"This is the best of guides to the world of medieval monasticism: a fresh, novel, exciting, detailed, reliable account of how monastic life developed over twelve centuries and of the many paths to perfection and salvation it created for both women and men. Medieval monasticism had its failures, but it also never ceased to surprise by its capacity to adjust to complex, changing circumstances, to establish itself as a fundamental element of medieval economy and society, and to cater for the whole spectrum of religious life from eremitical withdrawal to firebrand preaching. Here is an exceptionally rich mine of materials drawn from all kinds of historical sources and thoughtfully presented in the light of an exceptional understanding of structures and ideals by a wonderful scholar."

> —David Luscombe
>   Fellow of the British Academy
>   Emeritus Professor
>   The University of Sheffield

"The fruit of long study of medieval monks, ascetics, mystics, and the rules that they lived by, *The World of Medieval Monasticism* is a lively and erudite companion for any reader interested in exploring the many astonishing forms of Western religious life."

> —Barbara H. Rosenwein
>   Loyola University

"*The World of Medieval Monasticism* is the crowning achievement of the decades Professor Melville has devoted to the relentless study of medieval religious life in the West. Marked by a wealth of sources and shaped by the influential Research Center for the Comparative History of Religious Life at the University of Dresden, *The World of Medieval Monasticism* is an essential source in its own right for all those interested in the cultural history and spiritual inheritance of medieval religious life."

> —Timothy J. Johnson
>   Flagler College

"With this splendid translation, English readers have access to a lifetime of scholarly thought and reflection on medieval monastic and mendicant life offered as a coherent narrative. Gert Melville has long been one of the leading interpreters of monastic life in Germany and, at present, perhaps the foremost sponsor of probing new scholarship. This book shows him at his best as a sympathetic student of medieval religious life set, as a good historian would, in its social and material contexts."

—John VanEngen
     University of Notre Dame

"The doyen of monastic history has poured learning hitherto scattered among innumerable papers into the form of an elegant synthesis—a path-breaking sociological analysis of one of the most interesting medieval forms of life. Decades of scholarships and accumulated insights have been distilled into this volume."

—David d'Avray
     University College London
     Fellow of the British Academy

The World of Medieval Monasticism
Its History and Forms of Life

Gert Melville

Translated by
James D. Mixson

Foreword by
Giles Constable

This work was originally published in German as *Die Welt der Mittelalterlichen Klöster. Geschichte und Lebensformen* © Verlag C.H. Beck oHG, München 2012.

Scripture texts in this work are taken from the *New Revised Standard Version Bible*, © 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Unless otherwise indicated, quotations from the *Rule of St. Benedict* are taken from *RB 1980: The Rule of St. Benedict in English*, copyright © 1981 by Order of Saint Benedict, Collegeville, Minnesota.

For Marlen, Maximilian, and Niels

Contents

Foreword

This book will introduce English-speaking readers to the work of Professor Gert Melville, who has for many years played a leading role as a writer and educator in the field of medieval church history. As a lecturer at Munich, Frankfurt am Main, Tübingen, Paris, and Passau and a professor at Münster, Dresden, and Eichstätt, he has influenced countless students. He has organized many scholarly meetings and directed the publication of the proceedings, often in the series *Vita regularis* (which now numbers over sixty volumes) and Norm und Struktur (with over forty volumes). He has edited, or helped to edit, thirty-nine volumes of collected essays. He took the initiative in the creation of the Forschungsstelle für Vergleichende Ordensgeschichte (FOVOG)—the Research Center for the Comparative History of Religious Orders—which promotes the comparative study of the forms of medieval religious life. At the same time, Professor Melville has pursued his own research and published several volumes and well over a hundred articles on topics from Late Antiquity to the Early Modern period, concerned with the church and religious life not only in Europe but also in the Near East and America.

The present work distills a lifetime of study of medieval Christianity and covers an impressive range of material on religious life all over Europe for more than a thousand years. It concentrates on monasticism and other forms of religious life, including hermits as well as monks and nuns, canons and canonesses, and the mendicant orders. Professor Melville maintains a delicate balance between institutions and spirituality, between texts and charisma, and between rules and reality in religious communities, including the relation with the outside world of groups and individuals who have in principle withdrawn from secular society. In the late Middle Ages, the essentially personal element in religious life—the desire "to seek a direct encounter of the individual soul with God," as Professor Melville

puts it—inspired the new apostolic orders, communities of hermits, and lay associations of women as well as men. The older institutions lost much of their appeal, though they still attracted new members.

Along the way the reader meets a number of influential religious leaders and develops a sense of the personal and spiritual as well as the institutional side of religious life. The text illuminates the tension between individuals and institutions and contributes to an understanding of the real life in different religious communities, how they were organized and governed, and why they flourished at some times and declined at others.

Giles Constable
Professor Emeritus
School of Historical Studies
Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton

Preface

This book concerns those who sought the perfection of their souls and who were prepared, for that reason, to leave the earthly world behind. They retreated into a monastic community that to them seemed a safe haven amid the futile storms of the world, and there they subjected themselves to the strict regulation of every aspect of life in prayer, ascesis, and work. Such a way of life laid claim to the whole person. It required the absolute faith of approaching God in a way that secured spiritual salvation in the world beyond.

This book traces, from the earliest days of Christianity to the end of the Middle Ages, the many paths that men and women took to achieve this end—a journey that was an all-consuming struggle to adapt to changing spiritual needs and shifting cultural conditions. The history of monastic ways of life thus reveals itself as a multifaceted interweaving not only of experiments, of bold new beginnings and persistent reforms, but also of decline and failure. But in the end, it is the story of remarkable success, one set in a time when the Christian faith, as the bearer of hope for salvation from the afflictions of the world, was the foundation and measure of culture. The women and men of the monastery stood as a model for those who remained "in the world," a model that revealed to all that salvation was actually possible.

The book shows, from the perspective of the monastery, how such a way of life concretely influenced politics, society, economy, and the intellectual world. Monasteries offered themselves as a secure kind of investment, whether spiritual, political, or economic, and they often thereby fell into a dangerous dependence on earthly powers and into worldly temptations. On the other hand, the monastic world saw itself in principle as responsible for the salvation of mankind, and it performed fundamental services in that regard. It understood itself as a relay station, so to speak, between God and the world. Through

prayer, preaching, and the communication of knowledge, it sought to bring God and humankind closer together. Through care for the sick, the poor, and the forgotten, those in the monastery sought to follow Christ and to proclaim the message of love of neighbor through their own prominent example. Monasteries were an efficient, fundamental element of a medieval culture that nourished the roots of modernity.

The book paints in broad strokes across long stretches of time, traces particular ramifications, and ends with a presentation of the basic structural elements of monastic forms of life. In this wide thematic field, some things can only be treated briefly; the references to literature in the footnotes thus serve primarily to provide suggestions for further reading.

