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MONASTERIES AND COLLEGES – SOME ASPECTS OF SOCIAL AND ECCLESIASTICAL HISTORY[1]

The monastic complex was one of the most remarkable uniformities of the medieval world. It has often been said that a blind Cistercian monk could have found his way round any monastic precinct in the Order; but what to me is more remarkable is that the uniformity with its centre in the cloister was only slightly less for virtually all religious houses and orders over a certain size, from, say, the 11th century until the coming of the Friars. The fact is astonishing, for it far surpasses any uniformity either in the rituals and customs of the religious orders of those centuries, or (so far as we know) in the building plans of religious houses before the 11th century, or after the Counter-Reformation.

On the origin of the cloister and the claustral plan the admirable volume of *Gesta* which printed the Cloister Symposium of 1972 threw many beams of light; and the picture has not, I think, much changed since then[2]. A cloister in our sense of the word first appears at Lorsch in the second half of the 8th century, and Walter Horn and others argued that it represented there the restoration for a monastic purpose of a Roman „villa rustica". The very few other monasteries of this period whose shape is known do not reveal a square cloister as the centre of the complex, until we arrive at the celebrated St Gall plan of the first half of the 9th century – perhaps of about 820[3]. It is now generally agreed that the plan was composed at Reichenau – which we should anyway know to be a great centre of influence in monastic observance and monastic crafts; and may be roughly described as a sort of Christmas card sent by abbot-bishop Haito of Reichenau to his friend and disciple the abbot of St Gall, portraying a well-designed monastery with every latest improvement. The major elements in it include a „claustrum", so called. The word occurs in St Benedict's Rule for the whole enclosure or complex, the area in which the monk is enclosed, from which world is locked out. Canonised by Benedict, this meaning could never be forgotten. The difficulty is to determine the moment in time when the other meaning, the central courtyard, became current, since in the large majority of cases in which it occurs in early monastic uses and the like it either clearly has the wider sense or is ambiguous. Paul Meyvaert has found an occurrence in the 8th century, but he has emphasised that this is ambiguous[4]. The first wholly unambiguous references are in the early 9th century, one in the plural „in claustris" which suggests to me a slightly different meaning from ours, the other „claustrum" in the St Gall plan. Here we have a cloister complete – with the church, dormitory, refectory and cellar set about it as in the fully developed plan of the 12th century; the chapter house is conspicuously absent. We know very little about the spread of the claustral plan before the 11th and 12th centuries; but the St Gall plan – though its survival may be due to chance – surely played an important role.

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[1] This paper is a shortened version of a lecture given in Westfield College, University of London, in February and in Amory University, Atlanta, to the Medieval Academy of America, in March 1984. This version is offered in warm homage to the eminent scholar for whom this book has been written.

[2] *Gesta* XII (1973).

[3] See W. Horn and E. Born, *The Plan of St Gall* (3 vols., Berkeley etc., 1959). See esp. I, 241–309; and for the influence of the plan, II, 315–359 (C. M. Malone and W. Horn); W. Horn in *Gesta*, XII, 13–52.

Over the eastern range of the claustral buildings there commonly ran the dormitory, sometimes stopping short to make space for the chapter-house, sometimes avoiding it by pushing it further east, sometimes, as in Cistercian houses, riding roughshod over it. The Cistercian plan, imitated by (or perhaps imitating) those of some houses of canons, allowed the dormitory to extend to the transept of the church, with a night stair leading directly into the church. Anyone who has helped to organise the procession of a large community or gathering knows that it is easier to form up in a cloister than on a staircase; the Benedictine arrangement made for a more orderly procession; the Cistercian fetched the monk more swiftly to his office.

The dormitory, in early days, was an open chamber. But documentary evidence makes it clear that some measure of partitioning of dormitories was not uncommon in the late Middle Ages; and this was part of the process for providing more privacy, more seclusion for individual monks. In the 12th century great households lived mainly in common; privacy was an occasional and exceptional thing; only hermits could count on it. But in the 14th and 15th centuries there was at least a tendency towards a greater multiplicity of smaller rooms in any large house, and this could in some cases mean a genuine measure of privacy[5].

On the south side of the cloister – or the north, where the cloister itself lay to the north of the church – was almost invariably sited the refectory and kitchen, and the calefactory. The refectory enshrined the ritual nature of the monastic life as evidently as the chapter-house. Outside its doors was the lavabo or lavatorium, the ritual wash-place in which the monks prepared for their frugal dinner, and often at other times of day. This is commonly an elaborate, even ornate feature, and there is no radical distinction between the lavabos of communities austere and less austere, nor much concession, in this as in other arrangement, to the climate. Somehad a bout resembliy a font or a fountain; frequently a large community preferred a long line of basins of a design which culminates in the lavabo at Gloucester[6].

