

Monastic Culture

The Long Thirteenth Century

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Essays in Honour of Brian Patrick McGuire

Editors:

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Back: Part of the ruins of Alvastra (Photo Lars Bisgaard)

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Introduction

Kurt Villads Jensen

The Medieval Centre at the University of Southern Denmark is the oldest medieval centre in Scandinavia and began shortly after the foundation of the university in 1966, as a loosely organised group of scholars from different institutes but with a common interest in the Middle Ages. Since 1976, the centre has organized an international congress each year in November, and the proceedings of almost all of these congresses have been published.

The articles in this collection were first presented and discussed at the centre's thirty-fifth congress in November 2011, the topic of which was *Monastic Culture in North Western Europe in the Long Thirteenth Century, c. 1150 – 1350*. The congress was held to honour Professor Brian P. McGuire who would retire from his chair at Roskilde University in the beginning of 2012. The topic chosen for the conference illustrates the research interests of Professor McGuire, but is also a contribution to an on-going research internationally and in Scandinavia.

In 2002, the Centre for Medieval Studies held its twenty-sixth Congress on early Scandinavian monasticism, which was an attempt to work backwards from what is known from the Scandinavian early Middle Ages into the nebulous preliminary stages of Christianity in Northern Europe.¹ It was a topic that had been the subject of a round table session at the International Congress of Historical Sciences in Oslo in 2000, which was among the incentives for deciding that the conference in Odense should be about monasticism.² The proceedings were published in 2006 and accompanied by several publications devoted to particular monasteries. 2003 saw the publication of an anthology on the Cistercian monastery of Øm in Jutland,³ which had been inspired in its choice of topics and research questions by a similar investigation from 1997 of the Cistercian mother monastery in Denmark, Esrum,⁴ to which Brian P. McGuire

1 Published in Bisgaard and Nyberg (2006).

2 Another important incentive was the publication of Tore Nyberg's book on monasticism; Nyberg (2000).

3 Gregersen and Jensen (2003).

4 Frandsen, Jørgensen, and Thortzen (1997).

contributed with an article on the background and the foundation of Esrum. In 2010 came a magisterial work on the history and architecture of Løgum monastery, which Brian P. McGuire has visited regularly for many years and to which he has introduced numerous students.⁵ Similar books on Swedish monasteries have been published after conferences and studies, e.g. on Varnhem and on the two nunneries of Gudhem and Vreta.⁶ An impressive and weighty publication of a conference on the Augustinian canonry of Dalby in Scania in 2010 appeared in 2012.⁷ In Norway, medieval monasteries were fewer, and recent research has with few exceptions concentrated more on single aspects of monastic history than on broader, general aspects.⁸ In Finland the situation has been similar, where much research has centred upon the Birgittine Order.⁹

Common for all these publications are not only a fresh view of the sources and new readings of old texts, but also an interdisciplinary approach and co-operation between historians, theologians, archaeologists, and scholars from other disciplines. The excavations of monasteries and the architectural studies of remaining buildings have been pursued without interruption since the late nineteenth century in Scandinavia and Northern Europe, and new studies add continuously to our knowledge. While this introduction is being written, there are for example promising excavations being conducted in pursuit of the least known and once most remote Danish Cistercian abbey of the Middle Ages, Ås monastery in northern Halland, near the very corner of the early three Scandinavian kingdoms. Nearby their sovereigns met at Kungälv (the *King's River*) in a collegiate Scandinavian spirit, one of the remarkable occasions of the early Middle Ages.¹⁰

The subject for this collection is not monastic history in general as part of the history of the surrounding societies. After each monastery had been founded, for whatever religious, political or economic reason, and after the foundation history had been recorded and put on parchment, there began the daily monastic work of all members of the community, expressed in the words *Ora et labora* – pray and work. The prayers of the monks have not been much studied in a Scandinavian and northern European context, and the work of the monks has

5 Sterum (2010).

6 Harrison et al. (2011); Hagberg (2009); Tagesson (2010). On Alvastra, see Regner (2005).

7 Borgehammar and Wienberg (2012). On Norwegian Monasteries, see Haug (2008).

8 Exceptions are Haug (2005); Haug (2008).

9 E.g. Uotila (2011).

10 The meeting at Kungälv in 1101 between the kings of Denmark, Norway, and Sweden.

often been understood as manual work on their lands or fields, rather than the spiritual work on the field of the Lord. This approach has been in sharp contrast with what medieval monks themselves considered as their main task. Therefore, monastic culture is the focus of this publication, as it was of the symposium from which the contributions stem.