Abbreviations

CCCM	Corpus Christianorum, Continuatio Mediaevalis
CCM	Corpus consuetudinum monasticarum
CF	Cistercian Fathers series
CS	Cistercian Studies series
CSEL	Corpus scriptorum ecclesiasticorum laatinorum
Customs	*From Dead of Night to End of Day: The Medieval Customs of Cluny* = [*Du cœur de la nuit à la fin du jour. Les coutumes clunisiennes au Moyen Âge*]. Edited by Susan Boynton and Isabelle Cochelin. Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2005.
Ep(p	Epistola(e
Fontes	*Fontes Franciscani*. Edited by Enrico Menestò and Stefano Brufani. Assisi: Edizioni Porziuncola, 1997.
MGH	Monumenta Germaniae Historica
MGHSS	MGH Scriptores
PG	Patrologia Graeca, ed. J.-P. Migne
PL	Patrologia Latina, ed. J.-P. Migne
SBOp	Sancti Bernardi Opera. Edited by Jean Leclercq and H. M. Rochais. Rome: Editiones Cistercienses, 1957–77.
SCh	Sources chrétiennes
Schriften	*Franziskus-Quellen. Die Schriften des heiligen Franziskus, Lebensbeschreibungen, Chroniken und Zeugnisse über ihn und seinen Orden*. Edited by Dieter Berg and Leonhard Lehmann. Kevelaer: Butzon & Bercker, 2009.

Translator's Note

The basis of this translation is the edition of Professor Melville's book as it was published in 2012 by C. H. Beck. I have translated the text and notes of that edition into English, but Professor Melville has also expanded or otherwise considerably revised certain passages to better suit an Anglophone audience. The notes and bibliography have been considerably revised as well to accommodate an Anglophone readership and to reflect the latest scholarship. In many instances, English titles and translations have replaced or been added to titles appearing in the original work. Formatting has also been altered to reflect the conventions of Cistercian Publications and Liturgical Press.

I am grateful to the Department of History and the College of Arts and Sciences of the University of Alabama for their support of my work on this translation, as well as to Hans Christoffersen, Marsha Dutton, and the editorial staff at Cistercian Publications and Liturgical Press for their kindness, efficiency, and hard work in helping bring this project to conclusion. As ever, I am grateful to my wife for her faithful support and encouragement of my work. But above all I am grateful to Professor Melville himself, who entrusted me with the task of this translation. He has encouraged me, challenged me insistently, and worked with me at every step, line by line. His is a very refined and carefully crafted style, and I am grateful that he was not only thorough enough to save me from my worst mistakes in translating it but also patient enough to help me get it just right. Nevertheless, any shortcomings or errors that remain in the translation itself are of course my responsibility alone.

James D. Mixson
The University of Alabama

The Beginnings

Retreat from the World

"You should see it with your own eyes." With these words John Chrysostom (344/49–407), one of the greatest Doctors of the Church in the East, invited his reader to imagine the world of the monastery, where monks lived in the blessedness of Paradise:

> Their work is the same as that of Adam, when in the beginning, before the Fall, clothed in majesty, he communed intimately with God in that most blessed land that he lived in. How could our monks be worse off than Adam before the Fall, since he was entrusted with the building of Paradise? He knew no worldly troubles. Nor do they know them. He came before God with a pure conscience. They do the same. Indeed, they approach God with even more trust, because they are blessed with greater grace by the Holy Spirit.[1]

In these lines Chrysostom had already in Late Antiquity outlined the most important elements of a form of life that would come to shape medieval Christendom in so many ways. In a culture that both alienated and opposed humankind, and in which humankind could only hope to overcome the world through belief in salvation, these words were not to be taken lightly: "You should see it with your own eyes." They suggested that there were those who, though still

---

[1] Johannes Chrysostomus, *In Matthaeum homiliae* 68.3; PG 58:643ff; Johannes Chrysostomus Baur, trans., *Des heiligen Kirchenlehrers Johannes Chrysostomus ausgewählte Schriften*, 7 vols., Bibliothek der Kirchenväter 1:26 (Kempten and Munich: Kösel, 1916), 3:374.

living, had already entered the realm of Paradise and who, because of the power granted to them there, stood closer to God than all others. And to be close to God meant salvation. One could thus see monks as points on a moral compass, as exemplary figures, and as models for the fact that the hope of salvation could be realized. Yet the Paradise of the monks was attainable only through *anachoresis*, the renunciation of the mundane world. Only then could one lead an unconditionally religious life—a *vita religiosa*—that was both ultimately fulfilling and lived to the exclusion of all else. Thus the life of these figures—early on described, fittingly, as *religiosi*, "religious"—both provided a certain orientation for those who remained behind in the world and represented an unattainable world beyond.

The historical roots of this way of life are to be found among those who first sought to be radically free from earthly entanglement, as they stood ready to cross a decisive threshold. It had happened already in Egypt in the third century, when for many men and women it was no longer enough to lead an ascetic life devoted to God while also remaining tied to their families and communities. Longing to be set free from those bonds, they fled into the deserts beyond the banks of the Nile.[2] Liberated from worldly affairs, from the concerns of the church and their obligations to the overseers of their communities, the bishops, they retreated to caves, huts, or ruins in the desert, where they lived lives of contemplation, of penitence and bodily chastisement, of sexual continence and manual labor. They were clothed with cloaks, often made of animal hide. They wanted to be "angels on earth," and ultimately they followed a single commandment. It was soon captured, with enormous existential force, in one pithy phrase: "Wherever you go, above all have God before your eyes."[3] The hermit Anthony (ca. 251–356) is said to have offered up that expression,

---

[2] Martin Krause, "Das Mönchtum in Ägypten," in *Ägypten in spätantik-christlicher Zeit*, ed. Martin Krause (Wiesbaden: L. Reichert, 1998), 149–74; Susanna Elm, *Virgins of God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994); William Harmless, *Desert Christians* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Claudia Rapp, "Early Monasticism in Egypt," in *Female* vita religiosa *between Late Antiquity and the High Middle Ages: Structures, Developments, and Spatial Contexts*, ed. Gert Melville and Anne Müller (Berlin: LIT, 2011), 21–42.

