessential library. His phrase 'divine reading' by implication excludes the pagan classics. His instructions for the issue of books to the community imply that the purpose of reading is to acquire food for meditation. Ex-

year, at the beginning of Lent, each monk received a codex from the library, which he was expected to read in its entirety, without skipping pages. The ritual was maintained at Canterbury in the eleventh century, in Lanfranc's day: the books for Lenten reading were laid out on a carpet in the centre of the chapter-house; the books of the previous year were returned, and anyone who had failed to finish his volume prostrated himself and confessed his fault.²⁷

Yet even in St Benedict's cloister there had to be some study of the classics. The Rule provides for child-oblates, donated to the monastery by their parents. The practice already existed in the time of the anonymous Master. The principle was stated by the Council of Toledo in 633: 'a person is made a monk either by his own profession or by his father's piety. Whichever it be, all such are forbidden to return to the world.'²⁸ In the Rule the parents make the vows on the child's behalf, wrap his hand in the cloth used for the mass offerings, and, as it were, place him in the offertory plate, together with a suitable gift to provide for his maintenance. So boys, aged seven and upwards, formed a normal group in the Benedictine communities of the early Middle Ages. In the eighth-century commentary of Paul the Deacon, they are shepherded about the house in crocodile formation by a posse of masters, and are required to take their place in choir for all the offices. They had, of course, to be taught their letters through the standard grammars of Priscian and Donatus, which provided a fair anthology of the Latin poets. The classics might be dangerous fare, but they could not be wholly dispensed with in educating the young. Thus, of necessity, the monastery contained a school, but it was a school for child-monks, which did not normally admit pupils from outside.

St Benedict's Rule did not deny entry to men from any class of society. But in practice the requirements of the monastic life as he described it restricted adult recruitment to those social groups that were educated. In the following centuries the foundation and endowment of monasteries was largely the work of the princes and aristocracy in the Germanic kingdoms, and the recruitment of monks was largely from the same class. The practice of child-oblation, distressing though it may be to the mind of a modern parent, became increasingly popular. Among landed families it offered a welcome means of providing for surplus children, who could not be endowed without a dangerous partition of the family estate. It was equally valued as a way of providing for girls for whom no suitable marriage alliance could be found. Thus the child-oblates were a major source of recruitment to the medieval monasteries. Once donated, they were committed for life.

Sentiment turned against child-oblation in the twelfth century. The Cistercians refused to accept children – though more out of a desire to avoid the worldly entanglements involved than from any appreciation of child psychology – and before the end of the century the canon law had decreed that no person could be permanently committed to the monastic life until he had attained his

monasticism the practice produced some remarkable people. The Northumbrian Bede, 'Candle of the Church' and proto-historian of the English people, and Almer, the precentor of Christ Church Canterbury and biographer of St Anselm of Quedelmburg, a daughter of the Emperor Otto I, who had been veiled at age of eleven, but who in a national crisis proved herself able to rule a kingdom in the absence of her nephew. After the twelfth century it was still permissible to accept children for education in the cloister as long as they were not committed to the monastic profession before they reached adulthood. But from this time numbers of children in monastic houses dwindled rapidly, and there seem doubt that the ending of child-oblation was one of the reasons for the red size of Benedictine communities in the later Middle Ages.

St Benedict's Rule provided a model for a close-knit, well-organised ascetic community, following a carefully planned routine of prayer, work, and study. Although the writer's debts to the ascetical teaching of the East are obvious, he gave his scheme its distinctive character was his concern for the essentially Roman virtues of stability, order, and moderation. It was a wise and reassuring prescription for religious groups recruiting their members from the intelligentsia of antiquity. Amid the debris of classical civilisation, in a world grown barbaric, violent and unpredictable, Benedict's monastery offered an enclave of peace and order. But it was vulnerable, and the survival of his institution was by no means assured. Some twenty years after his death, the Lombards broke into Italy and tried devastation through the peninsula. The military presence left by Byzantium was too weak to offer any effective resistance. In 577 Monte Cassino was sacked and its monastic buildings were burned down. Benedict's other foundations at Subiaco and Terracina suffered the same fate. The monks at Cassino scattered. Some went to Rome, where the pope offered them a refuge at San Pancrazio, of the satellite monasteries of the Lateran basilica. The site at Cassino remained ruined and deserted for the next hundred and forty years.

Elsewhere also the Lombardic settlement seems to have arrested the development of Italian monasticism for nearly a century. Revival came in the seventh century with the advent of a Catholic dynasty to Lombardy and the conversion of the dukes of Benevento. The rulers of the eighth century became fervent patrons of monks, and monastic life burgeoned in a new spring. It was in this period that the great abbey of Nonantola in Emilia was founded by a relative of King Aistulf (749–56), and monks from Bobbio planted olives in the coastal Liguria.³⁰ But the fate of Benedict's Rule after the sack of Cassino is a mystery. It is obvious from Pope Gregory's reference that it was known at Rome at the end of the sixth century; yet there is no evidence of any monastery in the following the Rule nor, significantly, is there evidence of a cultus of St Benedict at Rome, either in iconography or church dedication, before the tenth century. In the shorter term the future of the Rule lay in fact, not in Italy, but north of the Alps in the Germanic kingdoms, and above all in Gaul.

Notes

1. PL 66, 126–204; modern edition by A. de Vogüé, *Les Dialogues de Grégoire le Grand* (*Sources chrétiennes*, 251, 260, 265, Paris, 1978–80).
2. The story of Torila's visit and St Benedict's alleged prophecy of his entry to Rome has literary antecedents in the Lives of the Fathers and the Life of St Martin which throws some doubt on its historical authenticity; see P. A. Cusack, 'Some literary antecedents of the Torila encounter in the second Dialogue of Pope Gregory I', *Studia Patristica* 12 (1975), pp. 87–90. On the allegorical sense of the anecdotes in the *Dialogues* see W. F. Bolton, 'The suprahistorical sense of the anecdotes in the Dialogues of Gregory I', *Aevum* 33 (1959), pp. 206–13, and J. H. Wansborough, 'St Gregory's intentions in the stories of St Scholastica and St Benedict', *Rev. ben* 75 (1965), pp. 145–51. In his introduction to the *Dialogues* I (*Sources chrétiennes* 251, Paris, 1978), A. de Vogüé rejects a comprehensively sceptical approach to the historical matter in the *Dialogues*, and distinguishes between narration and Gregory's tropological exposition. I agree with him.
3. Gregory's authorship of the *Dialogues* has been contested by Francis Clark, *The Pseudo-Gregorian Dialogues*, 2 vols (Leiden, 1987). His theory that the work is a forgery of the seventh century has not, however, found favour with most authorities on the period; see discussion and references in R. A. Markus, *Gregory the Great and his World* (1997), pp. 15–16.
4. PL 66, 161.
5. It was argued by K. Hallinger in 'Papst Gregor der Grosse und der heilige Benedikt', *Studia Anselmiana* 42 (Rome, 1957), pp. 231–319, that Gregory's letters concerned with monastic matters display no acquaintance with the Rule and in some respects are contrary to it, implying that he probably had not read it. But subsequent critics pointed out echoes of the Rule in his commentary on the book of Kings; see Markus, *op. cit.* p. 69, n. 6.
6. *Sancti Caesarii Arelatensis Opera*, ed. G. Morin (Maredsous, 1942) II, pp. 129–30. On the sources and teaching of Caesarius see W. E. Klingshorn, *Caesarius of Arles: The Making of a Christian Community in Late Antique Gaul* (1994).
7. A. de Vogüé, 'La règle d'Eugippe retrouvée', *Revue d'ascétique* 47 (1971), pp. 233–65. Text edited by A. de Vogüé, *La Règle du Maître*, 3 vols (*Sources chrétiennes* 105, Paris, 1964–5). For the discussion surrounding this document see M. D. Knowles, *Great Historical Enterprises and Problems in Monastic History* (1963), pp. 137–95; de Vogüé, 'Saint Benoît en son temps: règles italiennes et règles provençales au VI^e siècle', *Regulae Benedicti Studia* I (Rome, 1972), 170–93; Marilyn Dunn, 'Mastering Benedict: monastic rules and their authors in the early medieval West', *English Historical Review* 105 (1990), pp. 567–83.
9. Christine Mohrmann, 'La langue de Saint Benoît', *Sancti Benedicti Regula Monachorum*, ed. P. Schmitz (Maredsous, 1955), pp. 9–39.
10. The Rule, prologue. The edition used here is that of Philibert Schmitz (Maredsous, 1946), based upon the manuscript of Saint-Gall. English readers will find a convenient edition with translation by Justin McCann (1951). More recent scholarly editions are those by de Vogüé in *Sources chrétiennes*, 181–2 (Paris, 1972–7), R. Hanslik in *CSEL* (1977), and J. Chamberlin (Toronto, 1982), with translation.
11. The Rule, c. 1.
12. *Ibid.*, c. 1.
13. *Ibid.*, c. 58.
14. *Ibid.*, c. 58.
15. *Ibid.*, c. 48.
16. *The Letters of Peter the Venerable*, ed. G. Constable (Cambridge, Mass., 1967) I, p. 84.
17. The Rule, c. 65.
18. *Ibid.* c. 40.
19. *Gregorii I Papae Registrum Epistolatum* I, ed. P. Ewald and L. M. Hartmann (Munich, 1891), pp. 281–2. See on this question T. McLaughlin, *Le très ancien droit monastique de l'occident* (*Archives de la France monastique* 30, Ligugé, 1935), pp. 116–28.
20. J. A. Jungmann, *Missarum Solennia* (Paris, 1956) I, p. 267. N. Brooks argues in *Early History of the Church of Canterbury* (1984), p. 89, that the needs of the Gregorian mission to England were a direct cause of the practice.
21. *MGH Concordia* II, 2, p. 578.
22. R. Foreville and J. Leclercq, 'Un débat sur le sacerdoce des moines au XII^e siècle', *Studia Anselmiana* (4th ser.) 41 (1957), pp. 52–3. For the conciliar prohibition Lateran c. 17: Mansi XXI p. 285.
23. *La Règle du Maître* II, pp. 172–3.
24. *Lettres de Armand Jean le Bouthillier de Ranée*, ed. B. Gonot (Paris, 1846), p. 226.
25. *Cassiodori Senatoris Institutiones*, ed. R. A. B. Mynors (1937), pp. 68–9.
26. *Epistulae*, PL 58, 22, 30; J. N. D. Kelly, *Jerome* (1975), p. 42.
27. *The Monastic Constitutions of Lanfranc*, ed. M. D. Knowles (1951), p. 19.
28. *Corpus Iuris Canonici*, ed. Freidberg c. 20, q. 1 c. 3 (col. 844).
29. The principle seems to have been established by a decretal of Celestine III (1191) which laid down that a boy offered to a monastery by his father was free to leave attaining his majority; only a solemn vow taken as an adult made him a monk III, 31 c. 14. See discussion by W. M. Plöchl, *Geschichte des Kirchenrechts* II (Vienna, 1962), p. 253. In 1222 the Council of Oxford decreed that no one was to be received as a monk under the age of eighteen: F. M. Powicke and C. R. Cheney, *Councils and Synods III* (1964), p. 122.
30. G. Perco, *Storia del Monacismo in Italia* (Rome, 1961), pp. 110–25.

WANDERING SAINTS AND PRINCELY PATRONS

Columbanus in Gaul

By the time the Lombards sacked Cassino monasticism had struck deep roots in Gaul. It took a variety of forms. In the northern kingdom of Neustria centred on the Paris basin, and in the west, St Martin's colony of Ligugé had provided the dominant model. The writings of Sulpicius had propagated his cultus among the Germanic peoples of the north. According to Gregory of Tours, when Clovis the Frankish neophyte set out to conquer the Arian Visigoths, he first sent messengers to the shrine of St Martin to ask for a sign of divine approval.¹ Whatever the truth of the story, the Merovingians adopted the pioneer of Gallic monasticism as their *Reichsheiliger* – the national saint and patron of the Frankish dominion – and this must have done much to boost his fame and promote his ideal of the ascetical life. Eremitic groups inspired by his example sprang into existence in the region of the Loiret and Aquitaine.

As Martin left no known Rule, we know little about the internal organisation of these communities. Many of them were only short-lived. A more stable type of monasticism flourished in the south-east, in Provence and the Rhône valley. Here there existed a number of well-organised fully cenobitical communities, which stemmed from the early plantations at Lérins and Marsailles, the most famous of which was the convent for women founded by Caesarius in the suburbs of Arles. These establishments were located in, or adjacent to, episcopal cities and were under the supervision of bishops. As a rule they recruited their superiors, and probably most of their membership, from the old Gallo-Roman aristocracy of the area.

Although cultural contact between the two areas seems to have been limited, at least one significant link was forged by St Radegunde's foundation at Poitiers,

Holy Cross at Poitiers inaugurated a new social era for the monastic movement. It now began to enjoy the patronage of the Merovingian kings and started to recruit its leadership from the nobility of the Germanic kingdoms.

Radegunde's own life-story has something of the quality of a fairy-tale by the brothers Grimm. She was a Thuringian princess, who was captured and still a child by the Frankish king, Chlotar I, during an incursion into her father's kingdom. Chlotar carried her off as a spoil of war, had her brought up on a manor and educated in letters, and eventually married her. But she had already made up her mind to adopt the ascetical life of a devout Christian, and the marriage was an uneasy one for both partners. They joked at court that the had married a nun.² In the end, after her brother had been murdered with the complicity of the king, she quitted the royal household and settled at Poitiers where she constructed and endowed a convent with Chlotar's help, and took a veil. Her life was written by Venantius Fortunatus, the expatriate Italian monk who settled close to the monastery and became her lifelong friend and admirer. It was to celebrate her acquisition of a relic of the Cross – a gift from the Emperor Justin II – that he composed the triumphal processional hymn *o Vexilla Regis*. Fortunatus acted as counsellor and business manager to the community, and the elegantly contrived verses he wrote for Radegunde and Agnes allow us one of a very few glimpses into the life-style of a royal nun of the sixth century.

Radegunde refused to govern the community herself. She preferred to serve as a nun under an abbess whom she had appointed. Fortunatus was agghast at the thought of her washing dishes with her delicate hands and doing her share of the menial jobs about the house.³ Nevertheless, the planning of the institution was hers, and it was her decision to adopt the Rule that Caesarius had compiled for the nuns of Arles. It was also an integral part of her plan that the foundation should be subject to the supervision of the bishop of Poitiers. The oversight of a community of royal women proved, in fact, to be a thorny task. After Radegunde's death in 587, two daughters of King Charibert led a rebellion of the nuns against the abbess – 'for we are humiliated here as if we were offspring of low-born serving-women, instead of being the daughters of kings'. Not all princesses who were placed behind the walls of a convent, or took refuge there, felt a vocation to the ascetical life.

At the period of Radegunde's death the ascetical tradition of southern France represented by the Rule of Caesarius, was beginning to penetrate the north, but permanent monastic foundations in the Frankish kingdoms of Neustria and Austrasia were still sparse. In Provence, the ancient centres of Lérins and Marsailles had lapsed into obscurity. But in the last decade of the sixth century Gallic monasticism received a sudden infusion of new life from Ireland. The promoter in this transformation was St Columbanus, the most famous wanderer of the early Middle Ages, from a nation notorious for its mobility.

Columbanus was a monk and schoolmaster of the great monastery of Iona

ascetical ideal of exile for the sake of Christ, had driven him to quit his monastery to evangelise areas that were still semi-pagan. In or about the year 591 he landed in Gaul with twelve companions, and made his way to the court of Childebert in Burgundy to seek the king's collaboration. He was first allocated a wild spot at Anneyray in the Vosges. Recruits flowed in to people the new foundation of Luxeuil – the most illustrious Celtic monastic establishment on the Continent – and its creation was followed shortly afterwards by that of Fontaine. But this promising start to the Irish missionary enterprise was placed in hazard when Columbanus fell from favour at court.

The role of moralist at Merovingian courts was a dangerous one. The outspokenness of Columbanus about the sex-life of the young King Theuderic gained him the enmity of the formidable Queen Brunhild, the king's grandmother, and she had him expelled from Burgundy. He narrowly escaped being transported back to Ireland, but resumed his wanderings. He visited the Neustrian court at Soissons, and then moved on over the Vosges into Swabia. By Lake Constance he parted from his faithful companion, Gallus, whose cult centre grew into the great abbey of Saint-Gall, and made his way into Italy. He was graciously received at the court of the Lombard King Agilulf and granted a site in the Apennines at Bobbio, where he created his last monastic colony. It was there that he died and was buried in 615.

Like Luxeuil and Saint-Gall, Bobbio became a focus for expatriate Irish monks and scholars. Columbanus was, in fact, the spearhead of the first invasion of the Continent by the culture of Celtic Christianity. The impact of his advent upon the religious life of Gaul was like that of a spring tide bursting into a stagnant pool. His foundations excited a wave of religious enthusiasm among the Frankish aristocracy and inaugurated a new era of growth for Gallic monasticism. To understand the sources that energised this growth it is necessary to turn to the development of monastic life in the Celtic lands.

Early Irish monasticism

We do not know how or when organised monasticism reached Ireland. It may have been imported from Britain or from Gaul or even directly from the east Mediterranean. The weight of evidence has forced modern scholars to abandon the old notion that the Anglo-Saxon invasion and settlement severed the Celtic Christians of western Britain and Ireland from contact with continental Christianity. Missionaries from both Britain and Gaul had played a part in evangelising Ireland; there is also evidence that monastic life existed in Wales and Strathclyde in the fifth century, and that individual ascetics moved freely between the Celtic lands and the Continent.

The mission of St Patrick, who died in 461, created in Ireland a Roman episcopal organisation like that existing in Gaul. The evangelization of the Irish people reached a high point in the mission of St Patrick who, before his death in c.461 had

assured the continuity of his work by ordaining many clergy and appointing bishops. Before the end of the century St Brigit had formed her monastery at Kildare. But the great age of monastic foundation in Ireland was the sixth century. Hagiographical tradition ascribed the cardinal role to St Finnian, 'master of saints', who was led by an angel to the site of Clonard, where he constructed the cell that became the nucleus of his famous monastery.² Clonmacnoise, Clonfert, Terryglass and many other monasteries claimed foundation by saints who had been disciples of Finnian Clonard. In the same period, St Columba (Colmcille) founded Derry and Durrus and planted a colony of monks on Iona off the coast of Pictland; St Comgall founded Bangor; and towards the end of the century, St Kevin founded Glendalough.

The inspiration for these ascetical colonies came ultimately from Egypt, but we do not know how it travelled from there. In some ways their mode of life resembled what we know of St Martin's semi-eremical establishments in the west of Gaul, and perhaps it was from there rather than from the west of Britain that the pattern was derived. The Irish monastery was like a walled enclosure. The whole settlement was enclosed by a rampart of earth and stones, within which monks lived singly or in small groups in detached huts, made either of wattle or of stones morticed in a characteristic beehive fashion. The crudity of the building technique imposed limitations of scale, and larger monasteries like Bangor and Clonmacnoise, which were unable to house the whole community in a single building for liturgical purposes, contained several relatively small churches: kitchen, guest-house, and other offices were also housed in separate structures. Each settlement was an autonomous unit, presided over patriarchally by a presbyter-abbot – a monk in priest's orders.

These were cenobitical communities, but they also made room for anchorites on their fringe. Cassian's teaching that the contemplative life of the hermit is superior to the cenobitical life found a receptive ear in early Irish culture, and Celtic monastic movement embraced a strong anchoritic tradition. A text called the *Catalogus Sanctorum Hiberniae*,⁶ now recognised to be a compilation of the ninth century, divides the early saints of Ireland into three orders and assigns the highest place in the spiritual hierarchy to the third order – the anchorites. Not only monks, but Celtic abbots and bishops, moved freely and often from community life to solitude. The *Life of St Columbanus*, written by Jonas of Bobbio describes him from time to time quitting his monks at Luxeuil and living alone in a cave. During one of these eremitic spells, it was revealed to him that several of the brothers had fallen ill, and he hurried back to the monastery to care for them.⁷ When St Cuthbert at the end of his life withdrew from the community Lindisfarne to settle in a hermitage on the island of Inner Farne, he was following a well-recognised Celtic practice. The pull of the desert – 'the wave cry, the wind cry, the vast waters of the petrel and the porpoise' – that sounds so strong in Celtic hagiography, peopled many desolate islands and rocks round the coast of Ireland and northern Britain with hermits. In some places their derelict structures and oratories are still visible.

No Irish monastic rule is known earlier than the Rule of St Columbanus. This, together with his penitential and sermons, give us a glimpse of the spirit that governed Celtic monastic practice. These documents, in fact, describe an ascetical regime so harsh and uncompromising that they chill the blood. For Columbanus, the life of the monk was a heroic and unremitting warfare to conquer his own self-will and sensuality:

The chief part of the monk's rule is mortification . . . Let the monk live in a community under the discipline of one father and in the company of many . . . Let him not do as he wishes, let him eat what he is bidden, keep as much as he has received, complete the tale of his work, be subject to him whom he does not like. Let him come weary and as if sleep-walking to his bed, and let him be forced to rise while his sleep is not yet finished. Let him keep silence when he has suffered wrong. Let him fear the superior as a lord, love him as a father, believe that whatever he commands is salutary for himself.⁸

This austere programme is underpinned by a penitential of merciless severity. A brother who drops food or spills drink while serving is to do penance in church, lying prostrate and motionless during the singing of twelve psalms; breaking the rule of silence at meals is to be punished with six lashes; forgetting prayer before or after work, twelve lashes; smiling during the divine office, six lashes; using the words 'mine' or 'thine', six lashes; contradicting the words of another, fifty lashes.⁹

This ferocious discipline obviously reflects the conditions of a violent and turbulent society; but its object here was to hurry the monk up the steep road to the unitive experience of God, which was the crown of the contemplative's efforts. Columbanus explained it in the letter he wrote from his impending exile, addressed to the brethren he had been forced to leave at Luxeuil. He writes tearfully and in haste, for a messenger has come to say that the ship to carry him back to his own country is loaded and ready to sail: 'Keep to the highway of perfection . . . we must pass by the royal road to the city of God through affliction of the flesh and contrition of the heart; through the toil of the body and the humiliation of the spirit; if you remove the battle, you remove the crown as well.'¹⁰

The tone of this advice is echoed in Celtic hagiographical literature. The saints perform heroic acts of mortification; they recite the Psalter standing in icy waters, or stand for long periods in prayer with arms outstretched like a cross, an exercise known as the crossfigill; Kevin of Glendalough was said to have maintained the posture for seven years, unsleeping and motionless, so that the birds nested in his upturned hands;¹¹ they fast continuously, and use bare rocks for bolsters. On the other hand, there are hints in the Lives that the regime in the Irish monasteries was in reality more compassionate towards human weakness than

the penitentials suggest. In the midst of the ascetical heroics, glimpses of a gentler and more humane spirit break through, of the abbot's solicitude for his monks as they are not overworked and are properly fed, of the love of animals and a appreciation of the natural world.

The Irish monks seem to have been free from the dread of the pagan classical that afflicted Jerome and Gregory the Great. Latin was taught in the Irish monasteries of the seventh century, and it was not only the Latin of the Scriptures and the Fathers. The Latinity of Columbanus, who had taught the monks of Bangor before embarking on his continental odyssey, shows reminiscences of Virgil, Ovid, and Juvenal, as well as the Christian poets.¹² By the seventh century their enthusiasm for learning and their zeal for teaching had made the monasteries of Ireland the most famous in Europe. Bede referred to them with awe. They were also important centres of book production. Children were brought up in the monastery to copy texts in the distinctive half-uncial script that was transmitted by the Irish missionaries to Anglo-Saxon England and by migrator monks to the scriptoria of Saint-Gall, Bobbio, and many other Irish monasteries on the Continent.

St Columba was an accomplished scribe. Adamnan, who wrote his Life near a century later, tells us that at Durrrow, when there was drought, they carried the books written in Columba's own hand into the fields and opened them, so as to induce rain.¹³ The tenth-century author of the *Life of St Congall* has a pleasurable story of one of the boys in the monastery who was learning to write; but his writing was so appalling that nobody could tell whether it was a human scribble or meaningless marks made by the claws of a bird. His teachers despaired; but Congall blessed his eyes and hands, and after that he made fine progress until he surpassed all the other scribes of his time.¹⁴ It was the fusion of this tradition of Irish calligraphy and love of zoomorphic animal forms with the artistic tradition of northern Britain, after the Celtic mission to Northumbria, that was to produce the great series of illuminated Gospel books, like the Echternach Gospels, the Book of Kells, and the Lindisfarne Gospels, which are the supreme monuments of Hiberno-Saxon art.

Historians have long puzzled over the peculiarities of the monastic structure that developed in the Irish Church. The Church of the early centuries had modelled its organisation upon the administrative structure of the Roman Empire. In Gaul, as in other lands of the old Empire, diocesan organisation rested upon monarchical bishops, who were city-based. Everywhere the bishop's see was located in the old Roman *civitas* – an arrangement that was expressly authorised by the Council of Chalcedon in 451. Monasticism had developed in the West alongside, and in close connection with, this urban episcopal structure. Monasteries of men and women were founded in or adjacent to cities, and were under the supervision of bishops. But Ireland had never been within the Empire and lacked any urban life that could provide a basis for a Roman diocesan structure. It was a pastoral society, bonded together by the ties of tribe and kindred, that

lacking the kind of social base for the episcopal organisation that existed on the Continent. As in Anglo-Saxon Britain, where Roman urban life had disappeared, the area of a bishop's jurisdiction was that of the tribal settlement and diocesan boundaries were fluid. Co-existing with this episcopal organisation was that of the tribal monastery presided over by a presbyter-abbot. Several monasteries, like Columba's foundations at Durrow and Derry, acquired extensive territorial empires, comprising not only daughter foundations, but lands, churches, and in some cases missionary colonies, like Iona, across the Irish sea. A monastic empire of this type was called a 'paruchia', and it constituted a pastoral unit, subject to the authority of the priest-abbot of the founding house. Bishops continued to play an essential role both alongside and within this structure. In the course of the sixth century a number of them adopted the monastic life themselves and located their sees within a monastery. In this case, the bishop exercised within the paruchia the sacramental powers of his order, while sharing governmental authority with the priest-abbot. In some cases the roles of bishop and abbot were united in the same person, as happened at Armagh.¹⁵

One kind of organisation based upon collaboration between bishop and abbot can be seen in sixth-century Northumbria, which was evangelised by Irish monks from Iona. St Aidan was called from Iona by King Oswald to preach the Gospel in his kingdom. Aidan was, in fact, a tribal bishop, attached to the territory of the heathen Angles. As a monk in the Irish tradition, he chose to locate his see in a monastery on the offshore island of Lindisfarne. He resided on the island and followed the regime of the monastery when he was not occupied with one of his prolonged missions on the mainland. The domestic affairs of the monastery and its spiritual direction were left to the abbot. In Ireland, by the eighth century most episcopal sees had been merged with monastic paruchiae.

This monastic church structure was peculiar to the Celtic lands. It existed in sixth-century Wales as well as Ireland and parts of northern Britain; but it made no headway on the Continent against the long-established Roman episcopal organisation. In Britain, its further development was arrested by the Synod of Whitby (664), where Colman of Lindisfarne representing the Irish mission, and Wilfrid of Ripon the Roman, argued out the case for their respective traditions, and King Oswiu declared for the Roman party. Ostensibly, the object of the conference was to settle the Easter controversy — the two traditions differed over the dating of Easter because the Celts still adhered to an older system of computation which Rome had abandoned. But behind this frontal issue lay deeper differences, not of doctrine, but of culture and ecclesiastical organisation.