Monastic culture and way of thinking made its imprint on the sources so familiar to historians: the normative rules and statutes of the monasteries, written or material evidence of the monks' cultivation of the land and their craftsmanship, or their copying of books and illuminating of manuscripts, bearing witness to their artistic ambitions. And not least to consider is monastic ways of organization. All these sources manifest the abilities of monks and monasteries in creating social networks, and in their own understanding they aimed for networks for themselves and other friends of God. Their desire was to link men and angels together before God's face and to fight the devil and the powers of darkness.

Medieval monastic world was a multifaceted landscape, physically as well as spiritually. No monograph or collection of works can do justice to all aspects of it or comprise its entirety. The aim of the present collection is rather to present and discuss a number of the fundamental themes to understand better how the monastic world acted and thought, both internally and in relation to the surrounding society.

One such theme is the manifold *networks* that connected different monasteries with each other or with other elements of society. Learned networks were established among individuals who became friends and maintained and nurtured the links for years, also if they were separated by geographical distance, or they were created by for example the new mendicant orders that systematically disseminated knowledge. Aristocratic networks operated on a more local scale and established links to monastic institutions by donating children and economic support to them. Economic networks also functioned as means of communication that bound monastic centres together across regional boundaries. Ecclesiastical administrative networks became common European ones and connected even the most northern regions with the papal centres in Rome or Avignon.

Another central theme in this collection is the concept itself of *monastic culture*. We have considered what might be included within monastic life from our modern perspective, but also and especially from medieval ones. Were monastic institutions preservers of ancient knowledge which was slowly accumulated and added to, or were they innovative in combining selfreflection with active participation in worldly affairs? How was monastic life described in monastic texts, and were sermons different when directed to a monastic audience from those directed to lay persons?

The chronological frame for this collection is the long thirteenth century, ranging from around 1150 to about 1350. It was a particularly innovative and expansive period in the history of Europe with economic and intellectual growth, which saw the foundation of a number of institutions that are still of fundamental importance to modern societies. These include universities, parliaments, guilds and confraternities, international regulations of trade and warfare, but also a new and distinct monastic way of life, adopted by the old orders and promoted in the monasteries founded by the new orders, many of which are treated in this volume. It was also the period of the consolidation and unification of a common ecclesiastical legal system that for the rest of the Middle Ages covered all areas of Western Christendom, as the last contribution to this volume demonstrates.

Professor Brian Patrick McGuire's retirement from his professorship of medieval history was the incitement for the organizers to devote the 2011 symposium in Odense to him in recognition of what he has been and has done for medieval studies in Denmark and internationally, both for professional scholars and for the general public with an interest in the medieval universe.

Professor McGuire came to Denmark in 1971, with a newly awarded D.Phil. from the University of Oxford and a perspective from a historiographical tradition very different from the German-inspired approach among Danish historians. His influence upon Danish historical research cannot be overestimated. Professor McGuire has been instrumental not only in making Danish history research more international, but also in introducing to Denmark and Scandinavia history of mentalities, history of medieval spirituality. In short, he has been instrumental in teaching historians to take medieval man seriously. Monasteries and their monks and nuns, the spiritual literature and its authors, the search for God and truth in the middle of tedious intrigues, poverty and discontentment, the great men and women of a flourishing medieval culture, have been close to the heart of Professor McGuire.

Cistercians have played a prominent role in his research. One of his first comprehensive studies was his book on the Cistercians in Denmark, which came out in 1982 after the publication of more articles on aspects of the same topic. McGuire was not impressed by the spiritual grandeur of some of the monks in Esrum and Sorø – maybe he was disappointed by seeing them involved in petty quarrels about farms or the yield of farmlands. His work expanded rapidly in the following years and includes not only several biographies of Saint Bernard and a brilliant analysis of the fifteenth century Jean Gerson, but also studies devoted to earlier epochs of the Middle Ages. Among Professor McGuire's many impressive works stands his grand oeuvre on monastic friendship with its revo-

lutionary insights into the sources of what kept monks together. The force of this indefinable metaphysic quality called friendship, the divine energy which Saint Bernard spread. In this book, and in his many other publications, Professor McGuire has delved into medieval monastic culture to an extent which few other modern scholars have achieved.

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