[3] Jean-Claude Guy, ed., *Les Apophtegmes des Pères. Collection systématique* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1993–2005), chaps. 1–9, 1:102; Bernard Lohse, *Askese und Mönchtum in der Antike und in der alten Kirche* (Munich: Oldenbourg,

as the story survives in the *Apophthegmata patrum*, the "Sayings of the Fathers," a collection that was probably first written down in the fifth century in order to hand down his teachings and those of his like-minded contemporaries to their successors. That intention in fact yielded unimaginable fruit, since for the whole of the Middle Ages, the collection would be used as an introduction to monastic life.[4]

Anthony came from a wealthy household in Middle Egypt, and as a youth he had both administered the estate of his deceased parents and raised his younger sister.[5] One day he became fully aware of the meaning of Matthew 19:21 for anyone who sought unconditionally to follow the counsels of the gospel: "If you would be perfect, go and sell all that you have, and give to the poor." Around 270 or 275, he gave away all of his property and retreated first into the Nitrian Desert west of Alexandria and then later to a mountain called Pispir near the Nile and finally to a deserted mountain called Qolzum near Zaafarana on the Gulf of Suez. His contemporaries perceived him as an excellent model of the new kind of eremitical life, and an account of his life written by Athanasius, patriarch of Alexandria, did its best to preserve that image for centuries.[6] But Anthony was not the first, and he was not alone. Well before him, many who longed to flee to God had sought solitude. And among them the archetype of the hermits, according to the tradition handed down by Jerome,[7] was Paul of Thebes, who during the persecution of Christians under Decius (ca. 249–251) had fled to the deserts of Upper Egypt, where he embraced a life of strictest asceticism and supposedly lived to be 113 years old.[8]

Like-minded followers quickly gathered around Anthony and soon formed a colony of hermits inspired by his charismatic leadership. In

---

1969); John Wortley, ed., *The Anonymous Sayings of the Desert Fathers* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

[4] Lucien Regnault, *Les pères du désert à travers leurs apophthegmes* (Solesmes: Abbaye Saint-Pierre, 1987).

[5] Louis Bouyer, *La vie de S. Antoine*, 2nd ed. (St-Wandrille: Editions de Fontenelle, 1997).

[6] Gerhardus J. M. Bartelink, *Athanase d'Alexandrie: Vie d'Antoine* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 2011).

[7] See below, p. 14.

[8] Stefan Rebenich, "Der Kirchenvater Hieronymus als Hagiograph. Die Vita Sancti Pauli primi eremitae," in *Beiträge zur Geschichte des Paulinerordens*, ed. Kaspar Elm (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2000), 23–40.

the broad ring of deserts surrounding Egypt, and soon all throughout
Asia Minor, Syria, and Palestine, charismatically gifted men and
women offered their leadership as spiritual fathers and mothers (the
Apophthegmata called them *abba*, "Father," or *amma*, "Mother")
to the hermits who flocked around them. Most, whether male or
female, did not live entirely alone. They needed their neighbors, as
the words of Anthony suggest: "Life and death come to us from our
neighbors. For if we win our brother, we win God. But if we offend
our brother, we sin against Christ."[9] They did not live in spatially
enclosed communities, however, since every hermit, male or female,
lived alone, or perhaps in twos or threes, in dwellings they called
kellion ("cells"). They had no need of a properly formed religious
rule to bind them together. The gifts of the Holy Spirit were enough,
as Chrysostom had already emphasized. What mattered was an inner
consciousness of right, as well as the word and living example of an
abba or *amma*. Here they could find support for the mighty struggle in
which they saw themselves compelled continually to engage, a fight
for which they had to make themselves strong through asceticism
and prayer: the fight to turn away the demons who so relentlessly
attacked them but who in fact were nothing more than the temptations
of the hermits' bodily and spiritual passions, which sought to draw
them back into the mundane world. Hieronymus Bosch portrayed
that temptation masterfully on the eve of modernity in his triptych
"The Temptation of Saint Anthony."[10]

Most contemporary observers of this image may have recog-
nized—perhaps fearfully—that Anthony personified not only the
fear of losing one's soul but also the overcoming of that fear. Anthony
must have stood for them as a hero of the faith, because he had dared
to cross the threshold that led him out of the world and into the desert.

But had these observers of the late Middle Ages turned their view
from Bosch's image to look out on their own contemporary world,
they would surely still have seen those who were thought, rightly,
to have had a powerful faith in the world beyond. Yet the so-called
desert had become something fundamentally different. The desert had

[9] Guy, ed., *Les Apophtegmes des Pères*, 3:12; Bonifaz Miller, trans., *Weisung
der Väter*, 8th ed. (Trier: Paulinus, 2009), 16.

[10] *Schrecken und Lust. Die Versuchung des Heiligen Antonius von Hieronymus
Bosch bis Max Ernst*, ed. Michael Philipp (Munich: Hirmer, 2008), 106–11.

Demons, as the embodiment of his soul's temptations, threaten Anthony, in an image by Hieronymus Bosch (1450–1516).

become a landscape of monasteries—some still quite poor, but most provided with opulent buildings and fruitful estates, and most now banded together into orders that were present in every locale. And those who had lived in the desert had now become—whether enclosed in cloisters or moving about in cities and towns, in universities and in palaces—monks and canons, bishops, popes, scholars, and heretics. All of them would have assumed, in the depths of their hearts, that they still lived in the desert—in that other world, unreachable for most, beyond the decisive threshold between the mundane and the spiritual.

For the world of monasteries and orders that had grown up in the Middle Ages drew its legitimacy and its meaning from the very fact that it represented the world beyond that threshold. One could thus

with justification cite the Scripture, "In the house of my father are many mansions" (John 14:2). From its beginnings among the Desert Fathers, not only through flexibility and eagerness for enrichment via the adoption of new elements but also through a desire for renewal and reform that explicitly reached back to original models or that boldly laid hold of innovative ways of life, through all of the Middle Ages and beyond, the *vita religiosa* developed across a broad spectrum into a diversity that was soon hardly comprehensible—one that continually wove itself together organically into a braid and then divided itself anew.[11]

The sons of the Desert Fathers would soon be called to find new followers in the forests of Europe or to go back out into the world, preaching and teaching. They would come to terms with the representatives of the secular church hierarchy either by installing in its ranks members of their own circles or by getting out of the way. They would form various new kinds of community, follow their charismatic leaders, or allow themselves to be led through written rules and statutes. And they would argue among themselves over the best path to salvation.

Looking back on nearly twelve hundred years of history, it might seem astonishing that such complexity and diversity had already begun to set in from the earliest beginnings of the *vita religiosa*.[12] In the first

[11] For an overview of medieval religious life, see David Knowles, *From Pachomius to Ignatius* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966); Patrick J. Greene, *Medieval Monasteries* (London: Leicester University Press, 1992); Clifford Hugh Lawrence, *Medieval Monasticism,* 3rd ed. (London: Longman, 2003); Gudrun Gleba, *Klosterleben im Mittelalter* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgeschellschaft, 2004); Edeltraud Klueting, *Monasteria semper reformanda* (Münster: LIT, 2005); Karl Suso Frank, *Grundzüge der Geschichte des christlichen Mönchtums*, 6th ed. (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2010). Dictionary overviews are found in *Dizionario degli istituti di perfezione*, ed. G. Pelliccia and G. Rocca, 10 vols. (Rome: Editrice Paoline, 1974–2003); Georg Schwaiger, ed., *Mönchtum, Orden, Klöster* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2003); Isnard W. Frank, *Lexikon des Mönchtums und der Orden* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2005). Systematic overviews and introductions to sources are found in André Vauchez and Cécile Caby, eds., *L'histoire des moines, chanoines et religieux au moyen âge: Guide de recherche et documents* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2003).
[12] On the early phases of religious life, see Lohse, *Askese und Mönchtum*; Susanna Elm, *Virgins of God*; Martin Krön, *Das Mönchtum und die kulturelle*

third of the fourth century, again in Egypt—as we will see—men began to gather together in monasteries, and alongside the hermits monks lived coenobitically, with common property and in individual poverty. The first monastic rules emerged around the same time. In the fourth and fifth centuries, these religious communities began to be integrated into the episcopal structures of the church hierarchy. The roots of the process would establish themselves in North Africa at the turn from the fourth to the fifth century, when clerics living in the circles of bishops became so-called regular canons who lived in community like monks.