The monastic organisation of the Celtic Church, so different from that of Rome, was rooted in the socio-political structure of Irish society. The ascetical movement of the sixth century had found its recruits chiefly among the aristocracy, and the wave of monastic foundations was largely the work of fervent

princes. It provided an outlet for their religious zeal without diminishing property or power base of local dynasties. The monastery was the spiritual focus of the tribe or kindred group. The ruling dynasty which endowed it with a portion of the family lands retained a continuing interest in its property. The abbot was normally a member of the dynasty, and his successors were also co-arch-co-heirs of the founder's family. The paruchia of the monastery was not an area of spiritual jurisdiction where the abbot held sway; it also reflected political dominance of the founding dynasty.

The place of Iona in the polity of the Celtic Church is a conspicuous case-study. The founder, St Columba, was a prince of the Uí Neill, the most powerful dynasty of northern Ireland. Iona was to be the royal cult centre for the Scottish kingdom of Dairiada, an Irish colony ('Scotus' was the medieval term for an Irishman established in Argyll, on the edge of the Pictish kingdoms. As the evangelisation of the Picts and the northern Angles proceeded at the hands of monks from Iona, the paruchia of the monastery expanded eastwards, and it came to hold a position in the Celtic churches of Britain analogous to that of a metropolitan see in southern Europe. But it continued to be, as it had begun, a spiritual focus for Scottish colonisation of the territory of the Picts. A century after Columba's death Adamnan, the abbot, was still a member of the ruling Irish dynasty the Uí Neill.

Columbanus and the Merovingian nobility

This special relationship between the monastery and its founding dynasty has to explain the success of St Columbanus and his disciples in promoting Irish monasticism in Gaul. From the outset Columbanus directed his mission to the Merovingian court and he made his most influential conquests among the aristocracy. This was the area of society from which Luxeuil, despite the severity of its regime, chiefly recruited its monks.¹⁶ It became a focus from which ideals and usages of Celtic monasticism were widely diffused on the Continent and in the seventh century it stimulated a wave of monastic foundations which went forward under the enthusiastic patronage of kings and queens and members of the Frankish nobility. Part of the attraction the Columbanian type of monastic organisation must have had for this class lay in its independence from episcopal control and the continuing control that the founding family might exercise over the landed property of the monastery and over its choice of abbot.

Within a few years of the death of Columbanus, Luxeuil had mitigated the deterrent effects of his fearsome penitential by tempering it with the gentler more humane Rule of St Benedict and it was this 'mixed rule' of Luxeuil which was introduced into the many abbeys that adopted the new model. Like Lécroix in an earlier age, Luxeuil was a nursery of monk-bishops. At least eleven of these monks were appointed to Gallic sees in the course of the seventh century. Besides these products of the cloister, the chief agents in promoting the idea

Columbanian monasticism were secular bishops, like Audoenus of Rouen – the St Ouen of hagiographical tradition – and St Eligius of Noyon, who had previously held high office at the Neustrian court of Paris.

Audoenus was the son of an Austrasian nobleman who had sheltered Columbanus during his exile from Burgundy, and his childhood encounter with the holy *émigré* inspired a lifelong devotion to the ascetical life. Audoenus became *Referendarius* (Secretary) to King Dagobert, and with the king's assistance he founded a monastery at Rebas in Brie in 635 which was modelled on Luxeuil. After 640, when he was appointed to the see of Rouen, a new field was opened to him. 'If anyone would know', wrote his hagiographer excitedly, 'how many monasteries for either sex have been founded by him and under his episcopate, let him perambulate his diocese and marvel at the throngs of monks; he might think he was in Egypt.'¹⁸ St Wandrille, Jumièges, Pavilly, and Fécamp all owed their existence to his patronage and to the favour of the king, which he was in a position to tap. Enthusiasm for the monks of Columbanus seems to have gripped the whole family of Audoenus; two of his brothers collaborated with him in the foundation of Rebas, and one of them, Ado, established the famous double monastery of Jouarre on his portion of the family estates in the valley of the Marne.

The family of Audoenus were typical of members of the Frankish court aristocracy who responded with enthusiasm to the inspiration of Columbanus and his disciples. In their activities as monastic founders they had the active encouragement of the Merovingian kings, who seconded their efforts with charters of confirmation and grants of immunity. But royal assistance was not confined to ratifying the acts of others. Several women of the reigning dynasty also played a conspicuous role in promoting Columbanian monasticism of the kind practised at Luxeuil. Direct royal sponsorship reached a climax in the activity of Queen Balhild, the wife of Clovis II, who ruled the joint kingdom of Neustria and Burgundy. Balhild is a startling instance of the tendency of the Merovingians to follow their fancy in choosing their brides from the lower strata of society. She came of an obscure Saxon family settled in Britain. She had been sold into slavery as a girl and had been acquired by Erchinoald, the mayor of the Neustrian palace. According to her hagiographer, Erchinoald was much taken with her and offered her marriage; but Clovis, the son and heir of King Dagobert, snatched her up instead – 'a reward for her humility', adds the writer unctuously.¹⁹ She did much for the family of her adoption; she bore her husband three subsequent rulers, and her posthumous career as a royal saint conferred on the dynasty a valuable aura of supernatural approval. It was possibly a mixture of piety and policy that made her the devoted friend of zealous churchmen like Audoenus and St Elói, and the patroness of monks, for ecclesiastical support could be invaluable in reinforcing the position of a legitimate wife.²⁰

Both during her husband's lifetime and after his death in 657, when she presided matrarchally over the conjoint kingdom as regent for her son, Chlotar III,

Balhild worked steadily to promote the monastic customs of Luxeuil. It was through her efforts that the 'mixed rule' of Luxeuil was imposed upon the royal abbey of Saint-Denis. She also used her influence with many of the bishops to introduce the same regime to the loosely structured communities that served basilicas housing the tombs of the saints, so that Saint-Martin of Tours, Saint-Germain of Auxerre, Saint-Médard of Soissons, Saint-Pierre-le-Vif of Sens, and Saint-Aignan of Orleans all became regular monasteries following the 'mixed rule' of St Columbanus and St Benedict. Shortly after 657 she founded and endowed the abbey of Corbie and peopled it with monks from Luxeuil. But daring was the abbey of nuns at Chelles. The original convent there had been established on a royal villa by Clotilde, queen of the first Clovis; but Balhild refounded and rebuilt it on a grander scale. The first abbess, Bertille, and a community of nuns were imported from Jouarre. In the end a political upheaval that was probably connected with her policy of monastic endowment forced her to relinquish power,²¹ and the Wagnerian drama of her life ended in the peaceful Chelles, where she took the veil and lived out her remaining years humbly under the abbess she had appointed.

The double monasteries of Gaul

Both Chelles and Jouarre were double monasteries, housing communities of men and women within the same enclosure.²² They formed part of a group of aristocratic foundations for women that sprang up in the north-east region of Gaul the three decades following the death of St Columbanus. The double monastery was not, of course, a mixed society. It consisted of separate communities of men and women living in proximity, in most cases using a common church for liturgical offices, and directed by a single head. There was a precedent for arrangement in the early monasticism of the East. Both Pachomius and St Basil had organised communities of nuns in the vicinity of their houses of monks for the purpose of mutual support. The point of the arrangement was that the few communities required the liturgical and sacramental ministrations of priests; male community also provided help with manual tasks and managerial skills that were thought to be beyond the capacity of women.

The Columbanian double monasteries of seventh-century Gaul were essentially communities of nuns to which communities of monks were attached in order to provide priests and heavier manual services. The head of the joint community was invariably an abbess. Although the inspiration for these foundations had come from the mission of Columbanus, he himself did nothing to provide religious institutions for women, nor was there any clear precedent for double monasteries in Celtic lands.²³ The initiative came from the same circles that created the abbeys for men. The regime of Luxeuil provided a model for observance, and encouragement seems to have come from Eustrace Walbert, the two abbots who succeeded Columbanus at Luxeuil.

The proprietary attitude of the founding families towards these establishments is vividly displayed in the matriarchal abbesses who ruled autocratically over both their male and female subjects. The contemporary *Rule of a Father for Virgins*, which may have been the work of Walbert of Luxeuil, gives the abbess much the same role as a male abbot, including the power to hear the confessions of her nuns and to absolve them. 'An abbess, writes the author significantly, ought to be noble in wisdom and holiness, as well as noble by birth.'²⁴ The noble abbesses of Merovingian hagiography are learned and masterful women with the authority and self-assurance that society regarded as their birthright. Through them and the successors they appointed from their own kindred, the families which had endowed monasteries out of their own land continued to retain an interest in the property. The apotheosis of the abbess after death at the hands of the hagiographers provided the family with a domestic saint – a *Hausheiliger* – who enhanced its standing with a special kind of sacral prestige.²⁵ This was the role that St Gertrude, the abbess of Nivelles, discharged for the Carolingian family of Austrasia, which provided mayors of the palace before they aspired to the throne.

Nivelles in Brabant was the earliest of the family's monastic foundations. It was constructed and endowed by Itta, the wife of Pippin the Elder, after her husband's death in 640. Itta appointed her daughter, Gertrude, as its first abbess, while continuing to direct the abbey's external affairs herself. Gertrude organised it as a double monastery following the 'mixed rule' of Luxeuil. That she intended it to be a Columbanian establishment following Celtic liturgical customs is evident from the fact that she sent to Ireland for monks to come and instruct the sisters in the chant. She was also determined to infect her nuns with the Irish zest for letters: she sent agents to Rome to buy books to educate them, being herself, writes her hagiographer, almost an entire library of sacred lore.²⁶ Like other aristocratic abbesses, she appointed her successor, choosing her niece, whom she had educated in the abbey. Gertrude's powerful figure so dominated the imagination of her community that ten years after her death she reappeared to rescue the house from a crisis. A fire had broken out. The community had abandoned all hope of saving the buildings; and the nuns had taken refuge outside the enclosure, when the monk-steward of the estates caught sight of the familiar figure, clothed in her habit, standing; it seemed, on the summit of the refectory roof, and battering back the insolent flames with her veil.²⁷

The mixed rule in Gaul and Spain

The 'mixed rule' of St Benedict and St Columbanus that was followed by both monks and nuns in the newly founded Gallic monasteries of the seventh century derived its authority from the example of Luxeuil. The first reference to this hybrid regime, in the foundation diploma of Solignac, indicated that it was adopted at Luxeuil under Walbert, who became abbot in 629.²⁸ We do not know

enough about the observance of Luxeuil at this period to say with confidence which features of the Benedictine Rule were adopted; but it is a reasonable assumption that the successors of Columbanus preferred St Benedict's gentler penitential system as well as various practical directions for the management of the community that the Rule of St Columbanus ignored.

The same regime of a 'mixed rule' prevailed in the monasteries of seventh-century Spain. There, too, following the conversion to Catholicism of the Visigothic king, Recared, in 589, monasticism flourished under the warmth of royal patronage and monks played an active role in evangelising the people. The customs followed in the Spanish cloisters were a pastiche of Eastern tradition and the Rules of Leander and Isidore of Seville. The so-called *Regula Communis* a seventh-century compilation attributed to St Fructuosus of Braga, presupposes the existence of double monasteries, not unlike those of Gaul. Isidore's Rule which had a wide circulation, shows the impress of St Benedict, but the Benedictine Rule penetrated the peninsula only slowly and relatively late. It was evidently known, but it was many centuries before it was adopted as an exclusive model by some of the abbeys in the north of Aragon and the Spanish March.²⁹

How knowledge of the Italian Rule reached the northern kingdoms of the Franks remains a historical puzzle; but it is clear that through the spiritual colonies of Luxeuil knowledge and appreciation of it were gradually disseminated among the bishops and ascetical communities of northern and central Gaul. The spread of the Benedictine conception of the monastic life was closely associated with the cultus of St Benedict, and somewhere about the end of the seventh century this gained added impetus from a sensational relic theft, which brought the bones of the patriarch himself to a Frankish monastery. The perpetrator, and immediate beneficiaries of this furtive translation were the monks of Fleury abbey, the modern Saint-Benoît-sur-Loire.

Fleury was founded in 651 by Leodebodus, the abbot of Saint-Aignan at Orleans, and it was richly endowed with land by Chlotar III and Theuderic II. But the days of its fame began with its acquisition of St Benedict. The great romanesque basilica erected over the shrine in the eleventh century still stands by the rapid waters of the Loire as an eloquent memorial to its importance as a major cult centre of northern Europe. The eighth-century tradition, representative in its most reliable form by Paul the Deacon, contained only a few facts about the translation. These were that a party of monks from the Orleanais came to Monte Cassino, which had lain deserted and ruinous for the past century, discovered the bones of St Benedict and his sister, St Scholastica, and carried them back to their homeland.

This sparse stock of information was copiously improved by Adrevald of Fleury in the ninth century. He wrote a *History of the Translation of St Benedict* which proved a welcome model to other monasteries anxious to authenticate the acquisition of their patron saints.³⁰ Adrevald attributed the plan of retrieving the relics to Abbot Mommoleus of Fleury, who sent a party over the Alps to find

St Benedict's tomb. They were joined in the enterprise by a party dispatched by the bishop of Le Mans, who wanted the body of St Scholastica. There was the classical *mise-en-scène*: the unsuccessful search for the graves, miraculous guidance to the spot, a night break-in and a dramatic flight home from the pursuit of the pope and the Lombards. The monks of Monte Cassino, of course, later contested the authenticity of the translation, and medieval pilgrims had a choice between two St Benedicts. But Adrevald was widely read; and the fact that the author of the Benedictine Rule had chosen Gaul as his final resting place was of much significance for the development of Gallic monasticism. The Franks had taken possession of St Benedict; and it was in the Frankish realms that the Rule eventually acquired its authoritative status as the standard norm of monastic observance.

Notes

1. *The History of the Franks*, trans. Lewis Thorpe (1974), p. 152.
2. *Sanctae Radegundae Vita*, MGH SS RM, II, pp. 366–7.
3. MGH *Auctorium Antiquissimorum*, IV, p. 289. On Radegunde's manner of life at Holy Cross see Joan M. Peterson, 'The spirituality and miracles of St Radegunde' in *Monastic Studies*, ed. Judith Loades (1990), pp. 36–8.
4. *The History of the Franks*, p. 526.
5. On Irish monastic foundation in general see J. Ryan, *Irish Monasticism, its Origins and Early Development* (1972); A. C. Thomas, *Britain and Ireland in Early Christian Times, AD 400–800* (1971). For an evaluation of the sources see J. F. Kenney, *The Sources for the Early History of Ireland, I Ecclesiastical* (New York, 1929), Kathleen Hughes, *Early Christian Ireland: Introduction to the Sources* (1972). Among the most valuable modern studies are those of Kathleen Hughes, *The Church in Early Irish Society* (1966); and M. Dillon and Nora Chadwick, *The Celtic Realms* (1967); also Nora Chadwick, *The Age of the Saints in the Early Celtic Church* (1963); T. M. Charles-Edward, *Early Christian Ireland* (2000).
6. Text in A. W. Haddan and W. Stubbs, *Councils and Ecclesiastical Documents* (1869–78) II, p. 292. See discussion of its date and significance by Kathleen Hughes, *The Church in Early Irish Society*, pp. 69–70.
7. *Vitae Columbae abbatris discipulorumque eius auctore Iona*, MGH SS RM IV, pp. 75, 76–8.
8. *Sancti Columbani Opera*, ed. G. S. M. Walker, *Scriptores Latini Hiberniae* II (1957), pp. 140–2.
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 142–68.
10. *Ibid.*, pp. 26–36.
11. L. Gougaud, *Christianity in Celtic Lands*, trans. M. Joynt (1932), p. 95.
12. On the literary culture of St Columbanus see M. Manitius, *Geschichte der Lateinischen Literatur des Mittelalters* (1911–31) I, p. 181; Walker, *op. cit.*, introduction; and *Columbanus: Studies on the Latin Writings*, ed. M. Lapidge (1997). M. Richter, *Bobbio in the early Middle Ages: the legacy of Columbanus* (Dublin, 2008).
13. *Adamnan's Life of Columba*, ed. and trans. A. O. and M. O. Anderson (1961), pp. 450–2.
14. *Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae*, ed. C. Plummer (1910), II, p. 13.
15. On relations between bishops and the monastic paruchia see Kathleen Hughes, *op. cit.* (1966), pp. 79–90.
16. The best account of the spread of Columbanian monasticism in Gaul is by F. Prinz, *Frühes Mönchtum im Frankenreich* (Munich, Vienna, 1965), pp. 121–41. I am especially indebted to this work.
17. Prinz, *op. cit.*, p. 123.
18. *Vita Audoini* MGH SS RM, V, p. 557. On the foundations of Audouenus and his fan see Prinz, pp. 124–7.
19. *Vita Sanctae Bathildis*, MGH SS RM, II, pp. 482–3; cf. the *Vita Eligii*, *ibid.*, pp. 37–8, 41, 48.
20. A point made by Prof. Janet Nelson in her stimulating study of the careers of Bathild and Balhid in *Medieval Women*, ed. D. Baker (*Studies in Church History, Subsidia* 1978), pp. 31–77. On Balhid's monastic patronage see E. Ewig, 'Das Privileg Bischofs Berthold von Amiens für Corbie u. die Klosterpolitik der Königin Bathildis' (1973), pp. 62–114.
21. Ewig, *op. cit.*, p. 109, who points out that the conversion of the basilican church into monasteries involved loss of control and of valuable property by the bishops.
22. On Jouarre and the other women's foundations see G. A. Rohan Chabot, Marguerite Maille, *Les cryptes de Jouarre* (Paris, 1971), and Prinz, pp. 142–5. On double monasteries, Mary Bateson, 'The origin and early history of double monasteries', *TRH new ser.* xiii. (1899), pp. 137–98; Margaret Deanesly, *The Pre-Conquest Church in England* (1961), pp. 199–207; and the studies in *Doppelklöster und andere Formen Symbiose männlicher und weiblicher Religionen im Mittelalter*, ed. K. Elm and M. Parmentier (*Historische Studien* 18, Berlin, 1992).
23. The argument of Mary Bateson and J. Ryan that St Brigid's Kildare was a double monastery has not found favour with modern Celtic scholars.
24. *Regula carissimas Paris ad Virgines*, PL 88, 1069.
25. Prinz, pp. 489–503.
26. *Vita Sanctae Gertrudae*, MGH SS RM, II, p. 458.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 406.
28. Prinz, p. 268.
29. A. L. Coude, 'La diffusion de la Regula Benedicti en la Peninsula Ibérica' in *Regula Benedicti Studia* I (1972), pp. 297–325. On early monasticism in Spain see M. Coche-Eudes sur le monachisme en Espagne et en Portugal (Lisbon, 1966); and the monastic modern study of Antonio L. Coude, *San Benito y los Benedictinos*, 7 vols (Braga, 1999).
30. MGH SS, XV, pp. 474–7. For Adrevald and his work see W. Goffart, 'Le Mans Scholastica, and the literary tradition of the translation of St Benedict', *Rev. bénédictine* (1967), pp. 107–41; P. J. Gearty, *Furia Sacra: Thefts of Relics in the Central Middle Ages* (Princeton, 1978), pp. 146–9.

ENGLAND AND THE CONTINENT

Roman and Celtic foundations

It must have been the aristocratic tone of the women's abbeys of northern Gaul, as well as their reputation for asceticism and learning, that commended them to the notice of the nobility in the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms of Britain. Bede had heard that for lack of suitable nunneries nearer home, Earcongota, the daughter of King Earconberht of Kent, had become a nun at Faremoutiers-en-Brie; and he reports that many girls of the English nobility were sent to Chelles, Andelys and other Gallic monasteries to be educated and in some cases to enter the religious life.¹ Abbess Hilda, who was related to the royal family of Northumbria and who had been baptised by Paulinus together with the rest of the Northumbrian court, had a sister at Chelles. She had intended to go to Chelles herself until Aidan undertook her spiritual direction, and by so doing saved her for English monasticism and the English Church.

In seventh-century Britain the three traditions, Roman, Gallic and Irish, met together and fused. Monastic life grew step by step with the conversion of the heathen English to Christianity and, as the life of Hilda shows, it recruited among first-generation converts. Britain was the field of two missionary efforts — that of Augustine dispatched from Rome by Pope Gregory the Great, and the Celtic mission sent from Iona at the request of King Oswald of Northumbria; and two distinct monastic traditions were planted in their wake. Augustine and his companions had been monks before setting out on the mission to Kent, and besides erecting a cathedral at Canterbury he founded a monastery dedicated to Saints Peter and Paul outside the city — the later St Augustine's abbey — which became the mausoleum of the first archbishops and the early kings of Kent. Probably the original role assigned to the monks of this establishment was that of maintaining the round of liturgical offices at the nearby cathedral on the model of those

monasteries at Rome that were satellites of the patriarchal basilicas.² We know nothing of its observance at this early period, but it is a fair assumption that followed the customs of Gregory's foundation on the Coelian Hill, from which Augustine himself had come.

It has often been suggested that Augustine imported the Rule of St Benedict into England and that the abbey outside Canterbury was the first Benedictine foundation outside Italy.³ However, there is no evidence for this. The suggestions upon the mistaken notion that St Andrew's on the Coelian Hill and other monasteries in Rome had adopted the Benedictine Rule. In fact, the usages of Roman monasteries of the seventh century were various and eclectic. Some were Greek communities following the tradition of St Basil; others, which had sprung up as satellites round the patriarchal basilicas of the city, used the liturgical orders of the basilicas they served, and their internal regime, as it is revealed by the evidence of the *Ordines*, was determined by the varying experience of their founders. The Rule of St Benedict was known at Rome, but there is no evidence that a Roman monastery adopted it as an exclusive model before the tenth century.

The first great burst of English monastic foundation followed Aidan's mission to Northumbria. True to the tradition of the Celtic Church, he set up a missionary see in a monastery on the island of Lindisfarne, which King Oswald had granted him in 635. Although he was an active bishop with a diocese covered the whole of Northumbria, he continued to live the life of a monk, retreating periodically to Lindisfarne, where the community was governed by him but by an abbot, and even on occasion withdrawing to a hermitage on the island of Inner Farne.

The rule of life followed at Lindisfarne was that established by Columba at Iona. And the same Celtic observance presumably governed the other northern monasteries that sprang from the headwater of Aidan's mission: Melrose, Gairnhead, and Hartlepool, all founded by Aidan; Ripon, which originated as a colony of Melrose; and Lastingham, which was founded by Cedd, the apostle of the Angles, who had been a monk at Lindisfarne. The strategy of the mission from Iona was the same as that of Columbanus in Gaul: they addressed themselves initially to the court aristocracy, and monastic foundation went forward with the active collaboration of the Northumbrian kings, who provided landed endowment. The main effort of Iona was concentrated on the north; a number of Celtic monasteries were planted in the southern kingdoms by Irish missionaries from elsewhere. Fursey, an Irish princeling who, like Columba had taken a vow to spend his life as a pilgrim for love of Christ, was welcomed by the East Anglian King Sigebert, and given the old Roman shore-fort at Burgh Castle in Suffolk, where he erected a monastery. Malmesbury in Wessex was an Irish foundation.

One of the most striking results of the links between English royal courts and the women's abbeys of northern Gaul was the introduction of double monasticism of the Gallic type into England. The author of the *Life of Bertina*, abbess of Chelles

men, to give instruction in the religious life and in the construction of monasteries.⁵ Like their Gallic counterparts, the English double monasteries of the seventh century were primarily nunneries to which communities of men were attached, and they were governed by abbesses. In England also they were aristocratic foundations, housing the daughters and dowagers of kings and ruled by abbesses of noble blood. Wimborne in Dorset was founded and directed by two sisters of King Ine of Wessex. St Mildred, the founder and abbess of Minster-in-Thetford, came from the royal family of the Hwicce. St Etheldreda, the founder of Ely, herself the daughter of a king, had been queen of King Ecgrith of Northumbria.

At court Etheldreda encountered Bishop Wilfrid and came under the influence of his domineering personality. Under his direction she adopted an ascetical style of life and resolved to become a nun. According to Bede, Ecgrith tried without success for twelve years to persuade her to consummate the marriage.⁶ He never forgave Wilfrid, but in the end he allowed her to take the veil at Coldingham. The double monastery she constructed at Ely was built on her own land, which was a dowry from a previous marriage. Coldingham, where she was trained in the religious life, was governed by Abbess Aebbe, who was her aunt and a sister of King Oswiu.

No rule in use by an English monastery of the seventh century is known to survive. But the prototype of the English double monasteries was the Columbanian double monastery of Gaul, and the customary they followed was probably the 'mixed rule' of Saints Columbanus and Benedict that was observed at Chelles and Faremoutiers. The Irish element is certain. Hilda, successively abbess of Hartlepool and Whitby, had been trained in monastic observance by Aidan. And Coldingham, which was to be a nursery of royal saints and abbesses, had Irish monks. It was an Irish member of the community who complained to Aebbe that her nuns were eating and gossiping in their cells when they should have been at prayer, and wasting their time weaving fine clothes. He predicted the abbey would be punished by fire, like Nineveh.⁷ And it was. But the story is Bede's, and we need not take the accusation of laxity too seriously. The double monasteries may not have conformed to the fiercely ascetical standards of Columbanus, but they had inherited the Hiberno-Frankish tradition of religious fervour and learning, and they stood high in contemporary esteem.

The royal abbesses of Anglo-Saxon England, like their sisters in Gaul, ruled with the imperious self-assurance conferred on them by their birth, and many of them exerted an influence far beyond the confines of their monasteries. St Hilda's regime at Whitby, from its foundation in 657 until her death in 680, made it one of the most vital and creative centres of English Christianity in the generation before Bede. She had renounced the world but had not been forgotten by it. Bede wrote that kings and princes came to her for advice.⁸ It was indicative of the prestige of her abbey in Northumbrian society that King Oswiu chose it as the venue for the momentous synod of 664 that settled the Easter Controversy in favour of the Roman party and determined the future course of the English Church.

Whether it was for political reasons or out of loyalty to those who had trained her in the Celtic tradition, in the controversy Hilda sided with the spokesmen of the Irish practice and remained a stubborn opponent of Wilfrid. But her involvement in ecclesiastical politics was less important than the direction she gave her monastic community. She vigorously promoted education and learning in the abbey. Her enlightened regime thus performed a vital service by educating clergy for what was still a missionary church operating in an oral society. Five more of her community in fact became bishops. Probably it was her perception of catechetical possibilities of religious epic that made her quick to friend and encourage the peasant poet, Caedmon. When late in life he discovered his gift-song, she persuaded him to join the monastery and had him compose poems transmitted orally, for he never learned to write – on the great Biblical themes of creation and redemption. Both as an intellectual centre and as a focus for pastoral activity Hilda's Whitby stood faithfully in the Irish monastic tradition.

Wilfrid claimed he had been the first to organise an English monastery entirely on the basis of the Rule of St Benedict. The monastery was Ripon, and Wilfrid had been given it to rule after Abbot Eata and a group of the Irish monks had it rather than conform to Roman customs. Wilfrid regarded enforcement of the Benedictine Rule as part of his campaign 'to root out the poisonous weeds planted by the Scots'.⁹ His residences in Rome and Gaul had given him a taste for grandeur and a contempt for the insular traditions of the Celts. He had effectively pleaded the case for conformity with Roman practice at the Synod of Whitby. After 665 the bishop of Northumbria, his state was kingly; and something of his magnificence rubbed off on Ripon and the sister abbey he founded at Hexham in c. 670. The straggling monastic colonies of the Irish, with their humble structures of dry-stone or timber, must have looked barbarous to the eye that had feasted on the spacious Christian basilicas of Rome. At both Ripon and Hexham Wilfrid embarked on elaborate building operations, which included the erection of stone churches, crypts of which still survive with their narrow passages encased by great block ashlar. There seems no reason to doubt the claim of his biographer and devoted chaplain, Eddius Stephanus, that Ripon and Hexham were the first Benedictine monasteries in England in the sense that their customary was based exclusively upon the Rule. But it was not a model immediately imitated by other monastic founders of the seventh century. Knowledge of the Rule was gaining ground, it might be referred to for guidance on practical matters such as the procedure of electing an abbot; but in general, monastic customaries were still eclectic.