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[4] P. Meyvaert in *Gesta*, XII, 53–59.

[5] Cf. the discussion in C. Brooke, *Medieval Church and Society* (London 1971), chap. 8, esp. p. 177–178.

The western walk of the cloister was still within the living space the processional way; but the buildings beyond it played little or no part in the common ritual and were therefore the most varied in the complex. Similarly varied were the other buildings separated from the main cloister, the infirmary and abbot's lodging. The contrast between the stable plan of the claustral buildings and the peripatetic abbot underlines the uniformity of the basic plan.

From time to time it happened that a community found itself growing up on a site not intended by nature for so large a complex of buildings. Most remarkable of all is Mont-Saint-Michel, where a peaceful community protected by the militant archangel from the peril of the sea has lived perched on a tiny hill top since the 8th century[7]. In the early 13th century a new range of domestic buildings was provided by a generous benefaction from King Philip Augustus; and so the Merveille was erected, a marvellous work indeed, with a perfect cloister perched right on the top – this we may take to be the apotheosis of the traditional cloister[8].

One could pursue a striking parallel in the development of the plans of castles and palaces. I have chosen for my comparison a group of buildings much more tightly defined in time and purpose and function, the colleges of Oxford and Cambridge of the late Middle Ages. They were designed for a very specific and relatively uniform type of community, built in two cities only 75 miles apart; and the period in which we are interested covers little more than 200 years, from shortly before 1300 to shortly after 1500. Yet we shall find no such uniformity as we have been inspecting on the larger canvas of western monasticism.

Students in late medieval Oxford and Cambridge lived in halls or hostels or lodgings or religious houses or colleges[9]. I am for the moment solely concerned with colleges. It is true that the vast majority of Oxford students, and a high proportion at Cambridge too, lived in hostels or halls, but very little actually survives and it has little to tell us. It is fallacious to draw absolute rules for the difference between a hall and a college; but a College was a specially endowed foundation intended to support poor scholars in perpetuity; in had a chapel, or a lien on an existing parish church, in which prayers and masses could be sung for the souls of founders and benefactors; in a word, a college was an academic chantry. The first faint beginnings of the first Oxford College belonged to the early 13th century; but the foundation which truly launched a College in antything like the form I have defined was Merton College, founded by Walter de Merton in the 1260s[10]. It owed much to Parisian models and its architectural form was slow

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[6] W. Swaan, *The Late Middle Ages* (London 1977), pl. 29; cf. C. Brooke and W. Swaan, *The Monastic World* (London 1974), pl. 249; *English Romanesque Art 1066–1200* (Catalogue of Exhibition, London 1984), p. 200–201.

[7] Brooke and Swaan (n. 6), p. 210–219 and plates.

[8] Ibidem, pl. 348.

[9] On Oxford and Cambridge, see C. Brooke, J. R. L. Highfield and W. Swaan, *Oxford and Cambridge* (Cambridge, forthcoming); meanwhile, on early colleges, *Highfield* in *The History of the University of Oxford*, I, ed. J. I. Catto (Oxford 1984), p. 225–263; *Victoria History of Cambridgeshire*, III (London 1959); and for the buildings, *Royal Commission on Historical Monuments, England, Oxford and Cambridge* (London 1939, 1959).

[10] See J. R. Highfield's introduction to *The Early Rolls of Merton College, Oxford* (Oxford Historical Society, New Series, XVIII, 1964 for 1963).

to mature. In the 1290s the parish church of St. John was rebuilt to provide a magnificent chancel for the College; the dwindling parishioners had to be content with what they could find. In the early years of the 14th century the first wing of Mob Quad grew up, to be followed in the mid 14th century by the magnificent Library whose structure still survives, with many of its books. Thus slowly there emerged in the mother of all the Colleges a complex containing chapel, student chambers, library, hall and kitchen; and similar groups were made for the other early colleges, most of them modest. The first complex to survive intact is Corpus Christi College in Cambridge, whose old court enshrines the complete conception of the mid–14th century. It shows us how students' chambers could be distributed with an ample hand about a modest court, with library and kitchen and hall incorporated. Only in this case no chapel was provided, since it was intended that the fellows should worship in the ancient church of St. Benet nearby.