Communities of ascetics thus emerged in Europe (somewhat later than in the East) in Gaul during the fourth and fifth centuries. There, two different fundamental principles of monastic life developed: on the one hand a loose, charismatically inspired community that renounced every kind of material profit, and on the other a community that was well ordered, strictly organized, and economically successful. Finally, as will be seen below, another brand of monastic life was imported from Ireland at the end of the sixth century, and in remarkably successful ways it became tied to the interests of the powerful of this world. Thus already on the first stage of the journey through the Middle Ages, at least the nucleus of nearly every shape and form of religious life had already appeared.

The Establishment of Monastic Communities

A monastic way of life for those who had retreated from the world but who also gathered together in strict community is clearly discernible for the first time around 318/325. They sought to combat, as well as possible, the same danger that had especially confronted the hermits, who were in the end lone warriors against demons. The initiator of this communal ("cenobitic") way of life and the founder of a place in which to live it—a cloister in Tabennisi, a village near Thebes in upper Egypt—was the Egyptian Pachomius (292/298–346), who by that time already had rich experience in the eremitical life.[13]

Tradition des lateinischen Westens (Munich: Tuduv, 1997); Marilyn Dunn, *The Emergence of Monasticism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000); Henrik W. Dey and Elizabeth Fentress, eds., *Western Monasticism* ante literam (Turnhout: Brepols, 2011).

[13] Philip Rousseau, *Pachomius* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1985).

His sister Mary, similarly inspired, founded a women's community, since the cenobitic life had from the beginning been a safe haven for all who sought God, both male and female. Nine more male and two more female communities followed. Contemporaries reported that their members numbered in the thousands, since in those stirring times the desire for salvation was as great as it had been under Emperor Constantine (306–337), when Christianity had been able to emerge into public life.

With the strongest of ties to the Gospel, Pachomius wrote a rule (he called the text "rules," in the plural) for such a life, one that was to be led in strictest community and under absolute obedience to the authority of an abbot.[14] The aim was to provide a secure refuge for those who were too weak for the eremitic life but who nevertheless wanted to live as ascetics. The text is the oldest surviving rule for cenobitic monasticism. The core ideals it recorded—poverty, contemplation, and chastity—were modeled after the example of the hermits. But in the foreground of the rule stood a life lived in community.[15] All of the cells were to be found under one roof, and all who lived there ate together, prayed together, and worked together. The community lived in a strictly enclosed complex of buildings with a gate guarded both from without and from within—in other words, in a cloister in the actual sense of the word, a *claustrum*, a place "enclosed." Its way of life was regulated precisely. The order of the day was firmly established, alternating between periods of prayer, work, eating, and sleeping. And so that these crowds of monks and nuns (as they can now be called) could be directed in an organized way, they were divided into groups (with allegorical reference to the tribes of Israel), each with its various tasks and with a designated leader.

Those who lived in these early communities worked hard, so that from the proceeds of their labor they might uphold the commandment to have charity toward their neighbor. And because they worked with increasing efficiency, already in the lifetime of Pachomius himself incomes surpassed expenses and property holdings grew enormously.

[14] Armand Veilleux, ed., *Pachomian koinonia*, 3 vols., CS 8 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1980–1982); Heinrich Bacht, ed., *Pachomius, Klosterregeln* (St. Ottilien: EOS, 2010).

[15] Terrence G. Kardong, "The Monastic Practices of Pachomius and the Pachomians," *Studia Monastica* 32 (1990): 59–77.

The individual monk remained completely poor even as each community became exceedingly rich—and thus entangled once again in the earthly affairs that the monks had wanted to escape.

To consider the eremitical and the coenobitic forms of life together makes clear how remarkably they capture, in embryonic form, all that the medieval monastic life would then repeatedly take up, test, and adapt in new circumstances.

On the one hand, there were the principles of monastic life's organization: a strict claustration, based on the text of a rule, that sharply cut off the outside world, and a uniform, precisely ruled daily life of manual labor, personal poverty, common worship, eating, and sleeping, all guided by the unassailable authority of the community's superior—as well as an economic strength that could make a monastery into an important institution—and thus an envied one—in the world beyond its walls.

On the other hand, there were the basic elements of eremitic life: charismatic leaders whose aphorisms came to be written down, individualized internalization of the values of religious life, the absence of a written rule and of an organized order, spatially open forms of community with individual cells, and renunciation of, or at least total lack of interest in, economic success.

Another patriarch of coenobitic life was Basil the Great (330–379), archbishop of Caesarea.[16] He saw true Christianity as fulfilled above all through the ascetic life, a life he himself had practiced for decades. As a guide to the common life in a monastery he wrote in dialogue form the texts of rules that were shaped in a deeply theological way by both a call to ascetic renunciation of the world and strict adherence to the norm of the Gospel. At the same time, however, as a bishop he understood the need to integrate monastic life into the structures of ecclesiastical hierarchy within his jurisdiction. Already here an entirely new chapter in the history of the *vita religiosa* had been introduced. Whereas both the communities of hermits and the monasteries of Pachomius had stood at a certain distance from the hierarchical structures of the bishops' regulations, among the monasteries founded by Basil that relationship was of an entirely different nature. Two formerly distinct spheres of influence now came into relationship with

---

[16] Philip Rousseau, *Basil of Caesarea* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994).

one another: on the one hand, those active in the world and officially responsible for the growth of Christianity, that is, the bishops as representatives of the established church, and on the other, those who had recently retreated from such a world. Basil sought here to balance tensions that admittedly would never find a definitive solution, even across the coming centuries of the Middle Ages.

In 451, the Council of Chalcedon established a key legal principle: every monastery was to be under the direct supervision of the local bishop, and only the bishop's express authority could allow new foundations.[17] Later generations would continually appeal to these regulations, especially when they needed to arrest the powerful forces working against them. The "paradise of the monks" was difficult to reconcile with the burdens of this world.