Wearmouth and Jarrow

This conjunction of *Romanitas* with the monastic traditions of Gaul and Ireland can be seen in the two famous foundations of Benedict Biscop at Wearmouth and Jarrow. Like Wilfrid, Biscop belonged to the Anglian court nobility and an inveterate traveller. At twenty-five he abandoned everything and set out

pilgrimage for Rome.¹⁰ He stayed a while at Lérins, where he learned the discipline of the regular life and took monastic vows. But Rome repeatedly drew him like a magnet. He returned to England in 669 in the company of Archbishop Theodore, and was placed in charge of the abbey of Saints Peter and Paul at Canterbury. But within a couple of years he was off to Rome again in search of books and relics. The great Northumbrian monastery he began building on the north bank of the Wear in 674 was erected on land given him by King Ecgfrith. To help him in the enterprise and to govern the new community he obtained the assistance of another young nobleman, Ceolfrið, who was a monk at Ripon. Some years later, Biscop erected a sister monastery at Jarrow on the Tyne, and colonised it with monks brought from Wearmouth under the headship of Ceolfrið. An original inscription, incised in Roman capitals and miraculously preserved above the chancel arch of the existing church at Jarrow, records that it was dedicated to St Paul on 23 April, in the fifteenth year of King Ecgfrith and the fourth year of Abbot Ceolfrið – the year 685.

The dedication of Biscop's twin foundations to Saints Peter and Paul, the patron saints of the Roman Church, was an outward sign of their spiritual and cultural affinity with Rome. In the course of his constant travels, he brought back numerous trophies of pilgrimage – books from Rome to stock the libraries and scriptoria of both houses, and paintings and relics for their churches. He also persuaded John the arch-cantor of St Peter's to come to Wearmouth to instruct his monks in the Roman chant and liturgical use. For the buildings he imported masons and glaziers from Gaul, who knew how to build 'according to the Roman fashion that he loved'. Modern excavation of the sites has revealed constructional techniques and architectural features, such as lathe-turned baluster shafts and flooring material in *opus signinum*, derived from sub-Roman Gaul. Investigation of the layout of the monastic buildings is inconclusive, but indicates a single axial plan that differed from both the clustered enceinte of the Irish monasteries and the classical Benedictine arrangement round a square cloister garth.¹¹

Were Biscop's foundations Benedictine abbeys in the proper sense of the term, as has often been claimed? We cannot be sure. He demonstrated his own devotion to St Benedict by adopting his name when he entered the religious life. He knew the Rule and expressly commended it to his two communities as an authoritative guide to be followed when they had to elect a new abbot. Moreover Ceolfrið, Biscop's friend and travelling companion of many journeys, had come from Willfrid's Ripon, where the observance was based exclusively upon the Benedictine Rule. Yet in Bede's *Life of Biscop* there seem to be counter-indications that the observance of Wearmouth and Jarrow was not confined within the framework of the Rule. The regime was devised by Biscop and, like other monastic founders of the seventh century, his method of compiling a customary was eclectic: 'You are not to think', he told the brethren when he was dying, 'that I produced these ordinances from my own untutored heart. In fact, what I transmitted to you to be observed for the health of your souls, were all the best things I learned

from seventeen monasteries in the course of my long wandering and frequent pilgrimage.'¹² This valedictory speech seems to conflict with St Benedict's insistence on the undiluted sovereignty of his written code. But for all its insistence the Rule of St Benedict was not comprehensive; even later monasteries that governed by it required a customary to regulate many details of daily observance. Understood in this sense, Biscop's words are compatible with a monastic regime which accorded the Rule the status of constitutional law.

Biscop's concern that his monks should follow the Rule in their procedure choosing a new abbot marks a significant desire to eliminate one of the prevailing features of Celtic and Frankish monasticism. St Benedict's abbot was to co-act or member of the founder's kindred; he was elected by the brethren on grounds of his personal suitability. This was what Biscop wanted, in a choice dictated by considerations of kindred. It was evidently to safeguard this freedom of choice from any outside pressure that he obtained a privilege Pope Agatho for Wearmouth, which was later confirmed by Pope Sergius extended to Jarrow. But it was a long time before this precocious ideal made headway in northern Europe. It collided with the determination of aristocratic dynasties to retain their control over foundations which had been endowed of their family estates. Less than fifty years after Biscop's death, the debilitating effect of this domination by founder's kindred was already making itself felt in the monastic movement of Northumbria. In a letter written towards the end of his life to his friend, Archbishop Egbert of York, Bede laments the decline of religious fervour: he attributes much of the trouble to the growth of kindred monasteries, in which the founders assumed the role of abbot while living, the establishment with their wives and families.¹³ In England, as in Gaul, Germanic aristocracy had a way of adapting the ascetical movement to fit its own requirements.

Of course the supreme monument to Benedict Biscop's twin foundations was Bede (c. 672–735). His parents, who lived in the vicinity, had given him to Wearmouth as a child-oblate at the age of seven. Shortly after its foundation he was transferred to Jarrow, and there he spent the rest of his life, stirring outside the monastic enclosure except for a belated visit to York to see his old pupil, Archbishop Egbert, and possibly a visit to Lindisfarne his description of the island and its tides has the smell of sense-perception about it: 'I have spent all my life in this monastery, applying myself with my might to the study of the Scriptures; and, in the midst of observing discipline of the Rule and the daily care of singing in the church, it has at been my delight to learn or to teach or to write.'¹⁴ This testament of a life of peace, fulfillment and joy comes at the end of his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, which he finished in 731, four years before his death followed by a list of thirty-five works he had written, including commentaries on the books of the Old and New Testaments, homilies and letters, books on chronology, a martyrology, and a history of the abbots of his

monastery. His treatises on chronology were widely read and copied, and his homilies found their way into the night office of the Western Church; but it is the *Ecclesiastical History* that historians have always gratefully singled out as his masterpiece. Its wealth of detail, its concern for accuracy and documentary evidence, and the classical clarity of its Latin style, make it an astonishing achievement in view of the limitations of time and place within which the author had to work. Without it our knowledge of early Anglo-Saxon England would be immeasurably poorer.

The purpose of the *Ecclesiastical History* was avowedly didactic. Its object was to show that God had chosen the English race to receive the light of the Gospel; and a subsidiary theme, but an important one, was the reception by the English of orthodox Roman Christianity. Writing in a Northumbrian monastery a generation after the Synod of Whitby, Bede was preoccupied with the conflict between the Celtic and Roman traditions which had come to a head over the dating of Easter. His account of the synod, which he placed at the centre of the *Ecclesiastical History*, is one of the best pieces of reportage that the eighth century has to offer. Although he disliked the British and disapproved of the Celtic deviations from Roman practice, he fully appreciated the heroic role the Irish monks had played in the conversion of the heathen English. He wrote with enthusiasm about Columba and Aidan, and showed much interest in the monastic life at Lindisfarne. But the real warmth of his admiration was reserved for St Cuthbert – the monk trained by the Irish at Melrose, who came to accept the Roman Easter and who, as bishop of Lindisfarne, reconciled the two traditions.

The Anglo-Saxon monks on the Continent

The resolution of the conflict not only closed a sore that was draining the strength of the Northumbrian Church; it opened a new phase in the monastic history of Europe. The marriage of the two traditions gave direction and impetus to a new missionary effort by English monks on the Continent. English churchmen felt a hankering for the conversion of their heathen kindred in Frisia and Germany. And the monks who undertook the task took with them the notions of *Romanitas* they had acquired in England – of the normative value of Roman custom and the centrality of the see of St Peter in the ecclesiastical cosmos.¹⁵ They also carried with them a devotion to the Rule of St Benedict. The first objective of their efforts was the evangelisation of Frisia.

Wilfrid had initiated the enterprise when he stayed for some months in Frisia in 678 on his journey to Rome. But the hero of the Frisian mission was Willibrord, a monk who had been trained in Benedictine observance and devotion to Rome at Wilfrid's Ripon. From Ripon he had migrated to Ireland after Wilfrid's downfall, and there he came under the influence of Egbert, another English émigré who had been attracted across the sea by the fervour of the Irish monks

and the reputation of the Irish schools for learning. Egbert was an adherent of the Roman tradition. It was he who in the end persuaded Iona, last bastion of Celtic insularity in Britain, to accept it. But he had absorbed the ideals of Irish asceticism and missionary zeal and he hankered for the penitential life of the pilgrim. In 690 he managed to fulfil his ambition vicariously by sending Willibrord with eleven companions to evangelise Frisia.

The Frisian mission advanced under the patronage and protection of Pipin II, the Carolingian, who as mayor of the palace effectively ruled in place of the Merovingian monarch. The strategy of the missionaries was shaped by their Northumbrian training. Educated in the monastic schools of Wilfrid and Egbert, Willibrord sought and obtained papal sanction for his work; with collaboration of Pipin he got the pope to create a new ecclesiastical province based on his mission station at Utrecht, and was himself consecrated its first bishop by Pope Sergius. And the pope conferred on him the pallium – yoke of white wool that had first been placed on the tomb of St Peter symbolised the authority delegated by St Peter's vicar to the bishop of a non-Italian see.

The same strategy was adopted by St Boniface, an English monk who followed in Willibrord's footsteps and evangelised Thuringia. Boniface was from Northumbria; he was a Wessex man, given to the monastic life in childhood and reared first at Exeter and then at Nursling near Southampton. His missionary career exhibited the same loyalties that the northern monks shown to the Benedictine Rule and the traditions of Rome. He, too, went to Rome to seek an apostolic mandate for his work from the pope. Before he came to Rome his Saxon name, Wynfrith, was changed by the pope to that of Boniface, a Roman martyr whose church stood on the Aventine Hill. Later, when he returned to Rome to be consecrated bishop by Gregory II, he took an oath that Peter and his vicar to 'uphold the faith and purity of holy catholic teaching' 'to agree to nothing that is opposed to the unity of the universal Church, but all things I will show, as I have said, complete loyalty to you and to the will of your church.'¹⁶ Like Willibrord before him, he received the pallium, which was sent him in 732, signifying the creation of a new ecclesiastical province in Germany.

This re-exportation to northern Europe of the Anglo-Saxon idea of Roman ecclesiastical order had momentous consequences for medieval Christendom. After establishing the episcopal organisation of the German Church, Boniface was invited by the rulers of Austrasia and Neustria, Carloman and Pipin II, to help reorganise the Church in their dominions. Thus the Frankish Church was brought into a direct constitutional relationship with the Roman see and a path was laid for the future expansion of papal jurisdiction. Boniface was a primary agent in forging the political alliance between the young Carolingian dynasty and the papacy that paved the way to the creation of the medieval Empire.

The long-term results of the Anglo-Saxon mission were as important for Western monasticism as they were for the secular Church. It had been a monastic enterprise from the start, and this monastic character was maintained by a steady stream of recruits, both men and women, who came from English monasteries to join the mission. Workers in Germany were kept in touch with the brethren at home by the exchange of letters. 'I thank you for the presents and vestments you have sent,' writes Boniface to an English abbot; 'as for copying out the passages of Scripture you asked me for, please excuse my remissness — I have been so much occupied with preaching and travelling about that I could not find time to complete it.'¹⁷ From Bishop Daniel of Winchester he begs the copy of the Prophets that belonged to his old abbot, Winbert, because the text is written in large clear letters; for 'such cannot be procured in this country, and with my failing sight it is impossible for me to read small abbreviated script.'¹⁸ For an instant a bridge is thrown across twelve and a half centuries, and one sees the flickering oil wick and the monastic settlement in the menacing forest, where the monk, Sturm, constructed a fence every night round his mule to protect it from being eaten by wild beasts. The missionaries not only drew comforts and reinforcements from the English abbeys; as their work advanced they made recruits to the monastic life among the newly converted peoples, and several major foundations sprang from the mission. These were all given the Benedictine Rule for their model.

These spiritual colonies of Anglo-Saxon England on the Continent owed their creation to collaboration between the monk-missionaries and the Carolingian dynasty. Echternach, in the region of Trier, was erected by Willibrord in place of a small existing convent and on land given by Pippin II and his wife, Plectrudis. It provided him with a welcome refuge at times when it was going hard with the Frisian mission. The presence of English monks at the abbey in the eighth century, alongside their German brethren, is visually attested by the manuscripts produced in its scriptorium. The best known of these, the Echternach Gospel Book, now in the Bibliothèque Nationale at Paris, is a superb monument of the Northumbrian school, illuminated and written in the characteristic half-uncial script of the Hiberno-English monasteries.

The most illustrious of Boniface's foundations was Fulda in Hesse. It was constructed in 744 with the co-operation of Carloman of Austrasia. The story of the foundation is vividly told in the *Life of the Bavarian monk, Sturm*, who became its first abbot. After Sturm had spent some weeks in the forest prospecting for a site, he reported his chosen location back to Boniface, who made straight for the court of Carloman to ask for a royal grant. The hagiographer hints that other landowners besides the king had an interest in the area, and so 'a charter of this gift was ordered to be drawn up, signed by the king's own hand, and all the nobles in the vicinity of Grapfeld were summoned and asked to follow the king's example, if by any chance they possessed any property in that quarter... the donation was accordingly confirmed by all and passed from the possession of

men into the possession of God.'¹⁹ But a further act was necessary if God were to enjoy undivided possession: there were still the claims of the bishop. To these, Boniface obtained a privilege from Pope Zachary I, which exempted the abbey from all episcopal jurisdiction and placed it under the direct jurisdiction of the Apostolic See.

Fulda exemplified in a special way the two poles of Anglo-Saxon monastic loyalty. Its observance was to be strictly modelled on the Benedictine Rule. Sturm was sent to the fountain-head at Cassino, now repopulated with monks to imbibe the spirit of the Rule, so that he could return and instruct the brethren. The other English feature was exemplified by the papal privilege of exemption which accorded with the ideas of Roman authority implanted in their districts by Wilfrid and Benedict Biscop. Boniface had chosen Fulda to be his place of burial. After his martyrdom in Frisia at the hands of some enraged pagan enthusiasts tried to retain his body. But it was well known that the will of the saints was as impossible to frustrate after death as it was in life: the bier was placed on a barge to carry it up the Rhine on the stage of its journey to Fulda. It was an appropriate mausoleum for a monk who had instructed the Carolingian dynasty in the merits of St Benedict's Rule, the all-powerful authority of St Peter. Later events showed they had learned the lesson well. They invoked the authority of St Peter's vicar to dismiss the Merovingian kings and rule in their stead; and at their direction the Benedictine Rule was imposed as a norm upon monasteries throughout their north-western dominions.

Notes

1. *Historia Ecclesiastica* iii, 8. The best text, with translation, will be found in E. Brehaut, *St Boniface and his Mission*, pp. 100–101.
2. N. Brooks, *The Early History of the Church of Canterbury: Christ Church from 1066* (1984), pp. 91–2.
3. Thus P. Schmitz, *Histoire de l'ordre de Saint Benoît* (Maredsous, 1942), I, p. 2.
4. On the observance of Roman monasteries at this period see G. Ferrari, *Early Monasteries* (*Studi di Antichità Cristiana* 23, Vatican, 1957).
5. *MGH SS RM VI*, p. 106; cited by D. Baltrusch-Schneider in *Doppelkloster und Formen der Symbiose männlicher und weiblicher Religionen im Mittelalter*, ed. K. E. M. Parise (*Berliner Historische Studien* 18, Berlin, 1992), pp. 63–4.
6. *Historia Ecclesiastica* iv, 19.
7. *Ibid.* iv, 25.
8. *Ibid.* iv, 23.
9. *The Life of Bishop Wilfrid by Eddius Stephanus*, ed. B. Colgrave (1927), p. 99.
10. For Benedict Biscop and the foundation of Wearmouth and Jarrow see Thompson, *Bede, Life, Times and Writings* (1935), pp. 60–101; and P. Hunter Blair, *World of Bede* (1970), pp. 155–99.
11. Rosemary Cramp, 'Monkwearmouth and Jarrow, the archaeological evidence for the founding of the monastery of St Peter and St Paul', in *The Birkenhead Centenary of the Thirteenth Century of the Birth of the Monastery of St Peter and St Paul*, ed. G. Bonner (1976), pp. 5–18.

12. *Venerabilis Baedae Opera Historica*, ed. C. Plummer (1896), pp. 374–5.
13. *Epistola ad Egbertum*, *ibid.*, pp. 415–16.
14. *Historia Ecclesiastica* v, 24.
15. On the Frisian mission see W. Levison, *England and the Continent in the Eighth Century* (1946), pp. 45–69.
16. *Die Briefe des heiligen Bonifatius*, ed. M. Tangl, MGH *Epistolae* Berlin 1916, No 16; trans. C. H. Talbot, *The Anglo-Saxon Missionaries in Germany* (1954), p. 70.
17. Talbot, *op. cit.* p. 84.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 118.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 189.

5

THE EMPEROR AND THE RULE

The religious motives for endowment

When King Carloman granted fiscal immunities to the monks of Grandfelden explained the reason for his grant was 'that thereby we may merit pardon from eternal giver of rewards, and that it may please them to pray perpetually for stability of our kingdom and in every way to give faithful assistance to our governance'.¹ The same formula was used by his brother, Charlemagne, in a privilege given to Lorsch abbey in 772.² The stereotyped language of these royal diplomas indicates the complex attitudes — the mixture of piety and policy — that moved Carolingians, like other secular rulers, to promote monasticism in their realm. As with all monastic benefaction, the primary motive was that of safeguarding the soul of the benefactor and the souls of his relatives. Medieval rulers shared with their people current doctrinal assumptions about the economy of salvation. These assumptions included the ideas of vicarious merit and the need to make satisfaction or reparation for sin. The merit that accrued to an individual through prayer and good works could be applied to other people, and not only living people but also to the dead. This concept played a crucial role in medieval religious practice. To found and endow a community of monks was to ensure the donor an unceasing fund of intercession and sacrifice which would avail himself and his relatives both in their lifetime and after death.

The concern with vicarious merit was associated with the belief that people could, and should, make satisfaction for their sins. Repentance attracted divine forgiveness, but without satisfaction it was not enough; compensation must be paid to the wronged party, and in the case of sin, the wronged party was God. The concept of satisfaction was fostered by the early medieval penitentials. The extraordinary documents belong to the same mental world as the barbarian

codes, with their elaborate tariff of monetary compensations for offences against persons and property. They were primarily manuals compiled for the guidance of priests who had to hear confessions and allocate appropriate penances. Private auricular confession and the use of a penitential were both features of monastic life. It seems that these practices were first extended to Christians living in the secular world by the Celtic Church, and that the Irish monk-missionaries transported them to the Germanic peoples of England and the Continent. Columbus composed a penitential for the secular clergy and laity as well as for monks. And under the influence of the Irish treatises, penitentials were also compiled in England and circulated by the Anglo-Saxon missionaries abroad. From the eighth century lay people were exhorted to confess their sins at least once a year, and a penitential treatise became part of the stock-in-trade of a priest.

The penitentials laid down a nicely graduated scale of satisfactory penances appropriate to every sin. Thus, in the seventh-century penitential attributed to Archbishop Theodore of Canterbury, a priest or deacon who vomits on account of drunkenness is assigned forty days of penance; a layman who commits the same offence is allocated fifteen days; fornication with a virgin involves a year's penance; homicide, seven years; and so forth.³ During his period of penance the sinner was required to fast on bread, salt, and water, and to abstain from the sacraments; if a married man, he must abstain from conjugal intercourse. A year of penance involved performing these ascetical exercises for three Lenten – three periods of forty days each.

Medieval piety was haunted by the menace of these terrifying documents. The careless could easily accumulate more than a lifetime of canonical penance. What if the sinner should die without having completed his penance? Moralists of the twelfth century declared that the outstanding balance of satisfaction had to be made up in purgatory. But in earlier centuries, before the doctrine of purgatory had been fully articulated, it seemed doubtful whether the penitent who died without having discharged his debt could be saved. The best hope lay in the possibility of commutation or substitution: periods of canonical penance might be commuted to alms-giving, pilgrimage, or other recognised good works. This was the basic conception underlying the medieval indulgence. Indulgences remitted a stipulated period of canonical penance and were attached to specified works of piety such as visiting a shrine or contributing to the building of a church. Alternatively, a penitent might find helpers who could perform the acts of satisfaction on his behalf.

These features of the medieval penitential system in part explain the eagerness of princes and others to found and endow monasteries. A gift to a monastery was of itself a meritorious act which might remit a long period of penance. More important, the monks, through their penitential life of continual prayer and fasting, acted as surrogates for their benefactor; they performed the satisfaction on his behalf. Moreover, as a deathless society established in perpetuity, they would

are expressed with uncommon directness in the preamble of the charter written which Duke William III of Aquitaine signified the foundation of Cluny in the year 909:

Desiring to provide for my own salvation while I am still able, I have considered it advisable, indeed most necessary, that from the temporal goods conferred upon me I should give some little portion for the gain of my soul . . . which indeed seems attainable by no more suitable means than that, following the precept of Christ: 'I will make his poor my friend' (Luke xvi, 9), and making the act not a temporary but a lasting one, should support at my own expense a congregation of monks. And this my trust, this my hope, that although I myself am unable to despise a things, nevertheless by receiving those who do despise the world, whom I believe to be righteous, I too may receive the reward of the righteous.⁴

We have here the primary motivation behind the attention that the Carolingian rulers of the eighth and ninth centuries gave to the endowment and protection of monasteries: in the words of Carloman's charter, they hoped in this way to merit pardon. This also explains the concern of secular-minded princes and magnates for the cause of monastic reform, which is a recurrent theme of Charlemagne's capitularies. The prayers and mortifications of holy men would be efficacious with God. But clearly to a benefactor who hoped to participate in the merit acquired by a monastic community, to reap the spiritual dividends as it were, community of lax and negligent monks was a poor investment.

Social convenience

Besides these spiritual advantages, the patron of a monastery looked to obtain temporal benefits from his foundation. We have already seen how the royal and noble dynasties of seventh-century Gaul used monasteries to make provision for members of their families who could not otherwise be accommodated. Surplus male children who could not be adequately set up in land without a dangerous diminution of the dynastic estate, and women of the family for whom no suitable marriage alliance could be found, could be placed in monasteries, where they might live with the dignity and esteem that was proper to their rank. In many cases they were given to the monastery as children, together with an endowment in land. The abbots of the Carolingian age were used in this way to the Frankish nobility, and not least by the ruling dynasty itself. The heads of the richer and more illustrious establishments were in many cases blood relations of the royal family. Fulrad, the abbot of Lobbes, was a grandson of Charles Martel; most of the abbots of Saint-Riquier in the ninth century were members of the family, including Charlemagne's son-in-law and three of his grandsons; a Charles's daughter, Rohaut, was abbess of Faremoutiers. 'Every high dignitary

boasted the chronicler of Saint-Riquier, 'wheresoever he was in the kingdom of the Franks, rejoiced that he had a relative in this monastery'.⁵

The abbey which housed these aristocratic communities tended to exclude postulants who were not of noble birth. The great Swabian abbey of Reichenau claimed as much when it petitioned the pope in 1029: 'in the monastery there have always been, and are, only monks of illustrious and noble birth . . . from its foundation there have been none but the sons of counts and barons'.⁶ Nor was this social exclusiveness confined to the greater monasteries. Noble founders and benefactors, when they placed their children in a monastery, assumed that they would continue to enjoy the society of their own kind. When the bishop of Eichstätt confirmed the gift of a church to the small Bavarian nunnery of Monheim, he agreed that the benefactress should have the office of abbess among the sisters, and gave an undertaking that 'our successors shall see that the abbess has no permission to admit girls of base or ignoble birth to the monastery'.⁷

Public policy

Personal piety and social convenience were the primary motives that prompted rulers to encourage monasticism in their dominions, but they were not the only ones. There were also wider considerations of public policy. These, too, were referred to in the charters of the Carolingian dynasty: monks were assigned lands and privileges 'that they should pray perpetually for the stability of our kingdom and the safety of our country'. The safety of the realm depended upon the intercession of holy men. The monks were the spiritual counterpart of the secular armies which defended the realm against its enemies, especially against incursions by the heathen. Their prayers and sacrifices averted the wrath of God from the sins of the people and ensured God's blessing upon the king when he went into battle. But it was not only through the invisible services of prayer and fasting that the monks promoted the stability of the realm: the great abbey on the frontiers of the Carolingian Empire performed an important role in colonising newly conquered territories. Both as landed corporations entrusted with clearance and settlement, and as mission stations for the evangelisation of lesser breeds without the law, they were vital agents of the Carolingian *Osopolitric*.

Charlemagne made it a primary task of his regime to subjugate the warlike and heathen people of Saxony and to incorporate the area into the Frankish realm. This involved the destruction of German paganism and the forcible conversion of the Saxons to Christianity; for religious unity was the counterpart of political dominion; Roman Christianity was the common bond that united the different peoples of Western Europe in obedience to the Frankish ruler. It was here that the monks, alongside the bishops and secular clergy, had an essential role to play. When Charlemagne embarked upon the conquest of Saxony, he summoned an assembly at Paderborn to apportion the task of conversion, and the lion's share was assigned to the frontier abbey of Hersfeld and Fulda. Abbot Sturm, grown

old and tired, spent his last days preaching to 'the depraved and perverse race', destroying pagan temples, and building churches. The same kind of missionary role was performed in the south by Reichenau from its island fastness on Lake Constance. Its founder, St Pirminius, was a contemporary of St Boniface. He was a Visigoth who had come to the Frankish court as a refugee from southern Gaul, which was harassed by the Arabs; and Charles Martel sent him to plant monastic missions among the Alamans.

The importance of the abbey as mission stations and centres of Frankish loyalty was reflected in the pattern of royal munificence. A few favoured monasteries in the central heartlands of the Frankish realm, like Saint-Denis, received generous gifts: but the most lavish land grants were reserved for the abbey of Fulda, Hersfeld, and Lorsch, which lay east of the Rhine, and the abbey of Aquitaine and Septimania, which were close to the Pyrenean frontier.⁹

Concern for the public as well as the private function of the monasticism explains the constant preoccupation of Carolingian legislation with the details of monastic discipline. The decrees of Frankish councils and the royal capitularies harp upon the duties of abbots towards their monks, the rights of postulants to be received without payment, the obligation of monks to maintain strict enclosure and to be zealous in observing the Rule, 'for tepidity is displeasing to God';¹⁰ to avoid secular business, and to be obedient to their bishop. And from the German Council of 742 until the end of the century, the standard of practice for monks to which the decrees appeal is always the Rule of St Benedict. Charlemagne was convinced that the Rule offered the best plan for a well-ordered monastery; so much so that in 787 he sent to Cassino to ask Abbot Theodemar for an authentic copy of the text. This steady promotion through royal propaganda gave the Rule a unique status as the approved code of practice for the monasteries of the Frankish Empire.

Yet despite the cachet of royal approval and the growing adoption of the Rule in the lands east of the Rhine and in southern Gaul, it had still not superseded the 'mixed rule' and other forms of observance by the end of Charlemagne's reign. Customs consecrated by long usage, and traditions embalmed by the veneration of saintly founders, died hard in many of the Gallic abbey. Not a few were willing to swim with the tide. Under the old dispensation the difference between a community of monks and a body of secular canons, which was often called a 'monastery', was not always clear. One of the results of the Carolingian drive for order and uniformity in the affairs of the Church was to clarify this distinction. Those who took vows and followed the Rule of St Benedict were monks; other congregations of men and women who lived a communal life were a quasi-monastic kind were canons and canonesses. Thus the clergy who served the basilica of Saint-Martin at Tours, and who clung to the traditions of the past, came in the ninth century to be identified as secular canons. Some of the most famous women's abbeys, including Nivelles, Faremoutier, Chelles and Jouarré, went the same way and became houses of canonesses. The Benedictine Rule

which had made such spectacular progress in the outer territories of the Carolingian Empire, seems to have encountered more resistance in the central lands of Austrasia and Neustria. At Saint-Denis, in the time of Hilduin, a majority of the community were in favour of adopting the canonical life, and the minority who wanted to observe the Rule of St Benedict had to be hived off to a villa on the Oise. In the year 813 a synod of bishops meeting at Tours lamented that monasteries which had once observed the Rule were now lax in keeping it or had abandoned it entirely.¹¹

It was not only pious conservatism that hindered the spread of regular Benedictine observance. Many of the older and richer abbeyes suffered loss and demoralisation at the hands of their lay proprietors; and the greatest and most exploitative lay proprietor was the king. In this respect, royal practice fell short of the public and repeated avowals of approval for the Rule. The Carolingians extended royal proprietorship over the monasteries of the Frankish Empire; bishops and lay benefactors were encouraged to donate their foundations to the king, who could offer them effective protection. But proprietorship meant the right to dispose of the abbey and its property as the proprietor thought fit. Its endowments had been given to God, but God's bailiff was the temporal proprietor.