The enclosed courtyard was repeated not long after on a much more substantial scale in New College, Oxford. Winchester and New College survive sufficiently intact for us to see with admirable clarity what William of Wykeham proposed for his colleges[11]. The influence of Windsor Castle, where he had himself worked, may perhaps be discerned in the arrangement of the quad, as also the influence of other academic courts similar to Corpus. It is deeply puzzling that this great man of affairs, and of dreams too, cared little actually for seeing what he had created; it is quite likely that he never visited Oxford after New College was begun[12]. Yet the mingling of the quad, with a chapel as splendid as Merton's, and hall, kitchen, library and students' quarters – and with a fine purpose-built muniment room and a great cloister for exercise, meditation and burial, represent a personal conception of a College, and reflect the mark of a powerful personality. They are a very striking combination of elements conventional and unconventional. The combination of educational purpose and chantry was by his date conventional; the scale of the operation, however, was entirely novel. True, the King's Hall at Cambridge was planned to house almost as many scholars[13]; but it had no complex of buildings on anything like this scale, nor did it comprise part of a double venture, like Wykeham's, of college and school. Fairly substantial buildings for colleges of chantry priests grew up here and there about the land in the 14th, and more in the 15th century; but there is nothing before Eton (which is a copy of it) which so displays what was thought fit and proper in the 14th century for what was in our terms a substantial primary school, essentially for scholars from the ages of 7 do 14 or not much older. Thus viewed it makes something of the same impression as Buildwas or Fountains or the Cistercian Abbeys – immensely permanent and commodious houses for communities of ascetic monks.

Most colleges were modest affairs for small groups (as we should say) of graduate students – studying for the later stages of the arts course or for higher degrees in theology, law, or occasionally medicine. Gradually in the late middle ages a larger element of students whom we should call undergraduates, working for their B. A., entered the colleges; gradually between 1450 and 1550 the colleges enlarged their mantles, absorbed the halls, and took over the universities. But throughout this period the basic manner of life, and many of the elements of the college plan, were unaltered. The unit of accommodation was the chamber; and each single chamber was designed to house two or three fellows and students, living together[14]. In the corners were cubicles for studies, in the centre an open space into which truckle beds could be erected for the room's company to sleep in; in later generations the arrangement seems often to have been reversed. Similar arrangements have now been discowered or deduced in numerous earlier buildings from Mob Quad at Merton in the early 14th century to the Legge and Perse buildings at Caius College, Cambridge in the 1610s. From the 14th to the 17th centuries the basic pattern was remarkably stable.

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[11] J. Hervey in *Winchester College; Centenary Essays*, ed. R. Custance (Oxford 1982), pp. 77–93; G. Jackson-Stopps in *New College, Oxford 1379–1979*, ed. J. Buxton and P. Williams (Oxford 1979), p. 147–192.

[12] Ibidem, p. 157.

[13] See A. B. Cobban, *The King's Hall within the University of Cambridge* (Cambridge 1969), esp. p. 44–48.

Thus the Oxbridge college of the late Middle Ages came to have a unit of accommodation entirely special and appropriate to it. But if we look at the master plans of the colleges, we find no such uniformities. The Cambridge scene in the mid-15th century is dominated for us by the two large new colleges of king's and Queens'. King Henry VI left King's a building site: the stately lawns hide a great area of medieval Cambridge, with parish church, small college, streets and houses, stripped for a mighty concept – a larger New College by the Cam. We know what was intended, and we can see in the immensely grandiose ground plan of the chapel – for the plan is Henry VI's even if he failed in the execution and left it to Henry VII and Henry VIII to complete – the scale on which he conceived it[15]. Like New College and its Oxford imitator, Magdalen, it was to have had a large cloister, between the main court and the river. The enormous size of the chapel would have altered the balance even of the plan of New College, but in other respects it was a faithful enough copy. Queens' was a grander version of the old court of Corpus which also incorporated a modest chapel – or, if one prefers it so, a much more modest version of New College. It was founded by Andrew Dokett, a Cambridge rector and academic, master of a hostel[16]. He early won Henry VI's attention and proved himself one of the most successful beggars of Cambridge history. With Henry's assistance he won the College the patronage and name of Queen Margaret of Anjou. Come the civil wars and the fall of Henry and Margaret, and Master Dokett, nothing abashed, attached himself to Elizabeth Woodville, Edward IV's queen, who became a second foundress. But Dokett was playing for yet larger stakes, and after Edward's death and Elizabeth's disgrace he won the ear of Richard III himself, who planned to increase the endowment on a princely scale. It was fortunate for Dokett that he died in 1484, and did not live do see his final plans destroyed on the field of Bosworth in 1485. The original court, comprising fellows' chambers, kitchen, hall, master's lodge, library amd chapel, all dominated by a castle-like gate, still survives virtually intact – with behind it the suspicion of a cloister leading to a lodging by the river which may have been intended for entertainment of the royal family when they could be induced to visit Cambridge.