In North Africa at the turn to the fifth century, alongside the eremitic and monastic patterns of life, a third lasting form of the *vita religiosa* began to take on its normative shape: the cloistered life of clerics. Augustine (354–430), the most important church father of Late Antiquity,[18] retreated soon after his baptism in Milan in 387 to a small family estate in Thagaste. There with his friends—among them his old and most trusted companion Alypius—he lived in a cloistered community of "servants of God" (*servi Dei*). In the following years he and his circle began to produce several religious rules. They would endure over time and would have a remarkable impact. Despite their diversity, by the Middle Ages all of them were drawn together and circulated in manuscript under the single title of the Rule of Saint Augustine. The complex origins of these texts are in part responsible for that unique reception.[19]

In 391 Augustine was consecrated as a priest in Hippo in North Africa; there he eventually founded another community for pious lay brothers. After being elected bishop of the city in 395/97, around 400 he wrote (probably for that second community) a short rule that was later called *Praeceptum* ("Precept") or *Regula ad servos Dei* ("Rule for the Servants of God"). A somewhat divergent recension of the text, also circulated under the title *Regularis Informatio* ("Regular Instruction"),

---

[17] Birgitta Meinhardt, *Fanatiker oder Heilige?* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2011).

[18] Wilhelm Geerlings, *Augustinus* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2002).

[19] Here I follow the foundational work of Luc Verheijen, *La regle de saint Augustin*, vol. 2, *Recherches historiques* (Paris: Études augustiniennes, 1967).

Augustine teaches his circle of students.

survives from that time, in connection with a letter of the bishop called
Obiurgatio ("Reprimand"), directed to a rebellious convent of religious
women.[20] It can no longer be said with certainty which recension—for
men or women—served as the basis for the other.

[20] On the women's communities surrounding Augustine, see Georg Jenal,
"Frühe Formen der weiblichen vita religiosa im lateinischen Westen (4. und
Anfang 5. Jahrhundert)," in Melville and Müller, *Female* vita religiosa, 43–77,
here 60–64.

In the meantime, the first community had received its own rule. Alypius, who had remained in Thagaste and became bishop there in 394, had returned home from a journey to Bethlehem with a collection of normative texts on religious life. In 395 he developed these into a rule—the so-called *Ordo Monasterii* ("Order of the Monastery")—and had them recognized by Augustine, who had of course been the founder of the community. From this text another version survives that was intended for women. On a later visit to Hippo, Alypius also learned of the *Praeceptum*, and by combining that text with his *Ordo Monasterii* he developed still another version of the text of the rule.

The *Praeceptum* and the *Ordo Monasterii* differ in both content and function. The latter text provided quite strict instructions for the course of daily life in the monastery and thereby regulated the times for prayer and work, the obligation to obedience, the importance of personal poverty, diet, departure from the cloister, and correction of faults. It was a disciplinary text aimed at the moral formation of humankind, in order to secure (as it says in the closing passages of the text) salvation in Christ. The text of the *Praeceptum* also of course contained practical regulations for the course of the day, food and clothing, property, obedience, and so on, but it tied these patterns of relationship to the obligation of cultivating community, of being "one heart and one soul"[21] like the Christians of the early church, who had all in common (Acts 4:32). A spirit of brotherhood, powerful enough to overcome differences of status between poor and rich, along with mutual reliance on God, forgiveness, and love, stood in the forefront.

As Augustine himself bears witness, the community revealed in these regulations came together after his elevation to the office of bishop, and its members were clergy of his church: "As all of you know, or almost all of you, our way of life in the house called the bishop's is such that we, insofar as we are able, imitate those saints

---

[21] On the later impact of this important phrase, see Klaus Schreiner, "Ein Herz und eine Seele. Eine urchristliche Lebensform und ihre Institutionalisierung im augustinisch geprägten Mönchtum des hohen und späten Mittelalters," in *Regula Sancti Augustini*, ed. Gert Melville and Anne Muller (Paring: Augustiner-Chorherren-Verlag, 2002), 1–47.

of whom the Acts of the Apostles says, 'No one considered anything that he possessed as his own, but all had everything in common.'"[22]

Any knowledge of the texts written by Augustine or those authored in his circle was almost entirely lost over the coming centuries. Already in the first centuries of the Middle Ages, the *Praeceptum* was cited only very rarely, and never in any prominent place—in the Rule of Caesarius of Arles, for example, in the Rule of Saint Benedict, or in the Rule of Ferreolus of Uzès.[23] Yet the reputation of this renowned father of the church as founder of a model community remained intact, and from the eleventh century on it led in fact to a new and special kind of cloistered life—the *vita canonica*, the regular life of canons, as those were called who lived in the service of a bishop's church. As distinct from the eremitical life (*vita eremitica*) and the monastic life (*vita monastica*)—both of which, although in different ways, concerned laymen who had crossed over to religious life to seek God in asceticism, poverty, and inner contemplation—here it was clerics who had also retreated from the world to live in a religious community shaped by asceticism and poverty but who nevertheless remained active in the world through pastoral care. The society of the Middle Ages would come to have great need of such men.

The First Monasteries in Europe

The story thus far has focused only on the Christian regions of the Middle East and of North Africa, a focus justified because the establishment of religious communities in the West was remarkably delayed. It is true that very early—decades before even Augustine— Eusebius (ca. 283–371), who was from 340 on the bishop of Vercelli (Piedmont), had drawn together a community of clerics at his episcopal court and lived with them in a kind of monastic community.[24]

---

[22] Augustine, *Sermones de vita et moribus clericorum*, PL 39:1569 (with citation from Acts 4:32).

[23] Vincent Desprez, "La 'Regula Ferioli.' Texte critique," *Revue Mabillon* 60 (1982): 117–48.

[24] Enrico Dal Covolo, ed., *Eusebio di Vercelli e il suo tempo* (Rome: LAS, 1997). For the development of monastic life in the broader context of religious and cultural history, see Peter Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity, AD 200–1000* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013).

Ascetic ways of life of a certain permanence, however, emerged only from the first half of the fourth century. In Italy, for example, aristocratic women who lived ascetic lives on family estates were guided by the *vitae* of the Egyptian fathers of the desert.[25]

The church father and translator of the Bible into Latin, Jerome (331/48–419/20),[26] played an important mediating role in this context. During the years 382–385, he wrote persuasively about the ascetic religious life of *virgines sacrae*, of saintly virgins and widows whom he actively supported in Rome. He maintained close personal relationships with many women—especially the widow Marcella (ca. 325–410),[27] who was from an ancient Roman noble family—and also maintained an active correspondence with them. He knew the eremitic life of Syria from his own experience, and he also wrote a life of Paul of Thebes, the model Desert Father. Drawing from this background but now tailoring it to the Italian setting, he wrote a long treatise on the preservation of virginity.[28] In it he warned of the serious dangers that so clearly could arise from the fact that the ascetic life was lived in a context surrounded by the world, with all of its social entanglements and temptations.