The very lavishness with which lands had been showered upon the monasteries made it inevitable that they would be made to support many secular purposes. Charlemagne was not prepared, any more than his father had been, to divert huge estates solely to the maintenance of relatively small groups of men and women vowed to a life of prayer and seclusion. He used the abbeyes freely as a form of property with which he could reward loyal supporters and relatives or remunerate ministers.

This royal exploitation took two forms. In some cases a portion of an abbey's estates would be allocated as a fief to a royal vassal; the early Carolingians, hungry for land with which to reward loyal service, constantly appropriated monastic property in this way. It is to this practice that we owe the *polyptiques* — the early inventories of monastic estates and movable property, made at royal command, which have been of such value to economic historians. In other cases the king would grant the abbey totally to a lay vassal or relative. Just as the grant of a secular estate included both the land and the peasant tenants who worked on it, so the grant of an abbey as a 'benefice' or fief to a royal servant included both the lands of the monastery and the monastic establishment itself together with the monks, who were part of the human stock, as it were, of the estate. In this case the recipient of the grant became the lay abbot and could lay claim to most of the rights over the community that were assigned to an abbot by the Rule or by monastic custom. Most of those Charles favoured in this way seem to have been secular clerks, but under his successors the conferment of abbeyes on laymen was not uncommon.¹²

Where an abbey was given to a layman or a clerk, the allocation of the property and income between the abbot and the monks was a matter for negotiation

between the parties; so too was the division of responsibility for the direction of the community. The arrangement did not always work to the disadvantage of the monks. Alcuin, the English scholar and poet, whom Charlemagne invited from York to be schoolmaster of the palace school, was given six abbeyes by grateful royal master and pupil, including Saint-Martin of Tours; and although he was scathing about the 'rusticity of Touraine', he was an appreciative error. 'I love your holiness,' he wrote to the community of Saint-Martin, 'desire to be one of you.'¹³ And in the end he had his desire: after years of struggling to educate the court, from the emperor downwards, he was allowed to retire in 796 to his favourite haven beside the Loire, where he ended his career. It must have been his care for the scriptorium of the abbey that made it one of the most famous centres of manuscript production in Europe at the end of the eighth century.

Although Alcuin was a clerk, not a monk, he loved the monastic life. But all those to whom the king gave abbeyes were equally sympathetic to the monastic ideal. A layman might exploit the lands of the monastery ruthlessly and disorganise the life of the community by moving his household, with women, servants and dogs, into the monastic buildings. Those royal abbeyes that remained under direct control of the king tended to fare better. Charlemagne (768–814) treated them as an integral part of the political structure, and himself appointed abbots, whom he regarded as imperial functionaries. It was, of course, common to the express directions of the Benedictine Rule, which vested the election of the abbot in the monks of his community; but nepotism and political prudence did not invariably result in unsuitable appointments. Angilbert, Charles's son-in-law, whom he designated abbot of Saint-Riquier, seems to have felt a genuine vocation to the monastic life, and he rebuilt the abbey and furnished the church on a magnificent scale, as well as restocking the library.¹⁴

At the end of Charles's reign then, the monastic landscape presented a varied picture. The abbeyes east of the Rhine, which had drawn their inspiration from the Anglo-Saxon missionary effort, contained flourishing Benedictine communities. In Aquitaine and the province of Lyons the Rule was gaining ground. But elsewhere there was a variety of practices; and there are indications that in the Frankish heartlands of Gaul and Lorraine the ideal of the cenobitic life was in recession. Charles's desire to see a single and uniform monastic observance serving the needs of the Frankish Empire was never realised. It was his son and successor, Louis the Pious (814–40) who took up the plan and carried it through to a successful conclusion. The emperor's agent in this was St Benedict of Aniane (c. 750–821), a monk from the south, who had become a zealot for the strict observance of the Benedictine Rule. Through the collaboration of two men the Rule was imposed upon monasteries throughout the Carolingian dominions north of the Alps. So, by a development that St Benedict of Norcia could never have envisaged, his Rule was enforced by an act of state, and in this way it came to be the sole standard of monastic observance in the ninth cen-

The Rule under imperial supervision

Louis's protégé – this second Benedict – was a member of the Gothic aristocracy of southern Gaul. His father, the count of Maguelonne in the March of Gothia, sent him to the court of the Frankish queen to be educated and apprenticed to arms. It was in Italy, on campaign with Charlemagne, that a narrow escape from drowning brought his interior searchings to a crisis and persuaded him to enter the cloister. In 774 he became a monk at Saint-Seine, near Dijon. At first the fierceness of his macerations moved the abbot to remonstrate, but he replied that 'the Rule of St Benedict was composed for beginners or the sick; he himself was striving to rise higher by following the Rules of the Blessed Basil and the Blessed Pachomius'.¹⁵ The anecdote, which is told by Ardo, who was a disciple and uncritical admirer, conveys more than youthful conceit; there is in it a foretaste of the puritanical self-righteousness Benedict displayed later, when his single-minded enthusiasm caused him to ride roughshod over the traditions of a previous age. Even so, there must have been a warmth in his personality that is concealed in Ardo's austere portrait, for Alcuin, who met him at court, could write to him in terms of intimate friendship. Perhaps he mellowed with the years.

Being dissatisfied with Saint-Seine, Benedict left it to pursue the ascetical life on his own patrimony, in a cell beside the river Aniane. Faced with the task of organising disciples who gathered round him, he came to the conclusion that the Benedictine Rule was, after all, the best model for a cenobitical community; and it must have been at this time that he adopted the name of Benedict in place of his Gothic name of Writiza. In 782 he laid the foundations of a new monastery on the banks of the Aniane, which was to be the prototype of many others. In conformity with a growing practice, he gave the abbey and its estate to Charlemagne, who took it under his protection and removed it from the jurisdiction of count and bishop. Its exclusive code of observance was to be the Rule of St Benedict.

The rest of Benedict's life was spent in actively propagating knowledge and practice of the Rule with the zeal of a convert missionary. The hagiographer has probably inflated the list of southern monasteries reformed by him in the early years;¹⁶ but it is clear that he came to be regarded as the leading exponent of the Rule in Provence and Gothia. These activities brought him to the notice of Charles's son, Louis, who was then king of Aquitaine, and he was given a commission to visit the abbeys of Aquitaine and instruct their monks in Benedictine practice.

When Louis succeeded his father to the Empire in 814, a much wider field of action was opened to Benedict. Louis saw in this single-minded zealot the vicar-general he needed to implement Charlemagne's plan for a uniform and universal pattern of monastic observance. He summoned him to court at Aachen, and in order to keep him within reach, he had a new abbey constructed for him in the valley of the Inde, a few miles from the imperial palace. Inde was to be more

than a convenient residence for the emperor's monk-councillor; it came to have a central role in the monastic reform as the official model of Benedictine observance for all the imperial abbeys – a kind of ascetical staff-college, where abbots and monks could be sent to learn the approved practices, so that they could return home and instruct their communities. Benedict was given the authority of abbot-general over all the monasteries of Francia, situated in the last part of the valley of the Loire and the Meuse.

The programme of reform and standardisation was explained to two assemblies of abbots which met in the imperial chapel of Aachen, the first in August 814 and the second in July 817. In the course of debate these two synods, which were presided by Benedict, produced a series of decrees which received the assent of the emperor, and which were subsequently conflated into an imperial edict that became known as the *Monastic Capitulary*.¹⁷ The general spirit of the Aachen ordinances is encapsulated in the opening decrees of the first synod: it was to be the literal observance of the Benedictine Rule, to the exclusion of all other rules. Every abbot present, on returning home, was to read and expound the Rule to his monks, and to take pains to see that it was meticulously implemented. The monks who were able to do so, were to learn the Rule by heart. All present at the synod agreed to celebrate the divine office according to its instructions. The regulations of the ordinances range over various other details of the regular life. Some deal with trivialities, such as the custom of not shaving in Lent; others with more fundamental matters, such as the duty of abbots to share the life of the brethren. The object was to draw up a common customary that all would follow.

On some minor points the decrees of the second synod were less restrictive than those of the first. The Rule forbade the eating of flesh-meat except by the sick; did this prohibition include the flesh of birds? The first synod insisted that monks were not to eat fowl, unless it was prescribed for the sick. But the second synod relaxed the prohibition for the Christmas and Easter seasons. The first synod followed the Rule in restricting the use of baths, while allowing baths at Christmas and Easter; the second left the ordering of baths to the discretion of the prior. These minor emendations apparently reflect pressure by a more liberal group at the synod that wished to modify the rigorism of Benedict of Aniane.

There were dissenting voices. Some muffled echoes of the debate can be heard in the comments that Haito of Basel wrote for his monks of Reichenau: 'The synods decreed that abbots should share the life of their monks in table and dormitory; but 'in this matter', wrote Haito, 'I wish to avail myself of the authority of the Rule, which is not to be prejudiced by any new constitution'. As forbidding abbots to eat with guests by the monastery gate, he had eaten with guests from time to time, but in the abbot's auditorium, and 'this practice I wish to keep, unless it be more clearly forbidden'. The synod had forbidden eating of fowl, 'though', he observes tartly, 'it is not forbidden by the authority of the Rule'.¹⁸ Haito was not the only one who had reservations. The plan for the rebuilding of Saint-Gall, drafted for Abbot Gozbert shortly after the synod

included a separate house and kitchen for the abbot, and a bath-house for the monks.¹⁹ Probably the straitjacket Benedict of Aniane sought to impose was not accepted by many establishments without some modification.

All the same, the Aachen decrees were not just an expression of pious hopes. Active steps were taken to enforce them. Special *missi* were appointed by the emperor to visit monasteries and inquire whether the decrees were being observed. Each house was required to send representatives to Inde to reside for a period and learn the observance so that they could return home and instruct their own communities. The primitive and cumbersome apparatus of the Carolingian state was now harnessed to the task of imposing a uniform pattern of life on all the imperial monasteries. The outcome of this effort was that throughout northern Europe the Rule of St Benedict became for the first time the sole norm of observance for monks.

Paradoxically, in bringing about this standardisation, Benedict of Aniane set Western monasticism on a new path which increasingly diverged from the Rule. For one thing, the autonomy of each community in the management of its internal affairs was now curtailed by the overriding authority of the abbot-general, which was backed by the power of the secular government. Also, the interpretation that Benedict of Aniane placed upon the Rule was coloured by Gallic practices of the early ninth century, which departed in significant ways from the intentions of St Benedict and upset the symmetry of his original model. The most obvious of these changes were the large number of additions to the divine office described in the Rule. 'It is not to be believed', wrote Theodemar of Cassino to Charlemagne, 'that it would displease the blessed father Benedict, but rather would it gratify him, if anyone cared to add anything over and above what he ordained for the divine praises.'²⁰ And Angilbert evidently agreed with him: his *Ordo* for Saint-Riquier provided for three monastic choirs, each of a hundred monks and thirty-four boys to maintain a continuous round of psalmody, litanies, solemn processions, and the celebration of at least thirty masses daily at the different altars.²¹

These and other ritual developments of the time were accepted by Benedict of Aniane and were prescribed by the Aachen decrees. In addition to the sevenfold office of the day, monks were now required to chant additional psalms before the night office and visit the numerous altars in procession, and to recite the office of the dead daily. Besides these services, the community or chapter mass was now celebrated daily after the office of terce, and it was a growing practice for individual monks to celebrate 'private' masses on the numerous altars that were coming to be a feature of monastic architectural design.

This elaboration of liturgical prayer meant that a lengthening part of the monk's day was spent in choir. And the pace set by Benedict of Aniane was to be quickened in the tenth and eleventh centuries by the musical elaboration of the chant and the virtuosity of monastic authors in the composition of new tropes, proses and sequences for the feasts of the saints. In this way the old equilibrium

between prayer, work and study, that the Rule advocated, was destroyed. The divine office, which had always been a central point in the life of the monk, now became almost his exclusive occupation. There was little time left for manual work. The monastery employed servants for that purpose. The skills of the monks were more appropriately used in singing the divine praises. The idea that perfect execution of the liturgy was the characteristic function of a Benedictine community had its origin in the reforms of the ninth century. It was an idea that accorded well with the notions of lay benefactors. This was the unceasing stream of prayer which, it was hoped, would bear them and their relatives into heaven and offered their children as reinforcements for the ranks of the spiritual militia.

One of the major objects of the Aachen decrees had been to enforce strict rules of enclosure. St Benedict had warned of the dangers that beset the souls of the brethren when business took them beyond the walls of the monastery. The ideal monk was Brother Raupert, the historian of Saint-Gall, who rarely put foot outside the cloister and feared going out like death, so that he needed only two pairs of shoes a year.²² The other side of the problem was how to keep outside world from filtering into the cloister. It was with this in mind that assembly at Aachen decreed that there should be no school in the cloister other than that for the child-oblates. Secular clerks and lay people were excluded. The intention of the prohibition was to preserve the peace and segregation of monastic enclosure. It did not stop a monastery from acting as the proprietor and director of an external school outside its walls. We know from Ekkehard that Saint-Gall had both a claustral school and an external school in the ninth century, and that monks taught in both of them.²³ But the more austere spirit was opposed to this kind of arrangement; it was safer to leave the conduct of external school in the hands of a secular master appointed by the monks.

Although Benedict of Aniane wanted monks to disengage from secular education, he was eager to promote study in the cloister. But the learning he wanted was confined to what was implied by the *lectio divina* of the Benedictine Rule – Scriptures, Origen, Augustine, and Jerome, and, above all, Gregory the Great, master of monks and mystics. This was the syllabus he prescribed for his disciple Garnier. It was a programme designed to enlarge understanding of the dogma of faith, and so to lead to contemplation.²⁴ 'All progress comes from reading meditation', wrote Abbot Smaragdus in the *Monks' Diadem*;²⁵ but the only reading he recommends is that of Scripture. It was a narrower and more exclusive monastic culture than Alcuin had purveyed at the palace school or than Einhard had acquired at Fulda before the reformers got into the saddle.

The change is reflected in the literary product of the ninth-century monasteries. The cosmopolitan society of scholars, grammarians and poets that Charlemagne assembled from all parts of Europe made his court a major centre of literary activity, most strikingly in the composition of Latin verse.²⁶ The monasteries, too, were centres of scholarship and book production. In the libraries of Lor-

Saint-Gall and Saint-Amand, Virgil, Horace, Juvenal, and Cicero rubbed shoulders with the weightier and more numerous tomes of the Fathers.²⁷ Learned abbots like Rhabanus Maurus, the schoolmaster of Fulda, and Walafid Strabo, his pupil, who became abbot of Reichenau, wrote living poetry besides Biblical commentaries and works of ascetical theology. But as a whole, the monastic contribution to the Carolingian renaissance largely lay in the transmission, collection, and preservation of the past rather than in new creation. Copies of classical authors, commentaries on the books of the Bible, mainly distilled from the Latin Fathers, and anthologies of patristic texts, were the most characteristic works that emerged from the scriptoria of the Carolingian abbey. The ninth century also saw the composition of the earliest commentaries on the Benedictine Rule – those of Smaragdus and Hildemar, which became classics of monastic literature. The compilation of *Florilegia*, or anthologies of the Fathers, was unoriginal work, but in the end it served a wider purpose than its authors could have foreseen: the patristic anthologies of the ninth century provided a ready-made compost in which the schoolmen of a later age were able to grow strange plants as yet undreamed of.

Collapse and dispersal

Benedict of Aniane died in 812, and the organisation he had brought into existence did not outlive him for very long. Italy had never been brought within the orbit of his reform programme.²⁸ In the Germanic lands of the Empire, there is evidence of the *missi* conducting monastic visitations in the 830s, but the system collapsed with the disintegration of imperial authority. It was not just the problem of enforcement that caused the plan to wither in the opening bud; the conditions of the ninth century blighted monastic life. Monasteries, unlike wealthy lay landowners, were unarmed and defenceless communities. They could only survive in a violent society as long as they had the patronage and effective protection of strong rulers; and in the dominions of the later Carolingians this condition ceased to exist.

The civil war between the sons of Louis the Pious, and the troubled period that followed the partition of the Empire in 843, led to the widespread secularisation of abbey. The reformers had never succeeded in eliminating the practice of appointing lay abbots, and during the years of upheaval the contestants distributed abbey freely among their aristocratic followers as a way of rewarding loyal service. The Frankish bishops upbraided Charles the Bald in 844 for having committed 'even some more especially venerable places, against all authority and reason and the custom of your fathers, to the care and power of laymen. They sit in the midst of priests and Levites like abbots and make rules for their life and conversation.'²⁹ The resulting exploitation of monastic lands and buildings disrupted regular observance and impoverished the monks, who either dispersed or adopted the

Political instability and lay exploitation were not the only enemies of organised monastic life. The monks had to face more frightening foes in the heads of Vikings and the Saracens. In the ninth century Christian Europe was under siege. Ireland, England, and the north of Gaul were ravaged by the Northmen. Abbot situated near the coasts or on the inland waterways of these areas were sitting ducks. Lindisfarne, Clonfert and Clonmacnoise were among the first to be sacked. The more accessible abbey near the coast of northern Gaul and along the valley of the Seine, the Meuse, and the Loire fell victims to the onslaught of the pirates. The monasteries of the Rhône valley and southern Italy suffered the same fate at the hands of the Arabs, who had established themselves in the Maritime Alps as well as in Spain and Sicily. In 883 they burned Cassino and slaughtered the monks leaving it deserted for the next sixty years.

Communities of some of the ravaged abbey escaped the raiders and dispersed. Others kept together and maintained a precarious existence as refugees, like monks of St Philibert of Noirmoutier, who fled from the Danes in 836. Some years later Charles the Bald made them a grant of land to serve as a refuge from 'attack by the cruel Northmen'.³⁰ They were sheltered, in fact, in five successive monasteries before finding a permanent home at Tourmus thirty-nine years later. Their saga was paralleled by that of the monks of Lindisfarne, who fled the mainland from a second Danish attack, taking the body of St Guthbert with them, and wandered in Northumbria with their precious freight for seven years until they found a residence at Chester-le-Street. Such enforced migrations were commonplace at this period.

Before the end of the century, regular monastic observance had almost disappeared from western Gaul and England. Alfred of Wessex lamented over the destruction of the Anglo-Saxon abbey and their libraries. He provided endowments for the Old Minster at Winchester and a few other houses in which he had a family interest, and according to Asser he founded the nunneries at Shaftesbury and appointed his daughter, Aethelgifu, as its first abbess.³¹ The full-scale monastic revival had to await more settled times. In the east German lands, religious observance and scholarship survived at Fulda and Saint-Gall. Reichenau remained an island of peace and learning under the gentle abbot Walafid Strabo, whose poetry kept his herb-garden green for all posterity.

The situation in other parts of Gaul is indicated by the experience of St Odo as described by his biographer. As a young man, the son of a Frankish knight, Odo was comfortably installed in a canonry at Tours, when a reading of the Rule of St. Benedict convinced him he should become a monk. With a like-minded friend he set out in search of a monastery where the Rule was observed, but traversed most of Francia without finding one. Odo returned home frustrated but his friend travelled further afield and eventually discovered what they had been looking for in the remote abbey of Baume, on the west side of the Jura. It was a monastery where the observance of Benedict of Aniane had survived intact. The abbot was Berno, a Burgundian, who had been called in to restore regular

there in accordance with the Aachen decrees. The friend sent back the news, and both he and Odo took the habit there.

Some years later, in 909, when Duke William III of Aquitaine decided to found a monastery on his Burgundian estates, he sought the advice of Abbot Berno. Duke and abbot set off together to reconnoitre a suitable spot, and Berno chose the richly wooded valley of Cluny. William protested that the site was his favourite hunting ground, but Berno was inexorable: 'which will serve you better at the judgement, O Duke, the prayers of monks or the baying of hounds?' So William yielded, and Berno became the first abbot of the new foundation. He thus became a link between the Carolingian programme of reform and the monasticism of Cluny, which was to dominate the religious life of the next two hundred years.

Notes

1. *Die Urkunden der Karolinger*, ed. E. Mühlbacher, *MGH Diplomata* (1906) I, pp. 57–8.
2. *Ibid.*, pp. 86–7.
3. *Poenitentiale Theodori*, ed. A. W. Haddan and W. Stubbs in *Councils and Ecclesiastical Documents* (1871) iii, pp. 173–203; cf. texts edited by L. Bieler, *The Irish Penitentials (Scriptores Latini Hiberniae)* V (1963).
4. *Recueil des chartes de l'abbaye de Cluny*, ed. A. Bruel (Paris, 1876) i, pp. 124–8.
5. *Chronique de l'abbaye de Saint-Riquier*, ed. F. Lot (Paris, 1894), pp. 118–19.
6. A. Schulte, *Der Adel und die deutsche Kirche im Mittelalter*, 2nd edn (Stuttgart, 1922), p. 3 & n.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 114.
8. *Vita Sancti Summi*, *MGH SS II*, pp. 366–77.
9. J. Semmler, 'Karl der Grosse und das Fränkische Mönchtum in Karl der Grosse iii: Das geistige Leben', ed. B. Bischoff (Düsseldorf, 1965), pp. 255–89. This is the best modern account of Charlemagne's monastic policy.
10. Thus the general capitulary for the missi of 802: *MGH Leges II: Capitularia Regum Francorum*, ed. A. Boretius (1881) i, p. 94.
11. *MGH Conclita*, ed. A. Werminghoff (1906) II, p. 290.
12. E. Lesne, *Histoire de la propriété ecclésiastique en France* (Lille, 1926) ii, *passim*; P. Schmitz, *Histoire de l'ordre de Saint Benoît* (Maredsous, 1942) i, pp. 80–90. As against Lesne, it has been argued that the lay abbot does not appear before the reign of Louis the Pious: F. Felten, 'Laenäbte in der Karolingerzeit in *Monachum Episcopum und Adel zur Gründungszeit des Klosters Reichenau*', ed. A. Borst (Constance, 1974), pp. 397–431. On Louis's appointment of lay abbots see Rosamond McKitterick, *The Frankish Kingdoms under the Carolingians* (1983), pp. 115–22.
13. *MGH Epistolae IV*, p. 94.
14. *Chronique de Saint-Riquier*, p. 53.
15. *Vita Benedicti Abbatis Anianensis*, *MGH SS XV*, p. 202.
16. O. G. Oexle in *Forschungen zu monastischen und geistlichen Gemeinschaften im Westfälischen Bereich* (Münich, 1978), p. 151, argues that the abbey of The-Barbe was organised according to the Benedictine Rule by Archbishop Leidrad of Lyons in c. 802 and that, contrary to the statements of Ardo, Benedict of Aniane had no part in it. In Oexle's view the range and importance of Benedict's work has been exaggerated.
17. The original texts of the Aachen decrees have now been clarified and newly edited by Semmler in *CCMI* (1963), pp. 451–68, 471–81. Semmler has shown that the so-called *Capitulare Monasticum* ed. A. Boretius in *MGH Capitularia* (1883) I, pp. 343–9 is a document produced in c. 818–19 by conflating the capitularies containing decrees of both the first and second synods: 'Zur Überlieferung der monastischen Gesetzgebung Ludwigs des Frommen', *Deutsches Archiv zur Erforschung des Mittelalters* (1960), pp. 309–88.
18. Harizo's commentary is contained in the so-called Statutes of Murbach, *CCM* (1963), pp. 443–8.
19. W. Horn and E. Born, *The Plan of St Gall* (1979) i, p. 24.
20. *MGH Epistolae IV*, p. 511.
21. *Chronique de Saint-Riquier*, pp. 70–1; see discussion by J. Hubert, 'Saint-Riquier monachisme bénédictin en Gaule à l'époque carolingienne' in *Il monachesimo nel medioevo* (Spoleto, 1957), pp. 293–309.
22. *Casus S. Galli*, *MGH SS II*, pp. 94, 97.
23. See *The Plan of St. Gall* i, p. 24 & n.
24. Cf. J. Leclercq, F. Vandenbroucke, and L. Bouyer, *The Spirituality of the Middle Ages* (1968), pp. 77–8.
25. *Diadema Monachorum*, PL 102, 597.
26. Mary Garrison, 'The emergence of Carolingian Latin literature and the court of Charlemagne' in *Carolingian Culture: emulation and innovation*, ed. Rosamond McKitterick (1994), pp. 111–38.
27. Monastic library catalogues of the ninth century list only a few classical authors, are heavily outnumbered by Christian writers of the patristic age, see Giles Brindley, 'The Carolingian Renaissance', *ibid.*, pp. 35–7. For a survey of ninth-century medieval scholarship see McKitterick, *op. cit.* pp. 200–27.
28. G. Penco, *Storia del monachesimo in Italia* (Rome, 1961), p. 170.
29. *MGH Capitularia Regum Francorum II*, p. 115.
30. *Recueil des actes de Charles II le Chauve*, ed. G. Tessier (Paris, 1943) I, No. 91; cite as 'fisc' in *Francia, Forschungen zur Westeuropäischen Geschichte* (1984) 11, p. 163 & n. Jane Martindale, 'The kingdom of Aquitaine and the dissolution of the Carolingian empire', *ibid.*, p. 163 & n.
31. *Alfred the Great: Asser's Life of King Alfred and Other Sources*, trans. & ed. S. Keynes and Michael Lapidge (Penguin, 1983), p. 105. Controversy over the authenticity of Asser, specifically in relation to Alfred's monastic foundations, has been renewed by A. P. Smyth, *King Alfred the Great* (1995), pp. 264–9.

6

THE AGE OF CLUNY

The rise of Cluny

‘From this, the best seed’, wrote Ralph Glaber, himself a pupil of Cluny, ‘sprang an innumerable lineage of the Lord of Hosts, which is known to have filled a great area of the earth.’¹ There was much truth in Ralph’s encomium. At the end of the eleventh century, at the height of its magnificence, Cluny was the head of a huge monastic empire containing many hundreds of dependencies and associated houses spread throughout western Europe. It was a nursery of zealous prelates and the mentor of pious princes. Its holy and learned abbots were prominent counsellors at the courts of popes and emperors. Before Leo IX ascended the papal chair at the end of 1048 and made Rome the headquarters of the so-called Gregorian Reform Movement, it was to Cluny that men looked for spiritual leadership and religious inspiration. Even after its heyday was past and its creativity and confidence had begun to ebb, it remained a powerful force in the ecclesiastical and political establishment of the twelfth century.

All this lay in the future. In the tenth century Cluny stood for the restoration of Benedictine monastic life, largely as it had been understood by Benedict of Aniane a century earlier. As a house that was dedicated to reviving strict observance of the Rule, it was not unique. It had spiritual parentage in Baume and St Martin of Autun; and it also had important contemporaries. Within a few years of its foundation, a monastic revival was sponsored in Flanders by the count, Arnulf I. He found an enthusiastic collaborator for his purpose in Gerard of Brogne, a young nobleman who had adopted the ascetical life and created a monastery on his own patrimony at Brogne. Under the count’s active patronage, he restored Benedictine observance, first at Saint-Bavo of Ghent and St Peter’s on Mount Blandin, and then at the other Flemish abbeys of Saint-Bertin, Saint-

A similar revival, but one of wider dimensions, began in Lorraine in the year 933 when the abbey of Gorze was reformed by John of Gorze and archdeacon Einold acting under the authority of the bishop of Metz. Gorze in turn became cornerstone of a large federation of reformed abbeys in Germany. The striking thing about the promoters of the monastic revival of the tenth century is that they worked independently of each other in the different areas, apparently expressing a common need felt by individual ascetics and their lay patrons and that, despite differences of organisation, all three groups derived their inspiration and formative ideas from the work of Benedict of Aniane.