Other anchor points for a cloistered life set apart from the world had also begun to take shape very early on in Gaul. Taking the lead in developing a new model was Martin of Tours (316/17–397),[29] who after breaking off his military career had retreated with a crowd of like-minded followers to the desolation of the forests near Poitiers. Elected bishop of Tours, around 375 he founded communities in Marmoutier for both women and men to live a strongly eremitical life inspired by the model of the early church. The office of bishop, which in Gaul at that time was still overwhelmingly occupied by charismatic "men of God" (Martin was called *vir Dei*), had begun to

[25] Griet Petersen-Szemerédy, *Zwischen Weltstadt und Wüste* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1993); Jenal, "Frühe Formen." On later development, see Albrecht Diem, *Das monastische Experiment* (Münster: LIT, 2005).

[26] John Norman Davidson Kelly, *Jerome*, 2nd ed. (London: Duckworth, 1998).

[27] Jenal, "Frühe Formen," 49–53.

[28] *De conservanda virginitate*; Jenal, "Frühe Formen," 65–67.

[29] Friedrich Prinz, *Frühes Mönchtum im Frankenreich*, 2nd ed. (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1988), 19–46; Régine Pernoud, *Martin de Tours* (Paris: Bayard, 1996).

reconcile itself institutionally with the life of an ascetic hermit who had renounced the world.

The deserts of the East became the forests of Europe. And from the Loire region to the Iberian Peninsula, the number of monasteries that venerated Martin grew rapidly—surely not least because at the end of the fifth century the first Frankish king, Clovis, helped to establish Martin's cult and promoted him as a kind of "royal saint."[30] These "Martinian" monasteries were long left to a certain disordered spontaneity, shaped by the movements of wandering monks who left behind crowds of their followers in various places. Already the first church council in the young Frankish kingdom, held in Orléans in 511, demanded "stability of place" (*stabilitas loci*) of those who lived in these kinds of communities, which in the future could only be established with the permission of the appropriate bishop.[31]

Also in the fifth century, a number of communities both in the lower Rhône valley and on the cluster of islands around the abbey of Lérins (offshore from modern Cannes) turned the highly cultured Provence into another center of monastic life.[32] Above all at Lérins itself, founded between 405 and 410 by Honoratus of Arles, eremitical and coenobitic patterns had been innovatively linked in a stable form of organization. In contrast to the Martinian monasteries, this form offered an alternative monastic world[33] that later spread far into the Burgundian-Frankish north, to Lyon and the Jura. After its foundation, Lérins attracted the aristocratic elite of the region, as well as those from the northern regions of Gaul that had been lost to the Germans. Roman patterns of economic administration quickly turned the monastery into a prosperous concern, as had happened with similar success among the foundations of Pachomius. Here in a fully developed form was that pattern of development of monastic life that in the course of the Middle Ages would transform religious communities into centers of economic wealth and agricultural cultivation, and eventually even into focal points of power. This model was something other than the *vita religiosa* as the arduous way into

[30] Prinz, *Frühes Mönchtum*, 22–46.

[31] Prinz, *Frühes Mönchtum*, 91.

[32] Prinz, *Frühes Mönchtum*, 47–87; Yann Codou and Michel Lauwers, eds., *Lérins, une île sainte dans l'Occident médiéval* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2009).

[33] Prinz, *Frühes Mönchtum*, 88–94.

the desert or the forests, and the two models would eventually come into sharp conflict.

Lérins also provided fertile ground for the careers of future bishops, including Caesarius of Arles (470–542),[34] who became a monk at Lérins at the end of the fifth century and who then in the course of an energetic career as archbishop of Arles wrote two rules that had a lasting influence on the future of monastic life, one for the women's monastery in Arles of Saint-Jean, a community that he himself had founded and that his sister Caesaria led.[35] It is one of the oldest surviving rules for women. Particularly striking about it is that on the one hand it requires all of the nuns, regardless of their social rank, to live as equals and without personal property and on the other that the women remain enclosed—the insistence on enclosure not entirely new, but here remarkably strict, and combined with a rigorous insistence on remaining in one place (*stabilitas loci*) that was obligatory even for the abbess.[36] This kind of enclosure of nuns served to preserve the nuns' safety in those unstable times, but it was surely also meant above all as a preemptive measure to guard against sexual temptation.

Early on, the Frankish queen Radegundis established a community according to Caesarius's precepts at Sainte-Croix, which she founded in 558 in Poitiers and which was also easily one of the most renowned women's communities of its time.[37] Admittedly, the founder herself did not entirely adhere to its regulations. She never thought

[34] W. E. Klingshirn, *Caesarius of Arles* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

[35] Anne-Marie Helvétius, "L'organisation des monastères féminins à l'époque mérovingienne," in Melville and Müller, *Female* vita religiosa, 151–69, here 157–58. On the later development of Frankish women's communities see Franz Felten, "Frauenklöster im Frankenreich. Entwicklungen und Probleme von den Anfängen bis zum frühen 9. Jahrhundert," in *Vita religiosa sanctimonialium*, ed. Christine Kleinjung (Korb: Didymos, 2011), 71–92.

[36] Adalbert de Vogüé, "Caesarius of Arles and the Origin of the Enclosure of Nuns," *Word and Spirit* 11 (1989): 16–29.

[37] Josef Pilvousek and Klaus-Bernward Springer, "Caesarius von Arles und die Klostergründung der heiligen Radegunde," in *Radegunde—ein Frauenschicksal zwischen Mord und Askese*, ed. Hardy Eidam and Gudrun Noll (Erfurt: Druck und Reproverlag, 2006), 79–95; Helvétius, "L'organisation des monastères féminins," in Melville and Müller, *Female* vita religiosa, 158–59.

to renounce her noble customs but instead lived in keeping with her
status in a few rooms in the monastery, receiving guests in majestic
style. She also involved herself continually in the business of high
politics. In that way she was a forerunner of a pattern of relationships
that, despite all of the rules to the contrary, became common over the
coming centuries, especially in women's religious houses.

John Cassian (ca. 360–430/35)[38] is also worthy of mention as an
author of a rule. After living for years in Bethlehem and the monastic
communities of Egypt, he arrived around 415 in the still-thriving
port city of Massalia (Marseille). There he founded a community for
women, as well as one for men. The latter, established under the pa-
tronage of Saint Victor, came over the next centuries to be numbered
among the most important religious communities in Western Christen-
dom. Cassian recorded his guidelines for monastic life in two works:
On the Fundamentals of the Coenobitic Life (*De institutis coenobio-
rum*) and *Conversations with the Fathers* (*Collationes Patrum*).[39] Both
were among the most important channels for the transmission of the
foundational ideas of the Egyptian hermits to the West.[40]

The starting point for Cassian, as with Augustine, was "to be
of one heart and one soul," as in the early church—and as he saw
it monks were the only ones who still lived out that ideal. Led by
the model of the early Desert Fathers, he was convinced that it was
possible to find one's innermost life (and there alone to find God)
by turning away from the institutional church and the earthly en-
tanglements of the world—"avoid the bishop and the woman," he
said, perhaps with a sense of irony. In pursuit of such spiritual work,
which could only be carried out with fraternal assistance, Cassian
introduced as an aid to meditation the so-called praying of the hours,

[38] Columba Stewart, *Cassian the Monk* (New York: Oxford University Press,
1998).

[39] Johannes Cassian, *De institutis coenobiorum et de octo principalium utio-
rum remediis libri XII*, in Iohannis Cassiani Opera, vol. 1, ed. Michael Petschenig
(Vienna: Austrian Academy of Sciences, 2004), 1–231; *Collationes xxiiii*, in
Iohannis Cassiani Opera, vol. 2, ed. Michael Petschenig, CSEL 13 (Vienna:
Austrian Academy of Sciences, 2004).

[40] Andreas E. J. Grote, *"Anachorese" und "Zönobium." Der Rekurs des frühen
westlichen Mönchtums auf monastische Konzepte des Ostens* (Stuttgart: Thor-
becke, 2001), 193–329, 337–40; Thomas Merton and Patrick F. O'Connell, eds.,
Cassian and the Fathers, MW 1 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2005).

the responsive recitation of the Psalms, which for Cassian was to be done in the morning and evening. These precepts, shaped with great spiritual depth, are not to be thought of as a rule in a strict sense; rather, they represent a kind of normative writing that would play an important role in monastic life precisely during its periods of reform and renewal—writing that offered spiritually oriented admonitions, or *paraenesis*.

Another early focal point for monastic life emerged on the westernmost borders of Europe, beyond the farthest borders of the disintegrating Roman Empire—in Ireland. This island, long cut off culturally from the European continent, not least because of the Germanic invasions in Britain, was Christianized through the work of the Welsh missionary Patrick (who died, it is thought, ca. 463/93). Thereafter, a landscape of richly endowed monasteries quickly emerged.[41] The most important links in this long chain were the double monastery of Kildare, founded in 470 by Bridget, daughter of a king; Clonmacnois, founded around 543 by Ciarán; Doire (later Derry), founded around 546 by Columba the Elder; Finnian's community of Clonard, also founded in the sixth century; the monastery of Bangor, founded around 558 by Comgall; and the community of Clonfert, founded by Brendan around 560. These communities nourished the ecclesiastical elite of Ireland and helped shape the fundamentals of its political, economic, and cultural life. Clonmacnois, in fact, was for many centuries the spiritual and intellectual center of the entire island.[42]

What made these many monasteries distinct, scattered as they were across the entire island, was that they also became actual centers for the general organization of the church. In the largest monasteries there usually lived not only an abbot or an abbess but also a bishop. The office of abbot usually remained in the hands of a wealthy family, on whose estates the monastery was located. The abbots and abbesses

---

[41] John Ryan, *Irish Monasticism* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1986); Catherine Thom, *Early Irish Monasticism* (London: T & T Clark, 2006); Stephanie Haarländer, "*Innumerabiles populi de utroque sexu confluentes* . . . . Klöster für Männer und Frauen im frühmittelalterlichen Irland," in Melville and Müller, *Female* vita religiosa, 137–50.

[42] Annette Kehnel, *Clonmacnois—the Church and Lands of St. Ciarán* (Münster: LIT, 1998).

were the guardians of traditions that went back to the founding and preserved the charisma of the founder. The office of abbot was the highest instance of jurisdiction and administration. The power of consecration, however, lay with the bishop, who himself had often been called to his office by an abbot from within the ranks of the monks.

This surely remarkable variant of the mutual exchange between the worlds of monastery and bishop—an exchange that, as has already been shown so often, shaped the *vita religiosa* from the beginning—emerged from the idea that monks (especially if, as in Ireland, they were also ordained as priests) could be of more service to God than those who merely held an office in the church. The often extraordinarily stern ascetic life lived in Irish monasteries, as well as the systematic penitential exercises embraced there, conveys the image of the personal sanctity of the monk as a "man of God" (*vir Dei*). This monastic form of charisma reveals itself to have far surpassed that inherent in the office of the bishop. In Ireland monasteries thus became focal points for pastoral care, in turn requiring of their monks an adequate education—and thereby helping the island, with its broader regional connections to Northumbria, to become home to a vibrant and interwoven culture of the book that, for a time, far outshone that of the continent.[43]

Irish monasticism was also characterized by the particular ascetic practice of voluntary exile, of "wandering for Christ" (*peregrinatio pro Christo*).[44] It inspired individual monks to bring the life of Ireland's monasteries—and with it, by way of mission, the Christian faith—to parts of the British Isles that had remained pagan. An outstanding example of this dynamic is the career of Columbanus the Elder (532/33–597).[45] Born in Ireland and descended from the high nobility, he founded a few monasteries there, among them Daire Calcaich, today Londonderry in Northern Ireland. But he had soon to flee Ireland because of a feud that he himself had caused and that led to a war between noble clans. He made his way with a small

---

[43] Otto Karl Werckmeister, *Irisch-northumbrische Buchmalerei des 8. Jahrhunderts und monastische Spiritualität* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1967).

[44] Arnold Angenendt, "Charisma und Eucharistie—oder: Das System Cluny," in *Institution und Charisma. Festschrift für Gert Melville zum 65 Geburtstag*, ed. Franz J. Felten, et al. (Cologne: Böhlau, 2009), 331–40.

[45] Brian Lacy, *Saint Columba* (Blackrock: Columba Press, 2013).

group of followers to Pictish Scotland. There, south of the Hebrides, he founded a monastery on the island of Iona around 563 or 564. The community would become a leading center of missions to the pagan Picts and Scots, and also a royal mausoleum.[46] The monastery's influence, however, reached far to the south, into the lands of the Saxons, where Christianity had for the most part died out as a result of the pagan invasions. The impetus came from King Oswald of Northumbria (ca. 604–642), who in his childhood as an exile had been baptized at Iona and raised as a Christian.[47] Seeking to re-Christianize his kingdom, the king turned to that community shortly before 634. After a failed first attempt he soon received the monk Aidan, who founded a new cloister and a successful center for missions on the island of Lindisfarne on the coast of the North Sea.[48] A number of future foundations then allowed the influence of this community to reach into the kingdom of Mercia.