Cluny was given the basic organisation of its internal regime by Berno, its first abbot. It was also to him and Duke William that it owed a feature of its constitution that enabled it to preserve its identity and provided the base on which its later greatness was built: it was granted a degree of autonomy that was still uncommon for a monastic establishment. William’s foundation charter expressly authorised the monks to choose their own abbot after Berno’s death, without interference by any outside persons either lay or ecclesiastical. The abbot and community were to have sole and undivided control over their properties, free from intrusion by any secular power, including William’s own.

In order to guarantee this immunity William resorted to a device which number of other founders had adopted in the previous fifty years: he vested the proprietorship of the establishment in the Apostles Peter and Paul and placed it under the immediate protection of the Apostolic See. In recognition of this special relationship, the abbey was to pay a *census* or tribute of ten solidi every five years to maintain lights burning round the shrine of St Peter in Rome. Recent work has shown that this arrangement was not as original as was once believed.² Other benefactors had donated their monastic foundations to St Peter. In any case, the invocation of the bishop of Rome as protector of the monastery can have been an act of little more than symbolic significance at this time, for the tenth-century popes, immersed in the dynastic politics of Rome, appeared to lack either the will or the means to defend their distant protégés. What made the case of Cluny different was that the bond with Rome later developed into a special relationship of mutual advantage, which enabled the abbey to achieve its unique position of independence, prestige and power. This development was largely the work of a series of exceptionally gifted men who ruled Cluny for the next hundred and forty years.

In this respect, Duke William’s self-denying ordinance in granting the monks complete freedom to elect their abbot was a provision of crucial importance. In fact, this freedom, which the earlier reformers had struggled for in vain, was not exercised in the way specified by the Rule; for Berno and the three abbots who followed him designated their successors. But it was a primary factor in establishing the Cluniac ascendancy. It produced in St Odo (926–44), St Mayeul (965–94), St Odilo (994–1048), and St Hugh (1049–1109), four spiritual leaders of genius, each of whom in his own way stemmed his inheritance from the

Much that was characteristic of the Clunian ideal was the creation of Odo, who was brought from training the novices at Baume to succeed Abbot Berno. He gave the monastic vocation a new theology and a new sense of mission. The vision of the world he communicated in his *Occupation of the Mind* – a prolonged meditation written in hexameters – was unrelievabley sombre. The evils of society seemed convincing evidence that the end of the world and the Day of Judgement were at hand. For the great mass of mankind, which was enslaved by concupiscence, there seemed to be little hope. The only safe route to salvation lay through repentance, conversion and entry into the monastic life. Monks were the Pentecostal Church created and renewed by the Holy Spirit. If they utterly renounced the world and were faithful to their calling, they were already living in paradise: the great silence that engulfed the cloister was a participation in the eternal silence of God; and the monk was united to God through the practice of unbroken prayer.³ This conviction that the restored Benedictine life was the only authentic fulfilment of the Christian vocation was at the heart of the appeal that Cluny made to the society of its time.

To his disciples and admirers Odo himself seemed a living embodiment of the Benedictine ideal. He taught the message of renunciation with an evangelical fervour: 'He found me at Rome,' wrote Brother John, his biographer, 'trapped in the toils of earthly desires, and in his compassion he landed me in his net like a fish.'⁴ He observed the Rule meticulously. Some wag in the cloister nicknamed him 'Dicher' because he went about keeping constant custody of his eyes, with his head bowed and his eyes fixed on the ground. Two of the practices he inculcated in his monks came to be regarded as distinctive marks of early Clunian observance: the keeping of silence at all times, and the continual use of vocal prayer. Not only in choir during the offices, but wherever he went and whatever he was doing the monk was enjoined to recite the psalms. Brother John recalled an incident that occurred during one of their many journeys across the Alps. A gang of robbers was lying in wait for travellers. But the leader of the gang was astounded at the unusual spectacle of a cortege moving with bowed heads and ceaselessly chanting psalms. 'I never remember seeing men like these,' he muttered. And he would not let his men attack them.⁵ Another of Odo's disciples, Brother Godfrey, had learned the lesson of silence so well that he lost the community one of its horses. While the party was in Rome, he had been set to guard the horses, which had been put to grass overnight. Rather than shouting to the sleeping watchmen during the hours of the Greater Silence that followed Compline, he allowed a thief to mount one of the animals and ride off with it.⁶

In terms of buildings and material goods Cluny was still poor in Odo's time. He saw the first church completed, but when the bishop of Mâcon came to consecrate it, the monks were embarrassed by his large entourage as they lacked the wherewithal to feed everybody. Their dilemma was solved, according to Brother John, by the providential appearance of a wild boar, which came and banged on the door of the church with its trotters; having failed to gain admittance, he lay

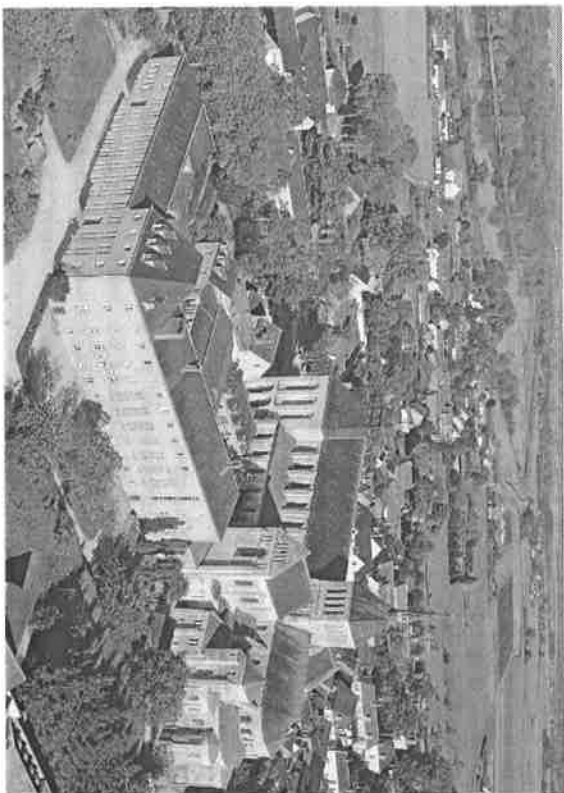


FIGURE 6.1 The Abbey of Saint Benoît-sur Loire
© Arnaud Chieucurl/Hemis/Corbis

down across the entrance and obligingly offered his body to the spears of the copal knights. Yet despite these humble circumstances, the reputation of Cluny as a model of Benedictine observance was spreading, and Odo received invitations from princes and bishops to undertake the reform of other monasteries.

The old abbey of Fleury and Romanmôtier were among the first of a series of French monasteries in which he restored regular observance. It authorised and promoted his mission of monastic reform that in 931 he obtained from Pope John XI a most significant privilege. The vows that a monk had bound him for life to the particular community that had accepted him; to another community was contrary to the spirit of the Rule, and required the sanction of higher authority. Pope John's privilege offered a ladder of ascent from this rule by authorising Cluny to accept from any other monastery a monk who was in search of a stricter observance. Odo obtained the same privilege for Déols, and a few years later for Fleury as well. These bulls in effect conferred official recognition on the Clunian reform and authorised its expansion.

It was Odo's regime and his own charismatic personality that set Cluny on its path to European stardom. He was a figure on the European stage himself. Bristling with papal approval for his work of monastic renewal he developed a special relationship with Rome at a time when papal influence in the church of northern Europe was at low tide. His reputation beyond France was increasingly demonstrated by the fact that only twenty-five years after the founding of Cluny he was invited by the secular ruler of Rome to undertake the

Much that was characteristic of the Cluniac ideal was the creation of Odo, who was brought from training the novices at Baume to succeed Abbot Berno. He gave the monastic vocation a new theology and a new sense of mission. The vision of the world he communicated in his *Occupation of the Mind* – a prolonged meditation written in hexameters – was unrelievedly sombre. The evils of society seemed convincing evidence that the end of the world and the Day of Judgement were at hand. For the great mass of mankind, which was enslaved by concupiscence, there seemed to be little hope. The only safe route to salvation lay through repentance, conversion and entry into the monastic life. Monks were the Penitencostal Church created and renewed by the Holy Spirit. If they utterly renounced the world and were faithful to their calling, they were already living in paradise: the great silence that engulfed the cloister was a participation in the eternal silence of God; and the monk was united to God through the practice of unbroken prayer.³ This conviction that the restored Benedictine life was the only authentic fulfilment of the Christian vocation was at the heart of the appeal that Cluny made to the society of its time.

To his disciples and admirers Odo himself seemed a living embodiment of the Benedictine ideal. He taught the message of renunciation with an evangelical fervour: 'He found me at Rome,' wrote Brother John, his biographer, 'trapped in the coils of earthly desires, and in his compassion he landed me in his net like a fish.'⁴ He observed the Rule meticulously. Some wag in the cloister nicknamed him 'Dicheu' because he went about keeping constant custody of his eyes, with his head bowed and his eyes fixed on the ground. Two of the practices he inculcated in his monks came to be regarded as distinctive marks of early Cluniac observance: the keeping of silence at all times, and the continual use of vocal prayer. Not only in choir during the offices, but wherever he went and whatever he was doing the monk was enjoined to recite the psalms. Brother John recalled an incident that occurred during one of their many journeys across the Alps. A gang of robbers was lying in wait for travellers. But the leader of the gang was astounded at the unusual spectacle of a cortege moving with bowed heads and ceaselessly chanting psalms. 'I never remember seeing men like these,' he muttered. And he would not let his men attack them.⁵ Another of Odo's disciples, Brother Godfrey, had learned the lesson of silence so well that he lost the community one of its horses. While the party was in Rome, he had been set to guard the horses, which had been put to grass overnight. Rather than shouting to the sleeping watchmen during the hours of the Greater Silence that followed Compline, he allowed a thief to mount one of the animals and ride off with it.⁶

In terms of buildings and material goods Cluny was still poor in Odo's time. He saw the first church completed, but when the bishop of Mâcon came to consecrate it, the monks were embarrassed by his large entourage as they lacked the wherewithal to feed everybody. Their dilemma was solved, according to Brother John, by the providential appearance of a wild boar, which came and banged on

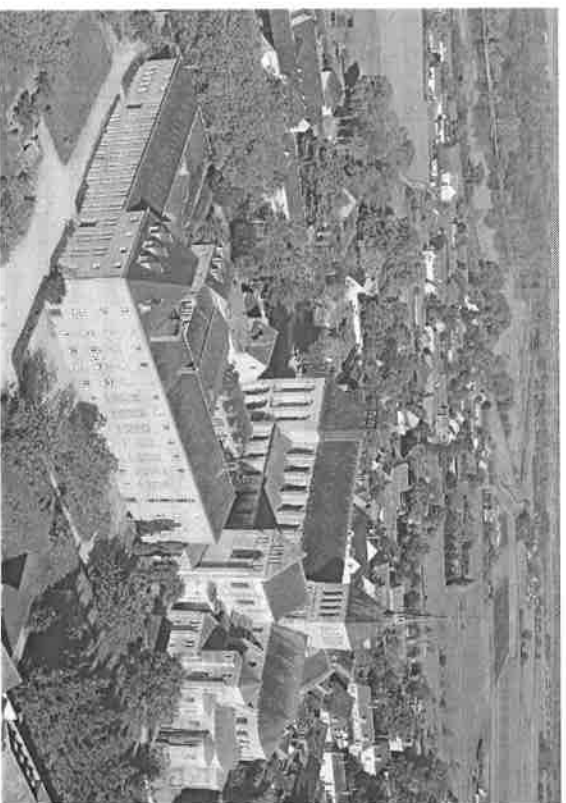


FIGURE 6.1 The Abbey of Saint Benoît-sur-Loire

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down across the entrance and obligingly offered his body to the spears of the copal knights. Yet despite these humble circumstances, the reputation of Cluny as a model of Benedictine observance was spreading, and Odo received invitations from princes and bishops to undertake the reform of other monasteries.

The old abbeys of Fleury and Romaniôtier were among the first of a series of French monasteries in which he restored regular observance. It was authorised and promoted his mission of monastic reform that in 931 he obtained from Pope John XI a most significant privilege. The vows that a monk bound him for life to the particular community that had accepted him; instead, another community was contrary to the spirit of the Rule, and required the sanction of higher authority. Pope John's privilege offered a ladder of escape from this rule by authorising Cluny to accept from any other monastery a monk who was in search of a stricter observance. Odo obtained the same privilege for Déols, and a few years later for Fleury as well. These bulls in effect constituted official recognition on the Cluniac reform and authorised its expansion.

It was Odo's regime and his own charismatic personality that set Cluny on its path to European status. He was a figure on the European stage himself. By steadily seeking papal approval for his work of monastic renewal he developed a special relationship with Rome at a time when papal influence in the church of northern Europe was at low tide. His reputation beyond France was strongly demonstrated by the fact that only twenty-five years after the founding of Cluny he was invited by the secular ruler of Rome to undertake the reform

of the monasteries in the city and in the Roman duchy. Rome at this time was ruled by the Senator Alberic, son of the notorious Lady Marozia and head of the dynasty of Theophylact. Most of the Roman monasteries had been secularised by this period. The establishments which served the patriarchal basilicas of the city and the imperial abbey of Farfa in the Sabina were occupied by married secular canons.

Alberic has not had a kindly press from historians of the Church. It has been argued that he sponsored the monastic revival for very worldly reasons: the resumption and reallocation of ecclesiastical lands that had fallen into the hands of rival families would serve to strengthen the hold of his own dynasty upon the duchy. Certainly, he was not above foisting his own son, the profliigate and half-illiterate John XII, upon the papacy in order to perpetuate the family's fortunes. Whatever his motives, he placed his authority behind Odo, who embarked upon his task in 936. During the following years Odo made six prolonged stays in the city. He introduced Cluniac observance to St Paul's-without-the-walls and to Farfa, and presided over the newly founded abbey of St Mary's, constructed among the groves of the Aventine hill out of one of the palaces Alberic had donated for the purpose.⁷ None of the Roman monasteries was placed in a relationship of dependence upon Cluny at this date, and Odo's reforming work was not long-lasting. But it impressed upon the capital of Christendom the fact that Cluny was the recognised standard-bearer of the regular Benedictine life.

The extension of the Cluniac family that Odo had begun was continued by Mayeul, whose life-history resembled Odo's in many ways. He too had come to the monastic life as an adult. He was already an archdeacon when he knocked on the doors of Cluny. He had been to the schools and acquired a love of the philosophers and poets, which he afterwards renounced so fiercely that he would neither read them nor suffer others to read them: 'the divine poets are sufficient for you; what need to pollute yourselves with the voluptuous eloquence of Virgil?'⁸ But the reading habit never left him, and even in the saddle he rode with an open book in his hand. As abbot he was constantly in demand to reform other monasteries, which involved him in frequent and prolonged absences from Cluny, and his *Life*, written by Brother Syrus, is filled with anecdotes of his journeys to and from Italy. On one occasion he was seized by Saracens while crossing the Alps and had to be ransomed. He was a familiar figure at Rome and a welcome guest at the imperial court, where he won the admiration of the dowager Empress Adelaide. She asked him to introduce the Cluniac observance to the new foundation of San Salvatore at Pavia; and when the Roman See fell vacant, she and her son, Otto II, urged him to accept the papacy. But he refused the distinction of being the first Cluniac pope, saying he did not relish the ways of the Roman people and, in any case, he was not willing to desert the monastic life and the monks under his care.

The Cluniac empire

The missionary zeal and energy of Odo and Mayeul placed Cluny at the centre of the monastic map of Europe. But it was the regime of Odilo and Hugh that gave it a great spiritual empire. The extraordinary reign of these two men, both whom were long-lived, lasted for a hundred and fifteen years. Slight in build and ascetical, always gentle and perceptive in his relations with his monks, Odilo was for Fulbert of Chartres 'the archangel of monks'. He had a capacious mind and humane sympathies which make him one of the most attractive figures in the gallery of Cluniac saints.⁹ Like his predecessor, a constant traveller in the cause of monastic revival and reform, he was friend and counsellor to popes and kings and moved with assurance in the courts of Europe.

It was through Odilo's tireless efforts that the first outlines of Cluny's monastic empire began to emerge. Besides abbey in France, Italy, and Spain which Cluny by their patrons and these remained direct dependencies in the sense that the abbot of Cluny was their head. The process of forging a Cluniac order was taken a stage further by the privilege of exemption which Odilo obtained from the papacy. Like the previous abbots, he assiduously courted papal support for the monastic reform. And he used his influence at Rome to extricate Cluny from diocesan authority. In 998 he procured a privilege from Pope Gregory V to the effect that no bishop might celebrate mass or ordain anyone at the abbey except the abbot's invitation. The final step towards autonomy was taken in 1024 when Odilo secured from John XIX a grant of complete exemption from the jurisdiction of the bishop of Mâcon, which placed Cluny under the direct authority of the Roman See. And this exemption extended to monks of Cluny wherever they resided. This effectively freed all the dependencies of Cluny from episcopal oversight and left them under the sole supervision of the abbot of Cluny.

The need to supervise the dependent houses and appoint their superiors kept Odilo continually on his travels in the later years. But Cluny was where his heart lay, and he always tried to get back there for major festivals. He revelled in triumphs, as he happily contemplated the growing numbers of novices and the monks from elsewhere who had come to study the observance. 'How festive he would stand,' wrote Jotsaldis, his pupil and biographer, 'in the middle of the holy choir, looking to left and right at the new plantation which was his crown as the head of a college might from the vantage-point of high table survey a new intake with pleasure and surmise.'

Success and mounting fame had brought the abbey a flood of endowment. The stringency of the early days was forgotten, and the exalted grandeur of the Cluniac ideal was beginning to take palpable shape in magnificent buildings. In order to accommodate increasing numbers Mayeul had replaced the church of Odo's time with a new and grander building. Odilo set about reconstructing t

community's domestic premises. He was a great builder – he renewed everything, wrote Jotsaldus, except the walls of the church. A new dormitory and refectory were built, and a guest-house divided into two sections, with beds for forty-five men and thirty women. But the major source of his pride was the cloister, which he rebuilt with piers of marble procured from Provence and shipped up the Rhône and Saône, and embellished with animated sculptures. 'He used to boast,' says Jotsaldus, 'that he found it made of wood and was leaving it marble, like Octavianus Caesar who, as the historians say, found Rome brick and left it marble.'¹¹

With the assumption of the abbacy by Hugh, Cluny entered on its last and greatest period of expansion. The year 1049, when his reign began, was also a milestone in the history of the secular Church. It saw the arrival in Rome of the emperor's cousin, Bruno of Toul, who as Pope Leo IX, inaugurated a new style of papal government. The first year of Leo's pontificate proved in fact to be an *annus mirabilis* for the growing party of high-minded churchmen who were pressing for the reform of abuses and an end to the secularisation of ecclesiastical offices. Following a brisk drive to restore clerical discipline in Rome, he set off to make his presence felt north of the Alps. Assemblies of bishops and abbots were summoned to meet him at Reims and Mainz. The prelates who attended were examined on the circumstances of their appointments and were asked whether they had paid money for their offices. Those who admitted having done so were disciplined; absentees were declared suspended from office; the disobedient were excommunicated; and new canons were promulgated. This burst of activity indicated that the pope had stepped into the leadership of the reform movement. It inaugurated a new phase in which the papacy demanded an ever more active and interventionist role in the affairs of local churches and called in question the domination of the Church by secular rulers. It was significant that Leo's synod at Reims was cold-shouldered by the king of France. The pope's attack on simony had thrown down the first challenge to lay control of ecclesiastical offices that was to lead to the Investiture Contest.

Cluny, by its idealism, its assertion of spiritual autonomy, and its constant appeal to papal protection, had helped to create the necessary spiritual climate in which the reform movement could flourish, and it could hardly avoid being drawn into the ensuing conflict between the papacy and secular rulers.

Thanks to the status won by his predecessors, Abbot Hugh entered at once into a European role. And his birth and his own talents equipped him well for the part. He was born to the purple – the son of a count of the Bretonnais, with family connections among the higher aristocracy of Aquitaine and Burgundy.¹² He had entered the novitiate of Cluny in his early teens. Odilo, who was no respecter of persons but a good judge of managerial capacity, appointed him prior at the age of twenty-two. His devotion to the Rule and his successful management of the abbey's external affairs during Odilo's later years marked him out as the obvious successor. He was a tall, well-built man

with an impressive physical presence. His shrewd judgement was combined with an urbanity and perceptiveness that attracted confidences from others. He had all the mental and personal gifts of the successful executive, which combined in his soul with the deeply ingrained humility of the monk: 'the flesh wanted it', he answered with utter candour when, with other abbots, he was asked at the Council of Reims how he had obtained the abbacy, 'but the mind and rational part refused it'.¹³ He read much, but he seems to have felt no urge to authorship; his talents lay elsewhere, in planning, directing, and building. Intense bodily mortification and constant prayer had enabled him to sublimate personal ambition into an unflagging will to promote the monastic ideal and enhance the grandeur of Cluny. His zeal in supervising the dependent houses of the French and Italian bishops as well as a welcome visitor to the courts of the emperor and the king of France. While he was prior, he had already made and won the confidence of the Emperor Henry III, and he later accepted the invitation to be godfather to the future Henry IV. It was this long-established association of the leaders of Cluny with the imperial family, as well as the carefully cultivated links with the papacy, that obliged them to assume a role in the investiture struggle.

For many of the aims and ideals of the Gregorian Reform movement the Cluniacs were bound to feel a profound empathy. They wholeheartedly endorsed that part of the reform programme that aimed at purifying the Church from abuses and rescuing it from exploitation by lay rulers. The fact that they owed their own freedom from lay interference and episcopal jurisdiction to the favour of St Peter and his vicar made them natural allies of the papacy in its struggle to assert its spiritual authority over Christendom. On the other hand, the spread of Cluniac monasticism owed much to the enthusiasm of pious princes; and the long history of collaboration with lay rulers, especially with the German imperial family, disposed the leaders of Cluny to adopt a cautious attitude to the more radical of the hierocratic claims made by Gregory VII.¹⁴ Their dilemma is apparent from the part played by Abbot Hugh in the bitter struggle between Gregory and Henry IV of Germany.

Gregory had been a monk himself, possibly at St Mary's on the Aventine which had links with Cluny, and he admired the Cluniac ideal. Hugh was a friend to whom he looked for moral support in the darkest days of his struggle. In 1075 he poured out his heart to him in a long letter written in a mood of deep depression and discouragement over the violent opposition to his decrees of clerical celibacy and lay investiture.¹⁵ But Hugh was also godfather and counsellor to King Henry; and this made it impossible for him to remain aloof from the dispute. So he bent all his efforts to bring about a reconciliation. He was, in fact, one of the chief architects of the dramatic meeting between the pope and emperor-elect at Canossa in 1077. He was present at the negotiations, and attested the oath Henry swore to implement the terms of the concordat.



FIGURE 6.2 Vézelay Abbey: the storiated capital of the mystic mill

Photograph by Clive Hicks

Six years later, when the German army was investing Rome and Gregory was trapped in the Castel Sant'Angelo, Hugh was allowed to cross the lines in a last but unsuccessful attempt to mediate between Henry and the pope. The fact that he managed to retain the trust and affection of both the contestants throughout

of course, the interests as well as the ideal of Cluny were bound to align it with the Gregorian papacy. If Hugh felt a painful division of personal loyalties, he never wavered in his support for the papal programme of reform, and he served Gregory well as papal legate in France. Other Cluniac monks also served at the papal Curia; and the old alliance was consummated in 1088 when a former grand prior of Cluny, Odo, the cardinal bishop of Ostia, was elected pope as Urban II.

In the course of Hugh's abbacy, which lasted for sixty years, Cluny touched the peak of its power and social esteem. Urban II was only the most conspicuous of a stream of Cluniac monks who were recruited to the ranks of the episcopate. It was during Hugh's regime, too, that a vast and complex network of relationships began to emerge between Cluny and its dependencies which has baffled the descriptive powers of modern historians. New foundations that were colonised by monks from Cluny were organised as priories immediately dependent upon the mother-house, which appointed the superior of each house, who was often drawn from Cluny itself. Hugh also brought pressure to bear upon abbeys reformed by Cluny to accept reduction to the status of priories. Those old and wealthy abbeys, like Vézelay and Moissac, that were allowed to retain their abbatial status, were subject to the control of the abbot of Cluny, who either appointed their heads or supervised the election of their abbots. Some of the subject abbeys and priories were themselves the parents and overseers of families of dependent monasteries. Moissac, in Gascony, acquired a cluster of houses in Catalonia. And the priory of La Charité, situated in the upper valley of the Loire, had a far-flung family of seventy dependencies, which included five foundations in post-Conquest England. Besides the host of monasteries that stood in a relationship of direct or indirect subordination to Cluny, there was a shifting circle of satellite establishments which were drawn into the organisation after accepting Cluniac observance, but subsequently regained their independence. Others again adopted Cluniac practice without ever surrendering their autonomy.

These differing degrees of association were to be seen in most parts of Europe by the end of the eleventh century. In the duchy of Rome, the ancient abbey of Farfa was restored to Cluniac observance with the help of Odilo, but it never became constitutionally subordinated to Cluny. By contrast, during the regime of Hugh a whole series of dependent priories were founded in north Italy at Lodi, Pontida, and in the region of Milan. In Germany, the major focus of Cluniac influence was the Swabian abbey of Hirsau, which adopted Cluniac observance after 1079 under the leadership of Abbot William of Hirsau – it was he who got Ulrich, the prior of Zell, to compile a customary for him; but Hirsau itself was never directly affiliated to Cluny.

In Spain, Cluny acquired a group of subject monasteries after 1072, thanks to the enthusiastic patronage of Alfonso VI of Leon-Castile. Cluniac penetration of the Spanish kingdoms began in the time of Odilo, when Sancho the Great sent monks to Cluny to learn the observance and introduce it to the abbey of San Juan de la Peña in Aragon. The personal links with the royal dynasty forced

Alfonso VI. Alfonso gave several monasteries to Cluny, but its practices and ethos were disseminated in Spain not so much through its subject priories as through the abbeys which adopted its customs without becoming dependencies. Chief among these was the royal abbey of Sahagun in Leon, which Alfonso forced to accept the customs of Cluny in 1080, together with a Cluniac monk as abbot. Sahagun became in fact the major agency by which Cluniac observance was introduced to the religious communities of Leon-Castile.

This ramshackle spiritual empire was not an order in the proper sense of the term. It was a vast spatial extension of St Benedict's idea of a monastery as a family community living under the personal direction of a father-abbot. All Cluniac monks, wherever they lived, were in theory members of the community of the mother-house itself. When they visited Cluny, they were entitled to take their place in chapter with the residents. Postulants who had been admitted to any house of the congregation, once they had completed their novitiate, were sent to make their profession to the abbot of Cluny or alternatively awaited his visitation of their own monastery. He was the spiritual father of all Cluniac monks everywhere. It was a theory that stretched St Benedict's model to breaking-point. For although Odilo and Hugh were indefatigable travellers and visitors of the daughter-houses, any real supervision of such a huge congregation was obviously beyond the capacity of one man. As time went on, the relationship between the mother-house and the dependencies lost the intimacy of a filial bond and assumed some of the colour of feudal lordship that existed in the secular world. The role of the abbot of Cluny became that of a distant potentate, to whom every house of the congregation owed obedience and to whom it looked for protection. The outward sign of this subjection was the annual tax or *census* paid to Cluny by each of its daughter-houses.

The Cluniac empire lacked an effective organisation because it was not the outcome of any clearly formulated design. Its colonies were acquired piecemeal in the course of two centuries through unsolicited donations and requests for help. It owed its existence chiefly to the enthusiasm of lay magnates, who either sponsored new foundations or donated abbeys in their possession with an appeal, not always happily endorsed by their monks, for the introduction of Cluniac observance. Two cases illustrate the different ways in which additions were made to the Cluniac family.

One of these was the case of Fleury, which came into the hands of Abbot Odo about the year 930. It was an acquisition of special and symbolic significance as it contained the body of St Benedict. It was a royal abbey, but Odo's biographer tells us that the Robertian king Rudolf I gave it as a reward for service to Count Elisiard. Elisiard was an admirer of Cluny and offered the abbey to Odo to be reformed. But the community did not share Elisiard's enthusiasm. When Odo arrived with a heavy escort of two counts and two bishops, he found the doors barred against him. The monks waved royal privileges which promised they should never be ruled by a superior from another congregation;

and some of them retreated to the roof of the cloister, from which they persecuted the visitors with bricks.

Odo, who was a peaceable but persistent man, allowed the siege to continue for three days; then, unescorted and unnoticed, he placed a ladder against the inconspicuous corner of the wall and quietly let himself into the enclosure. He was received without violence, and his gentle persuasiveness prevailed on monks to accept him as their abbot. According to Brother John, their change of heart was prompted by a threat from a personage more exalted than either ecclesiastical or bishop: one of the brethren, returning from duties outside the cloister, confronted by the Blessed Benedict himself who gave him a frightening message for the community: 'Since they will allow me no rest, I am departing from house, and know that I shall not return to this place until I bring from Aachen a man after my own heart.'¹⁶ Thus Fleury passed into the Cluniac family through the collaboration of St Odo with the wishes of a lay proprietor. It seems that its links with Cluny remained purely personal, through the appointment of its abbots. Odo did no more than restore strict observance. The early eleventh-century customary of Fleury, which contains some variants from Cluniac practice, indicates that he did not impose all the practices of Cluny upon his newly acquired abbey.¹⁷

A different case was that of Lewes in Sussex, which was a new foundation. Cluny began to penetrate England after the Norman Conquest, though the initiative came from the king and the Anglo-Norman nobility and not from Abbot Hugh, who showed no great eagerness to extend his monastic family across Channel. In fact he declined a request from King William to supply him with monks for English abbeys in return for an annual payment to Cluny. The foundation of Lewes priory, the first of the English Cluniac houses, was the result of an initiative by William de Warenne, the first Norman earl of Surrey. After turmoil of the Conquest and settlement, William, accompanied by his English wife, Gundrada, set out on a pilgrimage to St Peter's in Rome. They made leisurely progress through France and stopped at Cluny, where they were royally received and entertained in the palatial building Odilo had designed for no guests.¹⁸ The warmth of the hospitality and the splendour of the liturgical made a deep impression on them, and they sought and obtained from the community the privilege of confraternity.

On returning home, the earl and countess determined to create a Cluniac priory at Lewes, close to the castle which was the head of their lordship. They petitioned Abbot Hugh to send monks, promising to donate to the proposed foundation the newly built stone church of Lewes and an endowment enough to support a community of twelve. But Hugh at first demurred. As he had told King William, he was disinclined to send monks to an alien count across the sea, where supervision would be impossible. The earl and countess persisted, however, and in the end they prevailed on Cluny to send a small party consisting of a prior and three monks, and the work of erecting the priory con-

begin. Lewes in fact came to hold a privileged position as one of the five major priories of the Cluniac congregation. Its heads were appointed by the abbot of Cluny, and in the twelfth century one of its priors, Hugh III, became head of the mother-house itself. The circumstances of its foundation are only remarkable in that they typify the way in which the unsolicited efforts of lay magnates added fresh colonies to the empire of Cluny.

The Cluniac ideal

What was it about the Cluniac life that evoked such an eager response from the leaders of eleventh-century society? The Cluniac message that the secular world was irremediably sinful and that the life of the monk was the only sure route to salvation struck a deeply responsive chord in the minds of men who were oppressed by the need to make satisfaction for their sins and fearful of the impending Day of Judgement. Cluny, as St Hugh wrote to King Philip of France, was the refuge of the penitent; let the king therefore resign his earthly kingdom while there was still time and lay hold on the eternal kingdom by ending his days as a monk.¹⁹ 'Acknowledging the enormity of my sins,' runs the charter of a benefactor, 'and at the same time fearing the dread condemnation of the reprobate, and mindful of the greatness of God's mercies, I fly to the harbour of safety.'²⁰ Arnaldus, the author of the charter, donated both himself and his church to the abbey, where he purposed to take the habit. To those who could not commit themselves in this way (and King Philip was one of them), the best hope lay in winning the remission of sins by sharing in the merits of Cluny through association. This could be achieved by the gift of property or of children. A child-oblate provided a kind of living investment in the monastic community from which a family hoped to reap rich spiritual rewards. At Cluny, the *mirriti* reared in the cloister were trained up to sing the elaborate services with a professional expertise that was hard for an adult convert to master.

The repetitious formulas alluding to the burden of sins and the terror of the Last Judgement, which recur again and again in the hundreds of charters of donation written during the abbacies of Odilo and Hugh, reveal the mind and handiwork of the monk draftsman; but there can be no doubt that they echoed the sentiments of the donors themselves. They hoped to render satisfaction for their offences by sharing in the observances of the monks. One of the surest and most covered means of accomplishing this was to be received into confraternity. This was a form of association that communities of different monasteries granted one another on request. The monks of two houses connected in this way prayed for one another, and deceased members of either community were commemorated in both establishments. The privilege was also open to individual benefactors, both clerical and lay. From the ninth century onwards, it was sought by individuals of every class in ever-increasing numbers.

An application for confraternity was considered by the community in chapter and if it was granted, the applicant was brought into the chapter and inducted by a special form of words. In effect, he or she was made a participant in all the spiritual benefits of the monastery, and on the death of the confrater the community celebrated the full office of the dead for the deceased as it did for its own monks. The rich and influential often obtained confraternity in several abbeys. In the year 929, Coenwald, the bishop of Worcester, visited a number of German abbeys with a commission to present gifts from the English king Athelstan. At Saint-Gall, after placing an offering of money on the altar of the basilica, he was received into confraternity by the brethren; and at the same time he asked for the names of King Athelstan, Archbishop Wulfhelm, several of his suffragan bishops, and a number of others, to be inscribed with his in the register of confraters.²¹

The names of confraters and benefactors were written in a *Liber Vitae*, or Book of Life, which was placed on the high altar during the celebration of mass so that those in it, too numerous to be named individually, might be commemorated in the eucharistic prayer. These books, in which fresh names were constantly being inserted, are eloquent witnesses to the belief of medieval people in the efficacy of the intercessory prayer of the Cluniac monks. One of them compiled at Marcigny during the abbacy of St Hugh and continued at the small priory of Villars-les-Moines in the diocese of Lausanne, contains as many as ten thousand names.²²

The observance with which benefactors were so eager to associate themselves was the unending round of psalmody and vocal prayer. It was this that averted the anger of God from sinful and forgetful men and made reparation on behalf of the living and dead. The liturgical life of Cluny satisfied this deeply felt need to a degree that had never been achieved before. Our knowledge of the liturgical practice of medieval monasteries is chiefly derived from customaries. These, which survive in increasing numbers from the end of the tenth century onwards, were treatises setting out detailed regulations for every part of the monastic day. They filled out and supplemented the more general instructions contained in the Rule. Customaries were widely circulated and copied, and were the primary means of preserving uniformity of practice among different houses of the same congregation. Thus one of the earliest customaries of Cluny is a copy that was made in the time of Abbot Odilo for the Italian abbey of Farfa.²³ It reveals a timetable in which choir duties occupy the greater part of the monk's day – perhaps as much as eight hours on festival days. This was much longer than the time allocated to the divine office in the Rule of St Benedict.

In much of its liturgical practice Cluny had simply adopted and developed the legislation of St Benedict of Aniane and the Aachen decrees. Additions to the canonical hours, such as the recitation of the Matins of the Dead and the office of All Saints following the night office, were already established practice in the ninth century; so too was the custom of celebrating two community masses every

day. The prolongation of services was a trend that had been going on for centuries. At Cluny it was given a further push by the constant addition of psalms for benefactors and lengthening of the lessons recited at the night office – in the two weeks preceding Lent, the entire books of Genesis and Exodus were chanted at Matins. Another growth factor was the multiplication of saints' days on which the longer night office of twelve lessons was celebrated. 'In Lent', observes the customary of Ulrich grimly, 'the psalmody is extremely prolix.' On some days it must have been almost continuous. On Good Friday, after the office of Prime, the community retired barefooted to the cloister and recited the entire Psalter. Besides this, the customaries lay down elaborate rules for processions to the altars with cross, candles, incense and reliquaries.

For this endless solemn celebration of the liturgy the efforts of Odilo and Hugh had provided an architectural setting of incomparable magnificence. Odilo had reconstructed the abbey's domestic buildings on a grand scale. Hugh set about replacing Mayeul's church with a third and still bigger building, a huge basilica 531 feet in length and 100 feet in height, constructed on the plan of a patriarchal cross, with four transepts, five major towers, and five chapels radiating from the ambulatory of the choir.²⁴ The grandeur of Hugh's design caught the imagination of Europe. Subventions were received from Henry I of England and Alfonso VI of Leon-Castile, who exacted the money from his newly conquered Muslim subjects; the Empress Matilda presented the bells. The work was begun in 1088. By October 1095 the altars of the chevet were ready to be consecrated by the Cluniac pope, Urban II, who had come to France to preach the First Crusade; and in 1130 Innocent II dedicated the whole church. All but a fragment, a transept, of Hugh's great church has gone, but something of the harmonious masses of the design and the richness of its historiated capitals can be seen from its imitators at Paray-le-Monial and La Charité-sur-Loire, and from the debris of sculptured capitals housed in the old granary building. The marble sculptures of Odilo's cloister have vanished, but they live on, forever encapsulated in the vivid denunciation of St Bernard:

in the sight of the brethren reading in the cloister, what is that ridiculous monstrosity doing? What is that deformed beauty and that beautiful deformity? those unclean monkeys? those ferocious lions? those battling knights? those monstrous centaurs? those huntsmen sounding their horns? Here are several bodies under a single head; there a quadruped with the head of a serpent; there a fish with the head of a quadruped . . . on all sides one sees such a rich and amazing variety of forms that it is more pleasing to read the marbles than the manuscripts.²⁵

It was all a disgraceful aberration from the austere simplicity of the Rule. But Bernard was the spokesman of a new monastic age which was in search of apostolic poverty and was in the process of rejecting the Cluniac model. In Hugh's

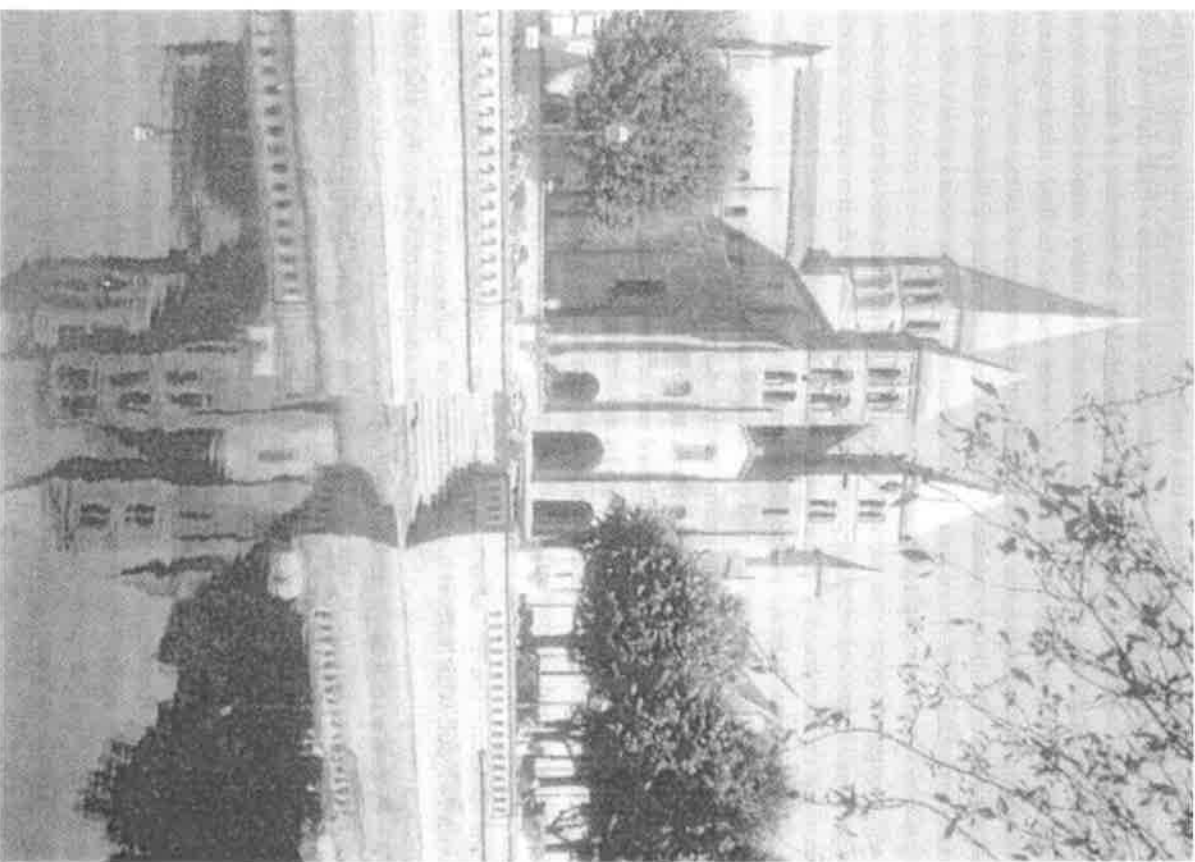


FIGURE 6.3 The exterior of Paray-le-Monial (twelfth century)
Photograph by the author

candelabra, surmounted by the gold pyx studded with precious stones, which was the gift of Henry of Blois, bishop of Winchester – 'a special lover of his mother, the church of Cluny'²⁶ – and the splendour of the liturgy it housed, seemed to most of those who saw it to be a symbol of the glory of heaven, expressing in

Cluny was the spiritual Everest in a landscape containing many peaks. Its far-flung network was only one of several monastic associations which derived their inspiration from the Carolingian revival directed by St Benedict of Aniane. In the course of the tenth and early eleventh centuries many ruined abbeys were repeople with monks, new foundations were made, and fresh congregations sprang into existence. Some of these took their pattern of monastic life from Cluny while remaining outside the Cluniac empire; others followed a distinct, if not very different type of Benedictine observance, given them by the mother-house of their own congregation.

Among the groups that were influenced by Cluny, but not of it in any constitutional sense, was the large constellation of reformed monasteries which received their customs from Saint-Bénigne of Dijon. Its animator was an Italian, William of Volpiano, who ranks among the greatest ascetical revivalists of his age. It is observable, and perfectly understandable, that most of the reformers were men who had come to the monastic life as adults. Often they were clerks, who had absorbed the best of the learning the schools of the time had to offer. The oblate, educated in the cloister and trained from childhood in the habits of obedience and conformity, was less likely to question the accepted norms of his establishment than was a recruit from the outside world, who had formed his ideals independently. But William of Volpiano was the exception. He had been placed as a child in the monastery of Luicedio near Vercelli. The stimulus that made him a reformer came from a meeting with Mayeul, which drew him to Cluny. In 989 he was sent to reform Saint-Bénigne of Dijon, where he introduced the customs of Cluny. For the next forty years, as abbot of St Bénigne, he worked to extend the Benedictine revival in northern Italy, where he founded the famous Piedmontese abbey of Fruttuaria. But the area of his most impressive achievement was Normandy. In 1001, at the invitation of Duke Richard II, he took a party of monks from Dijon to Fécamp, where he restored regular observance. In the following years the reform was extended to the Norman abbeys of Saint-Ouen, Jumièges, and Mont-Saint-Michel; and the duchy became famous for the quality of its monastic life. It was to the customary of William's congregation that Herluin, the convert-knight, looked for the guidance of the humble group of monks he gathered at Bec in the year 1034.

In Catalonia Cluny had little direct influence. There the monastic revival of the early eleventh century, which followed the ravages of the Muslim conqueror, al-Mansur, stemmed from the abbeys of Cuxa and Ripoll. They were ruled jointly by the famous Abbot Oliva, who founded a dependent priory of Ripoll to serve the sanctuary of the Blessed Virgin at Montserrat. Later in the century, Ripoll was absorbed into the spiritual empire of St Victor of Marseilles, which formed a large congregation of subject abbeys extending from the Midi into northern Spain.

Gorze and the German revival

Apart from a few outposts across the English Channel, the Cluniac empire was largely confined to the Romance-speaking lands. In the east Frankish lands which were gradually welded into the medieval kingdom of Germany, the monastic revival of the tenth century was led from the abbey of Gorze, near Metz. Gorze had been founded in the eighth century by St Chrodegang of Metz, but monastic life had ceased there and it was much dilapidated when in 933 Adalbero, bishop of Metz, gave it to John of Gorze and the Archdeacon Einold of Toul so that they could restore Benedictine observance at the abbey. Helped by enthusiastic patronage of bishops and German princes, the reform of Gorze was imported into St Maximin of Trier, St Vanne of Verdun, and other abbeys of Lorraine. And from Lorraine it was transmitted both to revived monasteries and to new foundations in Hesse, Swabia and Bavaria.

The major role in spreading the Gorzer observance in Bavaria was played by St Wolfgang of Regensburg. He had abandoned his post as *scholasticus* to a cathedral school of Trier to take the monastic habit at Eintriedeln, but the cloister could not hold him for long. In 971 he set off to evangelise Hungary. The following year his friendship with members of the Bavarian ducal house brought him to the see of Regensburg. His first step was to introduce the customary of Gorze to the monastery of St Emmeram, which he separated from the bishopric and from this base, he restored Benedictine life to a series of Bavarian abbeys and founded several monasteries for women.

In Germany and the Empire Gorze played a role in the Benedictine revival similar to that of Cluny in France, but with a difference. The monks of Gorze followed an elaborate liturgical routine derived, like that of Cluny, from the reform of St Benedict of Aniane, but Gorze had developed a tradition of its own quite independently of Cluny.²⁷ Its lectionary was different, and so were its liturgical ceremonies. It is in the customaries of the Gorzer group that we encounter for the first time the Easter play of the Sepulchre – the dramatisation of liturgical drama, played out during the night office, which marks the birth of medieval drama. It was unknown at Cluny; but the common customary of the English monks, which was compiled in 970, has it – the fruit of Dunstan's residence at Ghent, where he came into contact with the Gorzer tradition. In the English *of Nocturns* in the night of the Resurrection, three monks wearing albs and carrying incense, advance slowly up the church towards the place where a sepulchre had been prepared, step by step, as though searching for something; and when they draw near, 'he that is seated there shall begin to sing softly and sweetly: "Whom do you seek in the sepulchre, O worshippers of Christ?"'²⁸

Organisationally, the family of monasteries that sprang from the Gorze reform had little in common with the centralised patriarchal structure of the Cluniac empire. The Lotharingian and German reformers owed much to

patronage of the imperial house and to the active sponsorship of bishops. Unlike Cluny, they did not seek large-scale exemptions from episcopal jurisdiction. Nor did they attempt to reduce newly reformed abbeys and daughter foundations to dependent status. German abbeys that received the customs of Gorze retained their autonomy. No abbot east of the Meuse claimed the kind of suzerainty exercised by the abbots of Cluny. Instead the monasteries of the Gorzer tradition developed 'filiations' or associations of houses grouped round the abbeys from which they had received their common customary. These groups were not linked to their mother-houses by juridical bonds. They were primarily associations of prayer or confraternities which provided services at death for each and every monk of the congregation. So, besides Gorze itself, St Maximin of Trier, Fulda, which had the customs of Gorze imposed upon it by the Emperor Henry II, Einsiedeln, and the Bavarian abbeys of St Emmeram and Niederaltaich, all became the nuclei of congregations of coequal monasteries.

The English revival of the tenth century

Cluny and Gorze represented two distinct traditions, both of which derived their interpretation of the Benedictine life from the reform of Benedict of Aniane and the Aachen decrees. Both traditions played a part in shaping the form taken by the monastic revival in tenth-century England. Social pressure and foreign invasion had combined to cut short the first spring of monasticism in the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. Practically no organised monastic life survived the Danish invasions of the ninth century. Monastic lands had been appropriated, and those monastic buildings that were not deserted and ruinous were occupied by groups of married secular clergy. The impact upon learning of the loss of these monasteries and their libraries, which Alfred lamented in his translation of *The Pastoral Care*, is eloquently attested to by the low standard of Latinity displayed in diplomas, even those written by royal and episcopal clerks in the last decades of the ninth century.²⁹

The way for a revival was prepared by individual ascetics who found it necessary to go to the Continent to fulfil their vocation. One of these was Archbishop Oda, who came to the see of Canterbury in 942. He had previously gone to Fleury to take the monastic habit, and he sent his nephew, Oswald, there to become a monk, so initiating a connection with the ancient abbey on the Loire that influenced the whole course of the English movement. On being recalled to take up the bishopric of Worcester in 961, Oswald became one of the three leading promoters of the monastic revival, and it was from Fleury that he summoned Germanus, another English monk, to be the first abbot of a new foundation at Westbury-on-Trym. There were also personal links with the Lotharingian reform. St Dunstan, who became the chief architect of the revival, spent an instructive period of exile at Blandinium in Ghent, which had accepted the customs of Gorze. This process of cross-fertilisation later bore fruit in the common

The English revival was pre-eminently the work of three determined men: Dunstan, St Ethelwold, and St Oswald.³⁰ But it could not have been accomplished without the active support of the Wessex kings. The movement began with King Edmund gave Dunstan, who was the son of a Somerset thegn and a relative of the royal family, the old abbey of Glastonbury, where he had been educated. Dunstan repaired the monastic buildings and recruited a community of monks who vowed to follow the Benedictine Rule. His disciples included Ethelwold who was to prove himself the most austere and dynamic of the reformers. Dissatisfied with the observance at Glastonbury, Ethelwold hankered to search out his ideal on the Continent, but King Eadred diverted him from his planned flight abroad by giving him the derelict monastery of Abingdon to restore.

The momentum of the movement suffered a check during the crisis of Eadwig's short reign, when Dunstan was forced into exile and was sheltered by the monks of St Peter's in Ghent. But the accession of the young King Edgar in 959 gave the reformers the enthusiastic and powerful patron they needed to pursue their project. Dunstan was recalled to be bishop of Worcester, and from there was quickly translated, first to London, and then in 960 to Canterbury. Ethelwold, who had been the king's mentor, was appointed to the see of Winchester where he took the drastic step of expelling the married secular canons from the Old Minster and installing a community of monks brought from Abingdon. And, at Dunstan's suggestion, Oswald was summoned home from exile to take up the see of Worcester.

With the force of the king behind it the monastic revival now made rapid progress. The two restored abbeys at Glastonbury and Abingdon, and Oswald's foundation at Westbury-on-Trym, became the power-houses of the movement, each of them sending out groups of monks to people and restore ruined houses or to found new ones. The community of Abingdon supplied monks for a group of new foundations made by Ethelwold in East Anglia, including Medehamstede (later Peterborough), Ely, Thorney, and Croyland. Westbury colonised a group of houses in the West Midlands, including Worcester, Pershore, Ramsey and at one remove, Winchcombe. Glastonbury supplied monks for Bath, Malmesbury, Sherborne, and, at a later stage, for Westminster. Besides the monasteries for men, several abbeys of nuns were either restored or newly founded, among them the larger and richly endowed establishments at Romsey, Shaftesbury, Winton, and the Nunnaminster at Winchester. One by-product of the revival, rare outside England, was the cathedral monastery – communities of monks who took the place of a cathedral chapter that was normally occupied by secular clergy – which was introduced at Winchester, Worcester, and Sherborne, a few decades later at Canterbury. In these cases the place of the abbot in the community was held by the bishop, but for most purposes its effective head was the claustral prior.

All the English monasteries followed the Benedictine Rule, but within the common framework there was much variety of practice stemming from the

differing background and experience of the founders. It was therefore thought desirable to compile a single uniform customary which all would observe. So an assembly of abbots and abbesses was summoned to meet at Winchester under the presidency of the king in 970, and an agreed code of observance was drawn up, called the *Regularis Concordia*.³¹ According to Aelfric, the *Concordia* was the work of Ethelwold. We know in fact very little about the circumstances that produced it or why it was thought necessary. The desire for a nationwide uniformity of monastic observance and the idea that the king should be its patron and guardian, a notion quite foreign to the Rule of St Benedict, was a product of the Carolingian reform of the ninth century and a society that accorded a sacral role to kingship.

The programme of monastic life set out in the *Concordia* is that of the Aachen decrees, derived from the traditions of Cluny and Gorze. As was to be expected, the leaders of the English movement looked to the Continent for guidance in interpreting the Rule. The preface to the document, in fact, acknowledges the help given by monks who had been summoned from Fleury and Ghent to advise the synod. The timetable of the monastic day as set out conforms to the continental practice of the tenth century in making the execution of the liturgy the chief task of the monk. The additions to the divine office adopted at Cluny are included in the instructions of the *Concordia*, but at some points the document follows the Lotharingian tradition: the order for the last three days of Holy Week and the week following Easter is that used by the Gorze congregation. The Easter play of the Sepulchre within the night office is apparently derived from the same source. A special feature of the customary is the emphasis upon the role of the king as patron and protector. It was agreed that psalms and prayers for the king and queen should be recited after all the liturgical hours except Prime. In this way the abbots acknowledged the bond of mutual service that existed between the English monasteries and the monarchy.

The monastic renaissance could not, in fact, have been accomplished without the constant support and collaboration of the Wessex kings. The endowment of minsters restored to monastic use involved the resumption of church lands which had been secularised or appropriated by secular canons, and this could only be done by acts of royal power. Besides the forcible bestowal of alienated lands and churches, the king in many cases endowed abbays with important franchisal privileges which gave them seigniorial jurisdiction over the population of large areas. The abbots of Medehamstede, for instance, were granted jurisdiction over eight of the hundreds of Northamptonshire, and in this area the hundred courts were presided over by the steward of the abbey.

Not all the nobility shared Edgar's enthusiasm for the monastic revival, and after his death there was a brief insurrection by a group of families which had suffered loss through the king's largesse.³² But the gains made in his reign could not now be reversed. Despite the problems caused by renewed Danish invasions,

and enriching them with fresh endowments. The Old Minster at Winchester Abingdon, St Alban's, Ely, and the nunnery of Shaftesbury, all benefited from his favour,³³ and the new foundation of Eynsham, sponsored by the ealdorman Aethelmar, was reinforced by royal conformation.³⁴ Cnut's role in the foundation of Bury St Edmunds is doubtful,³⁵ but he showed himself an enthusiastic patron of the monasteries, not least by his practice of nominating abbots to English bishoprics. By the eve of the Norman Conquest, though something of the initial fervour of reform had cooled and the intoxicating sense of pioneering a great revival had been lost, the Benedictine abbeys had struck long and deep roots in the social landscape of southern England.

The English revival had drawn much of its inspiration from Cluny. Yet before the end of the eleventh century new kinds of religious organisation were trying to challenge the Cluniac ascendancy. Some of the best minds of the time were turning away from a life dominated by corporate ritual in search of a simpler form of ascetical life which allowed more opportunity for private prayer and reflection and which was less involved with the secular world. Behind this imposing façade of Cluny itself, there were signs of malaise, which became plain for all to see following the death of St Hugh. His successor, Pons of Melgueil, became the focus of a European scandal.