These missions, exports of the world of the monastery across northeastern England, had a certain parallel in the southeast. There the impulses came not from a largely autonomous Irish monasticism but rather by way of the Franks and directly from a mission initiated by the papacy. Its leader was Augustine, longtime prior of the papal abbey of St. Andrew's in Rome and now sent out as a missionary by Pope Gregory (I) the Great.[49] In 597, after a first failure only two years before, he landed on the coast of the kingdom of Kent and made his way to King Aethelbert in Canterbury. The king's wife Bertha was a Frank and a Christian; she had certainly lent her support to the mission, if she had not in fact encouraged it. Aethelbert was himself baptized and tasked Augustine with systematically leading his kingdom—now the most powerful in southern England—to the Christian faith. The pope supported that mission through numerous letters of

[46] Máire Herbert, *Iona, Kells, and Derry* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988).

[47] Clare E. Stancliffe and Eric Cambridge, eds., *Oswald: Northumbrian King to European Saint* (Stamford, UK: Watkins, 1995).

[48] Fiona L. Edmonds, "The Practicalities of Communication between Northumbrian and Irish Churches, c. 635–735," in James A. Graham-Campbell and M. Ryan, eds., *Anglo-Saxon/Irish Relations before the Vikings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 129–50.

[49] Robin Mackintosh, *Augustine of Canterbury* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2013).

instruction, through the provision of liturgical objects, books, and reliquaries, and through the sending of further missionaries. He also elevated Augustine to the status of archbishop of Canterbury, with future suffragans in London and Rochester.

Despite these pastoral tasks, Augustine did not forget his roots in monastic life. He founded the abbey of Peter and Paul just outside the gates of his city, thereby establishing a symbolic tie to the princes of the apostles in Rome and also consequently expressing the nature of his program. It remains unclear which rule guided the life of these and later monasteries. In any case the life of these communities was not, as one so often reads, a Benedictine tradition. The monks did follow a Roman rite for their liturgy, however, and thereby distinguished themselves sharply from the inhabitants of the Irish, Scottish, and Northumbrian monasteries.

The Irish monks' embrace of pilgrimage had a key consequence: from the sixth century on, the religious culture of the island established lasting bridges to the continent, above all in what had become an increasingly powerful and large Frankish kingdom led by the Merovingians. The earliest and also the most successful representative of this way of life was Columbanus the Younger (540–615).[50] Around the year 590 he departed from the northern cloister of Bangor with twelve followers. His arrival as a charismatic "man of God" immediately earned him the support of the Frankish king and nobility. It was thus possible for him to establish for the rapidly growing group of monks who followed him first the monastery of Annegrey, on the western slopes of the Vosges Mountains, and shortly thereafter, nearby to the south, the communities of Luxeuil and Fontaines in Dijon.

For these three monasteries Columbanus wrote a single rule that was based above all on acts of penance.[51] It envisioned a monastic life lived according to the strict Irish expectations of chastity and obedience, expectations that had as their goal the imitation of the

---

[50] Knut Schäferdiek, "Columbans Wirken im Frankenreich (591–612)," in *Die Iren und Europa im früheren Mittelalter*, ed. Heinz Löwe (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1982), 1:171–201; Yaniv Fox, *Power and Religion in Merovingian Gaul* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

[51] Adalbert de Vogüé, *Saint Columban. Règles et pénitentiels monastiques* (Bellefontaine: Abbaye de Bellefontaine, 1989).

suffering, humiliated Christ. Its communities were expected to live in almost uninterrupted prayer, and with prayer they would open the way, so to speak, for their ascent to heaven. In addition, Columbanus authored two so-called penitentials. These formally laid out what punishments and acts of penance were appropriate for particular lapses.

Such a harsh form of piety, one focused externally and driven by submission, was in its day quite clearly attractive, because monasteries recruited heavily from the ranks of upper nobility and, like Lérins, were fertile ground for cultivating the careers of future bishops, who also came from the aristocracy.[52] The aristocratic laity who supported and patronized these monasteries were certain that they had made a good investment in their own salvation, sustained as it was by the prayers of these strictly obedient monks. For premodern societies, proper form was often important as a guarantee of content.

Columbanus was exiled after a lengthy struggle with Theoderic II (king of the Burgundian region of the Frankish kingdom from 596–613), whom he accused of an immoral way of life. Columbanus then made his way to Metz, in Austrasia (in the eastern regions of the kingdom), and found acceptance at the court there. But he traveled further to Alemannia, worked there as a missionary, and then came to the Lombard court in Milan. There, in 612, on the northern fringes of the Apennines, he at last founded the monastery of Bobbio,[53] a community that later became a renowned center of education in the West.

After Columbanus's death in 615, his conception of monastic life lived on. Numerous monastic communities shaped by his tradition appeared across Francia, whether with the support of both the secular and the episcopal nobility or through their direct initiative—thereby revealing with remarkable clarity what would become a long-lived, essential element of the *vita religiosa* of the Middle Ages: the close relationship between monastery and political power, a relationship that often took on an almost symbiotic character and that was often expressed as domination over religious communities.

The seventh century thus saw an increase in the number of monasteries that remained, in terms of property law, in the hands of those who had founded them—whether kings, bishops, nobility, or

---

[52] Prinz, *Frühes Mönchtum*, 121–51.

[53] Michael Richter, *Bobbio in the Early Middle Ages* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2008).

sometimes even members of other monasteries—and who provided the appropriate resources, especially land and estates. The individual lords of each of these churches could dispose of the wealth of a so-called proprietary monastery in any way that did not interfere with its religious activity. They could even give their monastery away, leave it as an inheritance, or appoint its abbot, largely without regard to the rights of the local bishop. This institutional dynamic is visible as far back as the fifth century but saw its fullest expansion in the Carolingian era. In fact the church officially recognized it at a Roman synod in 826: "A monastery or a chapel that has been founded correctly according to the law of the church should not be removed from the lordship of the founder [*dominium constructoris*]."[54]

On the other hand, Columbanus's monasteries were able to free themselves from those ecclesiastical structures that had already begun to emerge in his day. Inspired by the Irish ideal of the cloister-bishop, monasteries could free themselves from both the local bishop's oversight and his prerogatives over the consecration and installation of abbots, even though the Council of Chalcedon[55] had granted that right unconditionally. Such monasteries were "exempt," that is, no longer subject to the power of their respective bishops. In principle, an exempt monastery might then be placed directly under the authority of the papacy—as happened for example with Luxeuil, or later, in 628, with the monastery of Bobbio in the Apennines. And with these events there again began to emerge entirely new conditions for the world of the monastery, conditions that would shape the future in essential ways.[56]

With Bobbio the story returns again to Italy and thus to a region that had prepared the ground for one of the most important turning points in the history of monastic life, even if it would be some two centuries more before it came to fruition. The story now turns to an abbot named Benedict.

[54] Peter Landau, "Eigenkirchenwesen," in *Theologische Realenzyklopädie* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1982), 4:399–404.
[56] Markus Meumann, "Exemtion," in *Handwörterbuch zur deutschen Rechtsgeschichte* (Berlin: Schmidt, 2008), 1:1451–52.