According to Peter the Venerable, Abbot Pons had resigned in 1122 to go on pilgrimage to the Holy Land; but he reappeared three years later, during Peter's abbacy, at the head of a mob of runaway monks and, with the help of malcontents in the community, seized the abbey, which was barricaded and subjected to an orgy of plunder and violence before Peter regained possession. Authority moved in with the assistance of the secular arm. Pons was summoned to Rome, was excommunicated, and died in 1126 in the prison of Pope Honorius II. The startling rebellion has been regarded by some scholars as the nemesis of the open door policy followed by St Hugh. In his later years the probationary period the novitiate had been reduced to as little as a single week. The fact that Pons found allies in the cloister could be explained by this and by Cluniac propaganda which may well have attracted numbers of adult recruits with no aptitude for the religious life.

There is no doubt that there had been relaxations in the last years of Hugh's long regime. But recent studies have rehabilitated Pons to some extent and related his fall to broader developments in the monastic world, which were in turn reflected in divisions within the papal Curia.³⁶ Peter the Venerable, admirer of the Carthusians and a friend of St Bernard, was attuned to the new ascetical spirituality of the twelfth century; he was known in monastic circles to be a reformer, and he sought to make changes in the observance at Cluny that aroused the opposition of the traditionalists in the community.³⁷ It was this group of dissidents that attempted to restore Pons, alleging in fact that he had never resigned the abbacy. They hoped to thwart Peter's efforts to restore some of the earlier austerity to Cluniac practice. Significant though it was, the rebellion

headed by Pons did not herald the decline of Cluny; it continued to attract patrons and recruits throughout the twelfth century. The crisis of 1122–26 was a symptom not of decadence, but of the challenge the new ascetical ideals were offering to the traditional version of the Benedictine life.

Notes

1. *Radhaphi Glaber Historiarum Libri Quinque*, ed. J. France (1989) iii, pp. 124–5.
2. For a modern discussion of the charter and its precedents see H. E. J. Cowdrey, *The Cluniacs and the Gregorian Reform* (1970), pp. 8–15.
3. On Odo's doctrine of the monastic life see R. Morghen, 'Monastic reform and Cluniac spirituality' in *Cluniac Monasticism in the Central Middle Ages*, ed. Noreen Hunt (1971), pp. 11–28; and K. Hallinger, *ibid.*, pp. 29–55.
4. *Vita S. Odonis*, PL 133, 45.
5. *Ibid.*, 71.
6. *Ibid.*, 60.
7. On Odo's work at Rome see E. Sackur, *Die Cluniacenser in ihrer kirchlichen und allgemein-geschichtlichen Wirksamkeit* (Halle, 1892–94) i, pp. 99–114; and B. Hamilton, 'Monastic revival in tenth-century Rome' in *Studia Monastica* (1962) iv, pp. 35–68.
8. *Vita S. Maioli*, PL 137, 752.
9. See the *Vita S. Odilonis* by his pupil, Jotsaldus, in PL 142, 897–940. For a striking modern portrait see R. W. Southern, *The Making of the Middle Ages* (1953), pp. 158–9. PL 142, 906.
10. *Ibid.*, 908. For the buildings of Cluny see J. Hourlier, 'Le monastère de Saint Odilon, *Studia Anselmiana* 50 (Rome, 1962), pp. 5–21. The authoritative monograph is that of K. Conant, *Cluny: Les églises et la maison du Chef d'Ordre* (Mâcon, 1968).
11. On Hugh's regime see Noreen Hunt, *Cluny under St Hugh 1049–1109* (1967).
12. *Vita S. Hugonis*, PL 159, 865–6.
13. Cowdrey, *op. cit.*
14. *Registrum Gregorii VII*, ed. E. Caspar, MGH (1920) ii, 49.
15. *Vita S. Odilonis*, 80.
16. Anselme Davril, 'Un coutumier de Fleury du début du XI^e siècle', *Rev. ben.* 76 (1966), pp. 351–4; and Dom Anselme's edition of the customary in CCM VII (1984).
17. L. Donat in 'Recherches sur l'influence de Fleury au X^e siècle', *Études Ligériennes d'histoire médiévale* (Auxerre, 1975), pp. 165–74; remarks on the close association of Fleury with the Lotharingian reform and suggests it was the source of the customs of Gorze.
18. According to a thirteenth-century tradition, they were warned to proceed no further as the war between the pope and the emperor had made the passage of the Alps unsafe. This and other details are derived from the spurious foundation charter of Lewes, printed in W. Dugdale, *Monasticon* (edn 1825) v, pp. 12–13. This was shown to be a forgery by C. T. Clay in *Early Yorkshire Charters* viii, *The Honour of Warrene* (Yorkshire Archaeological Society Record Series vi, 1940), pp. 59–62; but the historical material used by the forger is apparently derived from an earlier and genuine narrative.
19. *Epistolae*, PL 159, 9302.
20. *Recueil des chartes de l'abbaye de Cluny*, ed. A. Bruel (Paris, 1876) iv, no. 3063.
21. *Councils and Synods with Other Documents relating to the English Church*, I, part i, ed. Dorothy Whitelock (1981), pp. 41–3.
22. J. Wollasch, 'A Cluniac necrology from the time of Abbot Hugh' in *Cluniac Monasticism*, *op. cit.*, pp. 143–90.
23. *Liber Trinitatis Aevi Odilonis Abbatis*, ed. P. Dinter in CCM X (1980). On the liturgical practice of Cluny see G. de Valous, *Le monachisme clunisien des origines au XV^e siècle* (Lignèze-Paris, 1935) i, pp. 327–72.
24. Conant, *op. cit.*, and *idem*, *Carolingian and Romanesque Architecture 800–1200* 3rd edn (1979), pp. 185–221.
25. From Bernard's *Apologia: S. Bernardi Opera*, ed. J. Leclercq, C. H. Talbot and H. Rochais (Rome, 1959) III, p. 106; English trans. M. Casey (Kalamazoo, 1970).
26. E. Berger, *Notices sur divers MSS de la Bibliothèque Vaticane. Richard le Poitevin* (Bibl. des Écoles Françaises d'Athènes et de Rome 6, Paris 1879), p. 126.
27. The distinctive liturgical tradition of Gorze and its independence of Cluny were vindicated by K. Hallinger's monumental study *Gorze-Kluny*, 2 vols, *Studia Anselmiana* 22–25 (Rome 1950–51); on the organisational differences see particularly vol. ii, pp. 765–80.
28. *The Regularis Concordia*, ed. T. Symons (1953), p. 50.
29. N. Brooks, *The Early History of the Church of Canterbury* (1984), pp. 171–4.
30. For the history of the English revival see M. D. Knowles, *The Monastic Order in England*, 2nd edn (1963), and the studies in *Tenth-Century Studies*, ed. D. Parsons (1975).
31. On the sources of the *Concordia* see T. Symons in *Tenth-Century Studies*, pp. 37–59.
32. D. J. V. Fisher, 'The anti-monastic reaction in the reign of Edward the Martyr', *Cambridge Historical Journal* 10 (1950–2), pp. 254–70.
33. P. H. Sawyer, *Anglo-Saxon Charters, an Annotated List* (1968), nos 836, 839, 891, 876, 897, 888, 916, 907, 919, 850, 899.
34. *Ibid.*, no. 911.
35. Antonia Gransden, 'Traditionalism and continuity during the last century of Anglo-Saxon monasticism', *JEH* 40 (1989), pp. 159–207. On Cnut's patronage of the monastic Church see Frank Barlow, *The English Church 1000–1066* (1963), pp. 72–5.
36. H. V. White, 'Pontius of Cluny, the *Carita Romana* and the end of Gregorianism in Rome', *Church History* 27 (1958), pp. 195–219; and G. Tellenbach, 'Der Sturz des Abtes Pontius von Cluny und seine geschichtliche Bedeutung' in *Quellen u. Forschungen aus Italienischen Archiven* 43–3 (Tübingen, 1963), pp. 13–55, where the rough treatment of Pons at Rome is related to a conflict between Cluny and the bishop of Mâcon.
37. Giles Constable, 'The monastic policy of Peter the Venerable', *Pierre Abélard, Pierre le Vénérable: Colloques internationaux du centre national de la recherche scientifique*, no. 546 (Paris, 1975), pp. 119–42.

7

THE CLOISTER AND THE WORLD

Bare ruined choirs and empty cloisters kindle the imagination of a modern visitor, but cannot satisfy it. To anyone standing on the floor of the dormitory at Fontenay and glancing down the night-stairs into the transept of the great church, it is easy to visualise the cowed figures, hands hidden in the voluminous white sleeves, scurrying down for the night office. From the stone pulpit high up in the wall of the roofless refectory of Fountains one can look down upon a ghostly congregation of bowed heads. Yet it is hard to recapture the experience and atmosphere of daily life in a medieval cloister. Our documents can conjure up for us the exterior activities of the monastic routine; but ultimately, the inwardness of it eludes us. Our sources cannot penetrate the interior experience of the individual that energised and gave meaning to a pattern of life built round a belief in the omnipresence of the supernatural and in the power and necessity of constant prayer, and to which the modern secular world offers us no key.

How exactly did monks spend their day? Here we have to make distinctions of time and place. Although the Rule of St Benedict constituted a thread of continuity through the centuries, the domestic arrangements and assumptions of a monastic community were no more static than those of the society that surrounded it. The experience and mental furniture of a Benedictine monk living in the fifteenth century would have been different from those of a monk of the twelfth century, and the life-style and expectations of both would have differed from those of a monk living in a Carolingian abbey of the eighth century. Let us try to reconstruct the daily round in a Benedictine establishment towards the close of the eleventh century.

There is much to be said for selecting this point in time. Letters and monastic chronicles provide us with occasional glimpses over the walls of the enclosure; but the most systematic information about the occupations that filled the monk's day

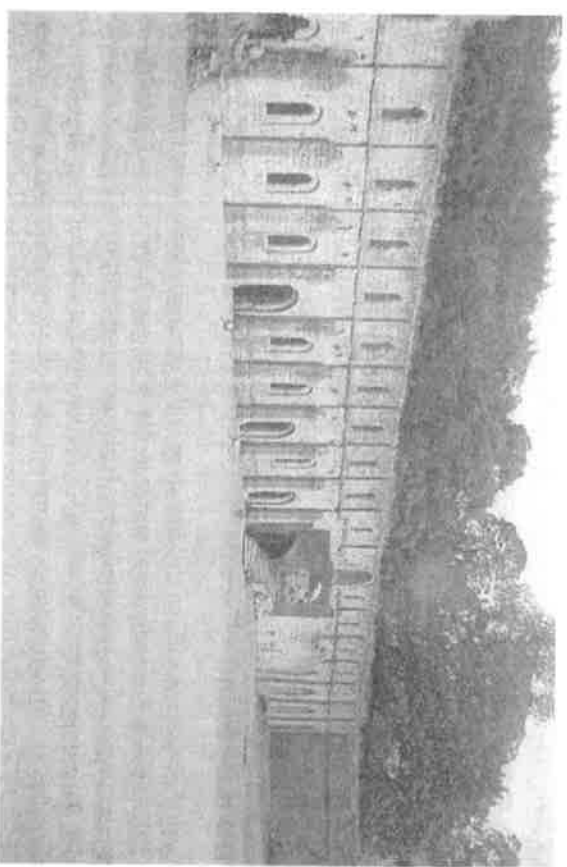


FIGURE 7.1 The exterior of the lay brothers' refectory, with dormitory above, at Fountains Abbey

Photograph by the author

comes from the customaries, and these survive in substantial numbers from the two centuries between 1050 and 1250. These were treatises recording the customs and established practices of particular monasteries. They were compiled to supplement or fill out the general instructions of the Rule and contained detailed regulations for the celebration of the divine office and for every activity that occupied the monastic day, as well as listing the duties assigned to the various officers of the community. One of the primary objects of these compilations was to secure uniformity of observance in houses belonging to the same congregation; so they were widely circulated, carefully preserved and periodically amended. Uniformity of practice was the avowed motive for the composition of the *Regularis Concordia* – the common customary agreed by the monks of tenth-century England; and a similar intention must have underlain the customary, or so-called statutes, that Archbishop Lanfranc gave to the cathedral priory of Christ Church Canterbury, soon after 1070, for they were copied in other cathedral monasteries of Norman England.

Some of the fullest of these rule-books are those written in the eleventh century as a guide to the customs of Cluny. One of them was compiled by a monk of the Italian abbey of Farfa, who had been sent to Cluny by his abbot to learn the usages and report back home.¹ Another was compiled by Ulrich, himself a monk of Cluny. He had been on a visit to the Swabian abbey of Hirsau about the year 1075, and during his stay, his host, Abbot William, had plied him with questions about Cluniac practice. So, on returning home Ulrich wrote up the statutes of

his abbey for William's benefit and also, unforeseeably, for ours.² Together these two treatises provide us with a fairly detailed guide to the pattern of life at Cluny under the regime of Odilo and St Hugh. We have already drawn upon them in describing some of the features of Cluniac observance. All the customaries give elaborate instructions for the celebration of the divine office at the various seasons of the year, but omit much that we should like to know. Nevertheless, they do enable us to reconstruct in some detail the routine of daily life in a great Benedictine abbey of the eleventh century.

The daily round

Both the brethren and the children slept in the common dormitory, fully clothed in their habits except for cowl and scapular. This may have been no hardship on winter nights in an unheated stone building, but it must have been uncomfortable in summer. It was the rule at Cluny that even on the hottest nights no more than feet or arms might be uncovered. At some time between 2 and 3 a.m., depending upon the time of year, the community was roused by the bell. They rose, pulled the covers over their beds, put on night-shoes and cowl – a monk, explains Ulrich, must not enter the lavatory (which connected with the far end of the dormitory) with head uncovered, for the cowl conferred anonymity – and then, while the bell continued to ring, they made their way down the stairs which led directly into the church and took their places in the choir to sing the night office of Nocturns (now called Matins) and Lauds. A monk who was not in choir in time for the preliminary prayers, which were said when the bell ceased to ring, had to confess his fault and ask pardon in chapter. The adult monks were followed into the choir by the boys, shepherded by their master; and after them came the novices, who slept in their own quarters. When they had arrived the service could begin. Engulfed in a cavern of darkness broken only intermittently by the pools of light shed by lanterns and candelabra, the cantors began the chant.

Saying awake during the lengthy readings of Nocturns was evidently a problem for some. The Cluny customary provides for a lantern-bearer to perambulate the choir to make sure that everybody is awake. If he comes upon a monk who has fallen asleep during the lessons, he does not speak, but gently waves the lantern to and fro close to his face until the sleeper wakes. Although the day began in the early hours of the morning, it was not unduly long as the community retired for the night at dusk. The longer summer days were punctuated by a siesta that was allowed in the afternoon. At some periods of the year the community would go back to bed after singing the Lauds of the dead and rest until the bell woke them again at first light. Then they returned to the church to sing Prime – the first service of the day. After this there was an interval, which in summer might last three hours or more, before the bell rang for the short office of Terce, the service of the third hour, sung at about 9 a.m. During this period

the monks changed into their day-shoes, washed hands and face at the lavabo, which was situated in the cloister, and occupied themselves with reading or the business affairs of the house.

As St Benedict had intended, vocal prayer at the canonical hours formed the framework of the monastic day. There were the three short services of Terce, Sext, and Nones, the last two sung respectively at about midday and three in the afternoon, and the rather longer evening office of Vespers; and the day concluded at dusk with the brief service of Compline – the prayer for 'a quiet night and a perfect end'. But as we have seen, by the eleventh century the relatively simple liturgical scheme of the Rule had been greatly enlarged by the addition of further services – the offices of the dead and of All Saints, by additional psalms and freshly composed hymns and sequences for the ever-growing number of saints' days. The community now attended two masses daily: the 'morning mass' celebrated immediately after Terce, and the high mass that followed the office of Sext at about midday. Besides these, there were the private masses murmured at side-altars in the early hours before daybreak, for by this period it had become the practice to ordain a high proportion of monks to the priesthood. The practice was reflected in the monastic architecture of the tenth and eleventh centuries – churches were provided with increasing numbers of altars and side-chapels, where individual monks could offer private masses for benefactors.

At major festivals the rituals of the liturgy were enriched with added magnificence. On the vigils of Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost, the church and cloister were decorated with foliage and flowers, and the brethren were woken for the night office by the pealing of all the bells. The high altar was illuminated by masses of candles, the cantors wore gorgeous copes, and during Nocturns two priests circulated incensing the altars and members of the community. When Matins was finished, the solemn mass of the feast was celebrated, heralded by a peal of bells, and following this the night services were completed by the singing of Lauds. The monks could then return to bed to snatch what sleep they could before daybreak.

It is impossible for the modern student to assess the psychological impact upon the individual of these interminable hours spent daily in communal vocal prayer and liturgical rituals. How much of the participation was simply mechanical? It is significant that some of the most reflective minds of the period rejected the Cluniac pattern of observance and that the new orders of the twelfth century cautiously pruned the traditional monastic liturgy. Even at Cluny, Peter the Venérable reduced the 'hateful multiplicity of familiar psalms', and composed a new hymn for the feast of St Benedict that was shorter than the old one 'on account of the boredom of the singers'.³

Outside choir, the most important assembly point of the day was the chapter. Following the morning mass, the community processed out of the church into the chapter-house. The brethren sat on the gradines – the tiers of benches round the walls – and the abbot or prior presided. After the reading of a lesson and a

chapter of the Rule, the head of the house delivered a conference or sermon. Business matters concerning the community might then be discussed. This was also the occasion when individuals who had committed breaches of the Rule confessed their faults or were accused by others, and were assigned penances. The boys met in a chapter of their own. There, Ulrich explains, those who have blundered in singing the psalmody, misbehaved in any way, or simply fallen asleep during the services, are stripped of cowl and frock and beaten by their master with willow rods. Harsh, but no harsher than the treatment children expected to receive in the outside world. It was a general conviction in medieval society that constant beating was indispensable for the proper education of the young.

After chapter, which would have ended towards 10 a.m., there was a clear period that could be devoted to work or study, lasting until the bell rang for Sext, about midday. Work was a part of the monk's routine expressly enjoined by St Benedict. There were always tasks to be performed in the offices and workshops of the monastery. But the abbey of the eleventh century employed servants for the menial jobs. In a major establishment such as Cluny, or the cathedral priory of Canterbury, which contained upwards of a hundred monks, as much as half of the community might be occupied with administrative duties, either inside or outside the enclosure. The management of the monastery's estates necessarily involved the periodic absence of a number of monks. Those who were not occupied in administration spent the hours outside choir in reading, copying books in the scriptorium, or in artistic work. The manual labour prescribed by the Rule had by now become largely ritualised. 'To tell the truth,' says the maestro in Ulrich's customary, 'it amounts to nothing more than shelling the new beans or rooting out weeds that choke the good plants in the garden, sometimes making loaves in the bakery.'⁴ On days when it is done, after holding a shorter chapter than usual, the abbot says 'Let us proceed to manual labour.' All then process out, the boys leading, to the garden. Palms are sung, and after a spell of weeding, the procession reforms and returns to the cloister.

The virtual elimination of manual work in favour of intellectual activities was partly the result of the great elaboration of the monk's liturgical duties. Far more of his day was spent in choir than St Benedict had envisaged; and choir duties were physically exhausting as well as time-consuming. The change also reflected changing social assumptions. Tilling and hewing were work for peasants and had servile associations. Peter the Venerable argued that the delicate hands of his monks, who came from social classes unfamiliar with toil, were more suitably employed furrowing parchment with pens than ploughing furrows in fields. It was one of the objects of the Cistercians and other reformers of the twelfth century to reinstate manual labour in the monk's timetable and to assert its spiritual significance. But it was a reversal of the prevailing trend, in which the Benedictine houses did not in general follow the reformers.

The importance of reading in the life of the monk was underlined by the generous amount of time allocated to it in the Rule; and it was symbolised by

the annual issue of books for private reading at the beginning of Lent. At Cluny, the keeper of the book-store, in accordance with the Rule, had the books laid out on a carpet that was spread on the floor of the chapter-house. A list of the books issued the previous year and their recipients is read out. On hearing his name, each monk hands back his book and receives another. Anyone who has not finished his book confesses his fault and asks pardon. Lanfranc's constitutions describe an identical ritual at Canterbury. A chance survival in the customary of Farfa abbey of a list of sixty-three books issued to the monks one Lent in the mid-eleventh century gives us a momentary glimpse of the reading tastes of one community.⁵ Most of the books fall into the expected categories of devotional works and ascetical theology – Cassian, Smaragdus's commentary on the Rule, Lives of the saints, and the Scriptural commentaries of the Fathers from Jerome to Gregory the Great, as well as the later commentators like Bede, Alcuin and Rhabanus Maurus. But the list also includes an interesting selection of historical works, the *History* of Josephus, the *Ecclesiastical History* of Eusebius, an anonymous *History of the English*, which must be Bede, and more surprisingly, the secular Roman history of Livy, a work that was not widely known at this period. The reading of history was regarded as an improving spiritual exercise. As John of Salisbury observed in the twelfth century, through studying the chronicles of the past, men came to perceive the invisible working of God.

A significant part of the book-holdings in a Benedictine library were likely to have come from donations. When Odo became a monk at Baume he took with him a hundred books, which were probably transported in due course to Cluny. Medieval library catalogues, like the great catalogue of Canterbury cathedral priory which was compiled in the thirteenth century, sometimes list the books under the names of donors. Nevertheless, a proportion of the library's stock had to be supplied by the monastery's own scriptorium.

The work that went on in the scriptorium or writing-room was vital to the interior life of the monastery and it also provided an important service to the outside world. At any given time several monks were likely to be engaged in copying texts or composing books of their own. Sometimes they worked in the northern walk of the cloister alongside the church, but often a separate room off the cloister was allocated to the task. The ninth-century plan of Saint-Gall provides for a spacious scriptorium above the library, with seven writing-desks. The first charge on the workers in the scriptorium was the reproduction of the books needed for the services in choir and the readings in the refectory – the antiphoners, tropers, missals and lectionaries. An equally important task was the provision of grammars for the education of boys in the cloister and the multiplication of books to stock the library.

Most of the energies of monks engaged in writing would be devoted to making copies of approved texts or standard authorities. If exemplars were needed, they could be borrowed from other monasteries. Since pen, ink, and parchment were the sole materials of production, books such as those mentioned in the

were rare and costly objects in the medieval world. Men used them as security for loans, and they were often passed on by pious bequest – they figure conspicuously in the wills of bishops and other higher clergy. A complete Old Testament, which was generally sold with the standard gloss, might cost more than the total annual stipend of a country priest. A whole flock of sheep would be needed to provide the parchment for it. Understandably, therefore, some abbeyes demanded a deposit before lending books. 'Send by the bearer of these present letters', writes Peter the Venerable to the monks of the Grande Chartreuse, 'or by some other trustworthy person securities for the books I have sent – not as a pledge for their better preservation, but so that the orders of our father St Hugh relating to such loans may be observed.'⁶

It was not only the humble copyists of texts who worked in the scriptorium of course. The regulated leisure of the cloister offered the ideal conditions for authorship. The evidence lies in the product. The monastic writing-office was the factory that, until the twelfth century, produced the great majority of the literary works, secular as well as sacred, that filled the libraries of the Middle Ages. Abbo of Fleury (d. 1004), grammarian, mathematician, historian, and hagiographer to Fulbert of Chartres ('the most famous master of all France'), held that, after prayer and fasting, the practice of literary composition did most to bridle the lusts of the flesh.⁷

Although the community itself had first call on the resources of the scriptorium, monastic scribes also provided important services for the outside world. Both in France and pre-Conquest England, early rulers who possessed no organised chanceries of their own made use of the scriptoria of the abbeyes to write their letters and diplomas. Abbot Hilduin of Saint-Denis was arch-chaplain to Louis the Pious, and the abbey supplied the emperor with a writing-office. But besides such periodic help to princes, the monasteries performed an essential service for the world of letters by reproducing books to order for scholars or secular patrons. Some houses acquired a reputation for the technical excellence of their calligraphy and the beauty of the illumination and miniature painting with which they decorated their manuscripts. It was, of course, a source of income to the monastery; the person who ordered the book paid for the labour, and sometimes he supplied the necessary parchment. Canon Hillin of Cologne, when he commissioned a text of the four Gospels from the tenth-century workshop of Reichenau abbey, apparently sent the monks the parchment already cut and made up into quires.⁸

Reichenau in the tenth century, like St Augustine's Canterbury in the twelfth, was famous for the sumptuous quality of its painted manuscripts. But the monks produced utilitarian copies of texts as well as the more colourful display books. In fact, until the rise of the university stationers in the thirteenth century, who specialised in the rapid reproduction of cheap texts for use in the schools, the monasteries had a virtual monopoly of book production. As time went on, however, the pressure of demand made it necessary to supplement the efforts of the

monk copyists by employing professional scribes, who were paid a salary or pro rata wages out of the monastic coffers.

The monastic timetable allocated two periods of the day to reading or writing, one in the morning hours before the midday office, and the second in the afternoon between Nones and Vespers. The hour of dinner – the main meal of the day – varied according to the season. In the summer months, beginning with Easter, it was eaten soon after midday following the high mass; and there was a second meal in the evening after Vespers. In the shorter days of winter the timetable allowed for only a single meal, which was served rather later in the afternoon, but some other form of solid refreshment or a drink of wine was given before Compline and departure to bed. Meals, like other activities, had their ritual. After washing their hands, all entered the refectory, where places were allocated by strict rules of seniority, and remained standing until the arrival of the abbot or prior, who pronounced or chanted the blessing and presided at the high table. The meal was served and eaten in silence except for the voice of the lector who read to the community from a lection or pulpit.

The preservation of silence in which prayer and reflection could flourish was one of the primary aims of all monastic observance. After the morning chapter and after dinner in the afternoon there were periods of the day when conversation was permitted in the cloister. The calefactory – the chamber off the cloister with the great fireplace, where chilled bodies could be warmed before retreat to bed – was also a meeting point for chatting. But in church, refectory, an dormitory, silence was perpetually observed, broken only by the chant and the public reading by the lectors. Some latitude was allowed to individual officers of the community engaged in business or to the head of the house who might be entertaining guests in his own quarters; but with Compline all talking had to cease. The silence of Cluny in the early days was proverbial. An elaborately sign-language, a kind of deaf-and-dumb alphabet, evolved so that a monk could express his needs without speaking. 'The novice must needs learn the signs with diligence,' explains Ulrich, 'for after he has joined the community he is very rarely allowed to speak.' A request for bread was indicated by a circular motion made with the thumb and first two fingers of both hands; fish was signified by motion of the hand simulating the tail of a fish moving through water; trout was the same, but in addition the finger was drawn from eyebrow to eyebrow (a sign indicating that even if no meat was eaten at Cluny, the table did not lack some variety); to ask for milk, the lips were touched with the little finger, 'because thus does an infant suck'.⁹ A monk who wanted to confess and receive absolution approached a priest of his choice and, standing before him, indicated his wish by drawing his right hand from his scapular and placing it on his chest; whereupon the priest would rise and lead him into the chapterhouse to hear his confession.

The rules of silence must have done something to mitigate what strikes a modern student as one of the most oppressive aspects of life in a medieval monastery – the total lack of privacy. It was not only that the individual slept, ate, and moved

about in the constant company of others; even such humdrum personal activities as shaving and taking baths were closely supervised communal exercises. Shaving was reserved for the eve of major festivals, so that during the last days of Lent before Easter the community must have presented an exceedingly shaggy appearance. At Cluny the razors were kept locked in a cupboard beside the entrance to the dormitory, to be produced when a general shave took place. The brethren sat in lines along the cloister wall and passed round the razors and bowls. The operation was preceded by the recitation of psalms and collects. At St Augustine's Canterbury, the monks shaved one another but, as the chronicler explained, the wounds they inflicted on each other's faces by their inept hands were so bad that Abbot Roger of Chichester imported lay barbers to do the job.¹⁰

The Benedictine Rule urged that bathing was a practice to be discouraged except for those who were sick. The medieval customaries commonly ordained baths three times a year, before the festivals of Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost, but always with the proviso that those who did not wish to participate need not do so. Lanfranc's constitutions for Canterbury lay down an elaborate procedure for the provision of baths before Christmas. The brethren assemble in the cloister and wait until the senior monk in charge of the operation calls them in groups to the bath-house. There each monk undresses and enters a cubicle shielded by a curtain where he takes his bath in silence. And even this moment of solitude was not to be prolonged: 'when he has sufficiently washed, he shall not stay for pleasure, but shall rise, dress and return to the cloister'.¹¹ An unmistakable air of anxiety hangs over the whole proceeding.

It would be a mistake, of course, to suppose that the monks themselves felt oppressed by the lack of solitude. Medieval society did not afford the individual much opportunity to be alone, unless he retreated to a hermitage. Peasant families occupied one-room dwellings separated, in many cases, from their livestock by only a partition. Townsmen lived in narrow congested houses; and rural knights lived and ate in halls surrounded by family, bailiffs, and retainers. Continuous company was the normal lot. The privacy we take for granted is the product of a more affluent society. As Heloise reminded Abelard when she was trying to dissuade him from marriage, only the very rich had houses with many rooms where a thinking man might find solitude, and scholars were not usually wealthy.¹²

The customaries set out an orderly routine covering every hour of the day and night. They made it clear what everyone had to do and when he was required to do it. What they cannot tell us, however, is the extent to which the Rules were observed at any given time. The history of most monasteries that were long-lived reveals alternating periods of strict observance and relaxation. Much depended upon the quality of the superior. Under an easy-going or senile abbot discipline tended to disintegrate. There were always those in a community who were ready to take advantage of such a situation. For, as long as the practice of

had been drafted. Some, when they reached adulthood, were able to rise to an ideal that had been wished upon them by their parents; others obviously sought to create a comfortable life for themselves in a predicament from which the medieval society offered no escape, except for a very few who managed to extricate themselves by obtaining a parish living.¹³ Nor were all adult postulants motivated by a simple enthusiasm for the ascetical life. Some sought admission to the monastic habit offered them the best prospect of status and security. Young clerks who had attended the schools, but who lacked the family connections necessary to obtain a benefice, might choose the monastic profession as an alternative career.

Apart from the question of lax observance, the customaries by their nature convey a deceptive impression of peaceful and undisturbed routine. This was a condition few communities can have enjoyed for very long. The evolution of monastic buildings, which look homogeneous to the casual eye of a modern visitor, often took several generations. In a thriving establishment was a constant process of rebuilding and enlargement. During the eleventh century there can have been few periods when the claustral peace of Cluny was disturbed by the sound of hammer and chisel, the creaking of hoists and clatter of workmen. The even tenor of monastic life was often disrupted by natural mishaps and by the violent intrusion of the outside world. A well-landed corporation could not hope to insulate itself entirely from the turbulence and political upheaval. Canterbury cathedral priory, like other English monasteries, suffered disturbance of its internal harmony after the Norman Conquest by the forcible importation of an alien prior and a group of Norman monks for some years racial animosity and cultural differences drove the two sections of the community apart. The life of the priory was also disrupted by the whole building operations that followed the Conquest. Its church was twice rebuilt in the course of the next sixty years, only to be devastated in 1174 by a fire which left the monks without a usable choir for more than a decade. Such mishaps almost commonplace. But community life underwent a gradual erosion which was less the consequence of catastrophes like this than of forces that sprang from the internal administration of the monastery itself.

Monastic tasks and their distribution

As St Benedict had envisaged, the abbot found it necessary to appoint a number of subordinate officers from among the brethren to assist in the management of the monastery's affairs. By the eleventh century a fairly elaborate chain of devolved authority had come into being in the greater Benedictine houses. A special task to which each official was assigned was called an 'obedience' and he himself was referred to as an 'obedientiarium'. In the first place there was the prior. Although the abbot appointed all his subordinates, as head of a religious community that was also a great landed corporation, he was a prominent

with public responsibilities that frequently took him away from the monastery. He might be absent for long periods in the service of king or pope or on the business of his own congregation. When he was at home, he was expected to entertain important visitors at his table. All this tended to separate him from the routine life of his monks; and during the twelfth century it became normal practice for the abbot to have his own house, with hall, kitchen, and chapel, within the enclosure. This development meant that the responsibility for maintaining regular life and discipline in the cloister fell increasingly to the abbot's second-in-command, the claustral prior. The bigger houses had more than one prior. At Cluny, where the abbot was constantly on his travels visiting his far-flung dependencies, there was a grand prior, charged with the general management of the abbey's properties and its relations with the external world, a claustral prior to oversee the internal life of the community, and second and third priors to help him. There were also roundsmen, called *circatores*, whose role was to tour the premises during periods of work and reading and ensure that there was no disorder or idle gossiping.

The various administrative departments of the establishment were entrusted to a lengthening chain of obedientiaries. The precentor or cantor was responsible for training the monks in the chant and the proper celebration of the liturgy and also, since he had to ensure a supply of choir-books, for supervision of the scriptorium. The sacrist had the duty of looking after the fabric of the church, the altars and sacred vessels, and he had care of the shrines – a heavy duty in abbeys that boasted famous relics and attracted a large number of pilgrims. The novice-master had the care and training of the novices. The almoner was entrusted with the task of dispensing food and other forms of relief to the poor.

Feeding the hungry and clothing the naked was an evangelical precept that was reiterated in the Rule, and most monasteries took it seriously. Pious confraternities distributed alms to the needy, and many towns endowed hospices to shelter lepers, but monastic alms-giving was the only regular form of poor-relief that existed in medieval society. At Cluny the almoner was assigned a portion of the tithes from the churches in the abbey's possession to enable him to meet the demands of his office. There was a daily distribution of bread and wine and twelve pies, weighing three pounds each, from the monks' kitchen. On *Quinquagesima Sunday*, all the poor who cared to come were fed with a meal of salt-pork. Besides giving food, the almoner also provided hospitality for poorer pilgrims and clerks who arrived on foot. And his charity was not confined to callers. According to Ulrich, he was expected to make a weekly tour of the township to seek out any who were sick and in need of food or medicaments. It was a practice that Lanfranc enjoined on the almoner of Christ Church Canterbury.¹⁴

The normal recipients of alms were the poor who congregated at the monastery gate. Thus in many cases the porter or gate-keeper acted as the almoner's deputy for alms distribution. At Beaulieu abbey in the thirteenth century, the porter was instructed to issue loaves and lefflovers from the refectory to those

begging at the gate on three days a week, and to offer hospitality in the hospice each night to not more than thirteen poor men. On Christmas Eve he was to give hospitality to as many poor people as there were monks in the abbey. On Maundy Thursday he was to admit the same number and give each of them a penny. But the almoner's ordinance distinguished between the deserving and the undeserving poor: the porter was told to issue the daily dole during time of harvest only to those unable to work – the sick and the aged, boys and pilgrims women thought to be prostitutes were to be given nothing, except in time of famine.¹⁵ Famine following on harvest failure would bring large crowds of the starving and destitute to the gates of monasteries. In normal times, bread, ale or wine, occasional pittances (a share of the special dishes enjoyed by the monks or anniversaries), and discarded clothes, were the staple commodities of monastic alms-giving.

The monk-chamberlain saw to the provision and laundering of clothing for the brethren. The supply of food, drink, and fuel for the community and its guests was the business of the cellarer. 'He should be sober and no great eater', urges St Benedict with understandable anxiety. Much of his time was taken up with the transport, checking, and storage of provisions from the abbey's estates. It was common practice to allocate to his use the buildings off the west range of the cloister for storage purposes.

Another sensitive appointment was that of the infirmarian. He had charge of what was, in effect, a parallel establishment, usually situated a little to the east of the main complex, containing its own dormitory, hall, chapel, and suites of private rooms. It was a monastery in cameo. This was because it had not only to house and nurse monks who were sick, but also to provide a permanent rest-home for those who were too old and infirm to take full part in the routine of the monastery. It might also be called upon sometimes to furnish quarters for the head of the house in retirement. As the Rule restricted the eating of meat to the sick, in times of strict observance the refectory in the infirmary was the only place in the monastery where meat was served.

In a great abbey like Cluny one of the heaviest tasks was that of the guest-master. He was in fact running what was, by twelfth-century standards, a first-class hotel, providing accommodation, meals, and stabling facilities, for a continual stream of visitors which included prelates, princes, and members of the higher nobility. The guest-house built by Odilo was a palace with a frontage of one hundred and thirty-five feet, containing forty-five beds for male guests and, in another wing, thirty beds for their ladies; but it was reserved for visitors who came on horses; those arriving on foot were assigned to a less grand establishment under the infirmarian's jurisdiction.¹⁶ As time went on, the senior obedientiaries, who had the heaviest responsibilities, delegated part of their task to subordinate officers, so that it came about that an ever-larger proportion of the community was involved in administrative or supervisory duties. Thus the

shrine, who was needed to manage the throng of pilgrims attracted to a monastic church that housed the relics of a famous saint. Some of the cellarer's duties were distributed among a kitchener in charge of the catering, a refectorer, a gardener, and a woodward.

Although all the obedientiaris owed their appointment to the abbot, in practice they acquired a large degree of independence in the administration of their offices. This was the outcome of a growing tendency to divide the properties of the abbey in such a way that a proportion of lands, tithes, and offerings was allocated to maintaining each office. This subdivision was encouraged by the habits of benefactors, who often made pious bequests to support specific departments such as the almonry – a favourite object for charitable bequests – the infirmary, or the guest-house. It gave each of the major obedientiaris control over a portion of the monastery's property and over the income from it. It was a practice fraught with dangerous implications both for regular observance and for financial stability. It meant that a group of monks were not only preoccupied with internal administration, but were also involved in managerial responsibilities that frequently took them away from the monastery, for estate management necessitated inspecting distant properties, interviewing bailiffs, hearing accounts, and attending courts. It was thus necessary to exonerate obedientiaris from regular attendance in choir, a duty that St Benedict had insisted was the first priority in the life of a monk: 'Let nothing take precedence over the divine office.'¹⁷

The devolution of authority and economic decision-making could also have damaging financial consequences. In the course of the twelfth century bad housekeeping or financial adventurism by individual monastic officers got some abbeys into serious debt. Cluny, whose estates were under the control of twenty-three monk-deans, was in financial difficulties when Peter the Venerable was elected abbot in 1122. Excessive expenditure and mismanagement of the demense manors had made it hard to keep the abbey supplied with regular provisions. It had to be rescued from this predicament by a reorganisation of the abbey's farms, and by generous financial help from one of its former monks, Henry of Blois, the brother of King Stephen and now bishop of Winchester.¹⁸ Crises like this were common among the Benedictine houses. In the thirteenth century there was a general move by ecclesiastical authorities – most observable by bishops in the course of visitation – to improve the situation by re-establishing central control over monastic finances. This was done by pressing each house to appoint a monk-treasurer and to set up a central exchequer, through which all income and disbursements had to pass, and by requiring an annual audit of accounts.

Recruitment

Although monks had in principle withdrawn from the world, the monastery was an organism whose roots were deeply embedded in the social landscape. Many of

still carries on its twelfth-century facade an open-air brick pulpit, the only and visible sign of a pastoral role it discharged to the surrounding city. richly endowed abbeys that were founded in the countryside usually became nuclei of new townships, created by the need of a large monastic community goods and services and the demands of a constant stream of visitors.

The most obvious link between the cloister and the outside it lay in its sources of recruitment. Throughout the eleventh and twelfth centuries new monasteries were founded and the monastic population continued to increase. The rising number of monks and nuns was a dimension of the general population increase that most parts of western Europe experienced during this period. In the second half of the period, growth was most conspicuous among the new orders of Cistercians and canons regular. Figures for Benedictines are hard to obtain before the thirteenth century and have variously interpreted.¹⁹ Some abbeys suffered a marked fall in numbers at the eleventh century; others, after a phase of rapid expansion which was often the result of local circumstances, settled down to a steady level of recruitment, vacancies caused by death, which continued with little change for the next hundred years. Canterbury cathedral priory, for instance, experienced a decline in applicants in the two generations that followed the Norman Conquest, but can be explained by the dispossession of many English landed families as a result of the destruction of their worldly prospects. Thus by 1120 the number of monks in the priory, which was about sixty in the time of Archbishop Lanfranc, had declined to one hundred and twenty. Thereafter numbers declined to about eighty and remained at about this level during the thirteenth century.

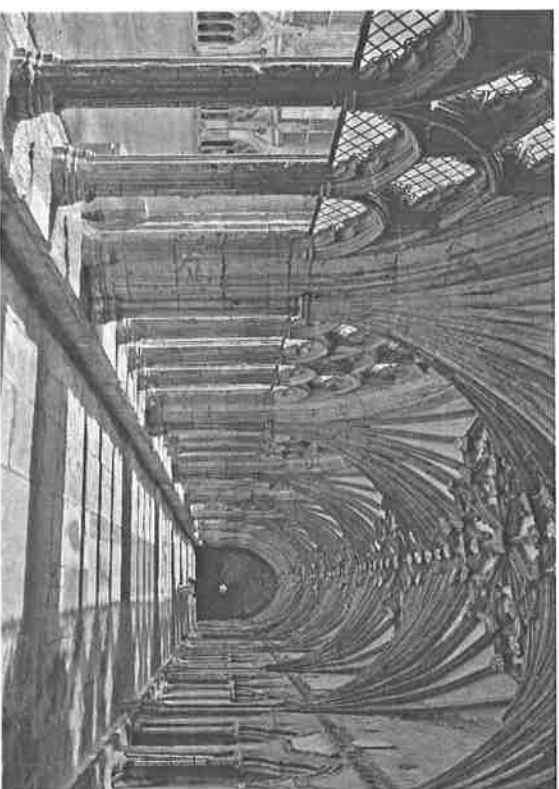


FIGURE 7.2 Canterbury Cathedral cloisters

Here, as elsewhere, the relative constancy of numbers over a long period of time indicates not so much a shortage of recruits as a determination of monastic chapters to match numbers to material resources. With this end in view, both Cluny and Cîteaux in the thirteenth century assigned to each house of their order a fixed quota of monks – a *numerus clausus* – which was not to be exceeded. Numbers at Cluny touched their maximum of about three hundred by the death of St Hugh. He seems to have admitted all who applied, without much regard to their character or suitability; but his successors found it necessary to adopt a more discriminating policy over admissions. By 1250 the community contained about two hundred monks, and it seems to have remained at roughly that level for the next hundred years.²⁰

Who were these people and where did they come from? As we have seen, the children donated by their parents formed one section of the monastic population. But the new orders of the twelfth century generally declined to accept child-oblates, and although the Benedictines continued to take them, the children formed a declining proportion of black-monk communities also at this period. Peter the Venerable regarded them as a potential source of trouble, and he reduced the number of boys at Cluny to six. The surge of new recruits to the cloister thus consisted largely of adult postulants, both clergy and lay people.

The scarcity of systematic records makes it difficult to generalise about their social origins. Some establishments, like the Swabian abbey of Reichenau, boasted of their social exclusiveness, but this was far from being the general situation. The requirement of noble birth as a qualification for entry was commoner in the men's monasteries and cathedral chapters of Germany than it was elsewhere. The leading figures in the Cluniac empire were men of aristocratic birth, but the rank and file were tawled from a more varied background. Most Benedictine houses appear to have recruited from their own locality and to have admitted men without distinction of birth, provided they could bring some form of endowment with them. The only class debarred was that of the unfree. But the property requirement, even if it was small, obviously meant that most recruits came from the ranks of middling landowners and better-off townspeople. One reservoir of recruits, about which we know too little in this early period, may have been provided by the local schools in monastic ownership. The chronicler of Bury St Edmunds tells us that his hero, abbot Samson of Bury, got his early education at the abbey's school in the borough, where he was taught by Master William of Diss, a secular clerk, who waived the fees for his impoverished pupil.²¹ We have no means of telling how many others made their first and most decisive contacts with the cloister through this channel.

Canterbury cathedral priory provides an illuminating case history of a large and wealthy Benedictine establishment which drew a significant number of recruits from the local township. The surviving rent-rolls reveal that in the twelfth century many Canterbury families gave a relative to the cathedral

obedientaries, were children of the more substantial town families – those of the borough reeves and the wealthier tradespeople, such as goldsmiths and mercers. The endowment they brought with them when they took the habit consisted of many cases of quite modest properties – a house or a plot of land within the city walls. Some of these recruits were evidently late converts to the monastic life. One of them, a monk named Henry, was the father of Hanno, the reeve of Canterbury. Another late convert, a leading citizen named John Calderun, retired to the cloister about the year 1176, while his wife was still living. He arranged for her maintenance by contracting with the priory to supply her with a daily corrody or pension of food from the monks' kitchen and a periodic provision of clothes. Thus many of the monks had relatives among the townspeople, including, in some cases, sons as well as brothers and sisters.

Possibly Calderun represented a category of recruits that was familiar to monasteries – that of the aged, the ailing or terminally ill, the death-bed convert. An unquiet conscience and belief in the efficacy of the intercession of monks for the living and dead prompted numbers of clergy and lay people to seek admission to the novitiate in their last years *ad succurrendum* – to obtain the help of monastic community in making their peace with God and to have the benefit of the prayers, especially the office of the dead, that the community offered for their own members. The prospect of a perpetual commemoration made burial in the monastery a coveted privilege. Princes and patrons who obtained it might hope for interment in the monastic church close to the spot where the blessed sacrifice of the mass was offered daily. Such was Queen Blanche of Castile, the widow of Louis VIII and regent of France, who in her last days took the veil of a Cistercian nun, and was duly buried in the nuns' choir at Maubuisson.²³ Lesser folk would make their dispositions in time could look for burial in the monks' graveyard. The monastic reformers of the twelfth century were generally opposed to the acceptance of these death-bed converts, whose residence in the community was necessarily brief and whose vocation was questionable. But the repugnance of Cistercians for devout observance made them a specially desirable refuge for ailing penitents. Clairvaux, in particular, attracted numerous retired bishops and some of them former monks of the order and others secular clergy, like Jd Bellsmains (d. 1204), who got papal permission to resign the see of Lyons order to die in the abbey, though he was never a professed monk.²⁴

The social and economic role

The Canterbury muniments give us some insight into the close economic contact that existed between a large monastery and a medieval township. By the twelfth century the priory had acquired through gift or purchase the lordship of nearly half the houses in the town and its suburbs, and the rent from these properties constituted a steady though minor element in its income. The economic converse of the priory's role as landlord was its function as employer. It provided

livelihood for a large number of the city's residents. On its payroll there were, besides upwards of a hundred domestic servants employed in the precincts, a multitude of professional people and craftsmen who provided it with specialist services, such as attorneys, physicians, goldsmiths, masons, and plumbers. There were, too, a group of residents who derived support from the priory in the form of a corrody or pension. Some of these were permanent lodgers in the priory.

At a later period, corrodies came to be a serious drain on monastic resources. Kings and other patrons occasionally required monks to provide a pension, or board and lodging on the premises, for retired clerks, domestic servants and soldiers. This form of exploitation, for which the monastery usually received no compensation, became more frequent in the thirteenth century. In England the practice reached a peak in the reigns of Edward I and Edward II. But there also existed corrodies of a different sort, which were purchased by the recipients. In twelfth-century Canterbury we meet a number of townspeople who have granted the cathedral priory a house or rent from a property in return for an undertaking to provide them with daily food and a cash allowance for the duration of their lives; sometimes the contract includes the privileges of confraternity and burial within the priory precinct. Frequently the purchaser would, like John Calderun of Canterbury, include his wife or others in the benefits purchased.

Canterbury was not unusual in this. From the twelfth century onwards, most monasteries granted corrodies to lay people, commonly in the form of an allowance of food and drink from the monastic kitchen; sometimes clothing was included in the benefits, sometimes accommodation within the monastic complex. In the Cistercian abbeys, those lodgers who were unmarried were often housed in the infirmary of the lay brothers.²⁵ Many of those who bought corrodies, either with a cash sum paid in advance or with a grant of property were men of means, who were still active at the time of purchase.²⁶ They were seeking an endowment for themselves on retirement or for their wives in their widowhood. In effect they were buying an annuity or endowment policy, and the monastery was discharging the role of an insurance company. Sometimes the beneficiary was a lay servant of the monastery, who was granted a corrody without payment as a reward for service, as was done for the porter at Canterbury cathedral priory. But inevitably the majority of corrodians were middle-class people who could afford to secure their future.

The town of Canterbury predated the foundation of the cathedral priory. As it was a royal borough, the monastery had no governmental responsibilities towards it. In this respect it differed from many of the satellite towns that grew up round the Benedictine abbeys in England and on the Continent. Population centres like these had been created by the needs of the monastery for servants, craftsmen and retailers, and the land they occupied had formed part of the original endowment of the monks. Where an abbey possessed the relics of a famous saint, the original nucleus of the settlement was augmented by pilgrim traffic,

given birth to the settlement, it was landlord of the entire town and acquired the advantages and duties that went with medieval landlordship. It not only leased the rents and managed the leasing of the urban properties and controlled the market; also like secular landlords, it had seigniorial jurisdiction over the tenants, held the borough court, and took the profits of justice.

By the year 831, the great abbey of Saint-Riquier had spawned a dependent township containing some 2,500 houses, all of them leased from the abbey in a similar situation existed at Bury St Edmunds, where a township had sprung round the abbey founded some twenty-five years before the Norman Conquest. The monastery had sole and undivided jurisdiction over the borough. So of the obedientiaries drew rents from properties within the town, but the 1 share of the spoils was divided between the cellarer and the sacrist. The cellarer held the lordship of the manor of Bury, which included receipts from millers from the sale of pasture rights as well as the right to the proceeds of the manor court. The sacrist had control over the borough; he received rents from urban houses, dues from the market, and tolls levied upon all merchandise passing in and out of the town, and the profits of the portman moot or borough court also had the appointing of the reeves or bailiffs who administered the town on his behalf.

Rent from urban properties constituted part of the income of most Benedictine houses, but the primary form of endowment from which they derived income was land. In the early Middle Ages, the abbeys were richly endowed estates by their princely founders, and these initial grants were augmented by gifts from kings and members of the higher nobility. But by the twelfth century the heyday of monastic endowment was past. Small gifts and bequests continued to be made, but as population growth pressed upon natural resources and more land was brought under the plough, the area of cultivable land available for charitable use diminished; and the lay aristocracy became more concerned with preserving their family inheritance, and more cautious about giving of it away.

Nevertheless, the estates of the more ancient abbeys were often huge in extent, and, as a result of piecemeal acquisition, they tended to be situated in widely scattered areas. These properties were managed in much the same way as great estates belonging to secular lords. The land was worked by the serfs, labour of serfs or villeins – peasant smallholders who owed week-work for tenements and whose bodies were at the disposal of the landlord. A portion of the manors that made up the estate was leased to tenants, who paid the monastery a fixed rent in cash or kind. The remaining manors were retained as demesne – in other words they were exploited directly by the monastery, which consumed the produce and sold any of it that was surplus to the needs of the monks. The primary role of the demesne manors of a great abbey was to supply the table of the monks and to feed the army of servants and guests. In order to ensure more regular supplies, Peter the Venerable recommended the monks to

manors of Cluny so that each group specialised in a particular product – some supplied wheat for the white bread, some rye for the bread of the lower orders; others specialised in producing cheese, beans, or wine. Each manor was made the sole supplier of its particular produce for a given period of time. Loudon supplied bread-corn for February and March; Mazille had to supply all the oats required for the horses at Cluny for a single night; Jully and Saint-Hippolyte had to supply the abbey with wine.²⁸

As landlords, monasteries were subject to the same economic forces as secular lords and responded in much the same way. After about the year 1180, population growth and the corresponding growth of demand caused a continuing rise in the price of agricultural produce and land values throughout northern Europe. Most landlords responded to these trends by recovering leases and extending their demesne lands so as to produce large surpluses for sale and reap the profits of the rising market. 'Yesterday I would have given sixty marks to recover the manor,' shouted Abbot Samson of St Edmunds gleefully, when they reported the death of one of the abbey's tenants, 'but now the Lord has freed it.'²⁹ The raising of a cash crop was becoming a major preoccupation. In the thirteenth century, Christ Church Canterbury organised its demesne manors into groups round a number of centres where the corn crop could be concentrated for bulk sale and shipment round the coast or abroad. The historian of its estates described them in this period as 'a federated grain – factory producing for the market'.³⁰

The remarkable thing is that as money and exchange came to play an ever-greater role in the agrarian economy, increasing numbers of landowners got into a chronic condition of debt. And the monasteries were no exception. Cluny was in almost constant debt after 1140, and by the end of the century La Charité and Monte Cassino were in a similar plight. In England, France, and Italy, monastic indebtedness is a recurrent theme of the chronicles and visitation records of the thirteenth century. The scarcity of financial records, and the complexity of those that do survive, make it difficult to unravel the causes of the problem. It does not admit of any single explanation. Lavish expenditure on building, the incessant drain of hospitality, and the burden of corrodies, were obviously contributory factors. Some houses that engaged in trade got into financial difficulties by raising loans on the security of a future grain or wool crop, which subsequently failed to come up to expectations. But the malaise was more persistent and deep-seated than this.

Grain prices – a fairly accurate barometer for the state of an undeveloped economy – reveal that the period 1180–1300 was a time of prolonged inflation.³¹ This underlying trend was responsible for many of the political problems of thirteenth-century governments, whose efforts to meet rising costs by taxing the property of their subjects encountered stiffening resistance. Monasteries were among the big spenders most affected by fluctuations in prices. A great abbey containing upwards of a hundred monks and perhaps double that number

consumer of goods and purchaser of services. Its attempts, in an age of growing affluence but persistent inflation, to keep up with contemporary standards of living enjoyed by the upper classes meant a steadily widening gap between expenditure and income. It was this chronic financial problem, rather than shortage of postulants, that imposed limits upon the number of recruits accepted by the greater Benedictine establishments.

Feudal obligations

The possession of land conferred both privileges and public responsibilities. Kings who endowed the ancient Benedictine abbeys with great estates expected temporal returns as well as spiritual dividends from their investment. Abbots vassals, enfeoffed with their lands in return for services. Like the king's lay vassals, owed their lord suit of court – the obligations of attendance at the royal court-council – and military service. They could also expect to be used from time to time as royal judges, ambassadors, or inspectors-general. Charlemagne and his successors constantly used abbots as imperial *missi*, charged with the duty of visiting counties, investigating the conduct of counts and other agents, and ensuring the emperor's instructions contained in the capitularies were being implemented.

It was the Carolingians, too, who began the practice of requiring abbot-supply contingents of mounted soldiers for the royal army. These contingents were raised from the tenants who had been enfeoffed on the abbey's estates. Early in the ninth century, the abbey of Saint-Riquier was supplying the imperial army with a force of one hundred knights. The contingents provided by German abbeys, together with those raised by the bishops, constituted the mainstay of the armies that the Saxon and Salian emperors led across the Alps in the tenth and eleventh centuries. In the summer of 981 Otto II, who had been raising at Rome for some months, decided to embark upon the conquest of southern Italy, which was under mounting attack by the Saracens. For this purpose, he needed to strengthen his army, and he summoned the prelates of Germany to bring reinforcements. A surviving list of the military quotas supplied on occasion shows the abbot of Saint-Gall leading forty knights to join the emperor, the abbots of Lorsch and Weissenburg set off each with fifty knights, an abbot of Reichenau with sixty; the abbot of Fulda also supplied a contingent of sixty, but he apparently left it to someone else to lead them and himself stay home. The abbots and bishops together provided Otto with a reinforcement of 1,504 knights, as against only 586 supplied by his lay vassals.³²

In the same way, a group of royal abbeys in north-eastern France supplied Capetian kings with troops. There are traces of this kind of military obligation in late Anglo-Saxon England; but it was only after the Norman Conquest that the English Benedictine abbeys were subjected to the full impact of the customs that had developed on the Continent. The Conqueror assessed lands for specified quotas of armed knights. The archbishop of Canterbury