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[14] R. Willis and J. W. Clark, *Architectural History of the University of Cambridge* [...] (4 vols., Cambridge 1886), III, chap. III, esp. p. 298, 304–311; W. A. Pantin in *Medieval Archaeology*, III (1959), p. 244–247 and fig. 88; Highfield in *The History of the University of Oxford*, I (n. 9), p. 255–256.

[15] Willis and Clark, I, part II, section VII; *Royal Commission* (n. 9), *Cambridge*, I, 98–131 (A. R. Dufty).

[16] W. G. Searle, *The History of Queens' College* [...] (2 vols., Cambridge 1867–71). On the lodging by the river I am indebted to the guidance of Professor J. Riley Smith.

Between Queens' and Corpus there is a clear resemblance, and the enclosed courtyard remained the norm until the 1560s, when that eminent physician Dr Caius laid down in his statutes for Gonville and Caius College that his own court was to remain open to the salubrious southern air[17]. From then on three-sided courts became for a time almost as fashionable as four-wn special needs – and the nave remained in a sense for theithese courts and quadrangles may look alike to us, they never achieved the measure of uniformity of the monastic cloister. In Corpus were grouped kitchen, hall, chambers, library and lodge – with no chapel; in New College chapel, hall, kitchen and muniment room, library, chambers and lodge; in Queens' kitchen, hall, lodge, library, chapel and chambers – all in that order. In New College the Warden sat over the main entry gate like a grandiose head porter; in Corpus he was set in a corner; in Queens' his lodge was set between hall and library, with a spy-hole into the hall. The apotheosis of the spy-hole was in the Lady Margaret' Beanfort chambers in Christ's College about 1500 which provided her with a secret view of both hall and of chapel. The common purposes behind all these variations are clear; but so also is the difference of a collegiate from a monastic plan.

The statutes of a medieval college gave the fellows or scholars little freedom or leisure – even though any reader of the annals of a medieval university knows how much time they somehow found to sport and riot in. They were expected to be constant in chapel services and in the schools; but their life was not a ritual lived in common to anything like the same extent as in the religious life in the 11th–13th centuries. Complex as were the arrangements of monastic enclosure, the main rooms were in origin communal. Comparison with the colleges reminds us how deeply the religious house had been founded on ritual. I have deliberately left to last, for our final return to the monastic cloister, the church itself. Evidently the church was the centre of this ritual, the place where it was most elaborate and most in evidence. Yet it is at first sight curious how uniform the basic plan appears to us, since different orders made strikingly different use of its various parts. It is clear that in the 11th and 12th centuries the nave of a great Benedictine house, like the nave of a cathedral – and in England especially a number were both – was open to the laity. Doubtless it had other functions, aesthetic, spiritual, and functional; it was the place for great processions and for all sorts of formal meetings. But it was also specifically that part of the church in which God, the saints and the monks met the laity. It is indeed remarkable that in many large monastic churches the nave is conspicuously the largest feature of the building; even allowing that the monastic choir stretched a bay or two into the nave, even allowing that naves were slow in building, since the sense of urgency could go out of the programme when the choir was complete, it is remarkable how splendid was the provision for visitors. Here is another story, of the relations of the monks and the world, of their involvement in pastoral care, of the friction between the inward and outward view of the monastic vocation[18]. If we turn to a Cistercian church we shall find the nave (in an architectural sense), scarcely less conspicuous a feature; yet the world was in principle totally excluded. In this case the nave was adapted, so far as present evidence goes, to provide space for the lay brothers' choir or church, separated from choir monks' by a solid if not spectacular screen – whose traces can be clearly seen at Buildwas, and which survives intact, if much restored, at Maulbronn[19]; and the aisles were given over to additional chapels for choir monks who were priests, as can still be seen from an early phase at Rievaulx. Thus the Cistercians adapted the traditional form to provide for their own special needs – and the nave remained in a sense for their own version of the laity. In their basic shape and planning therefore, in the relation of the various parts one to another, the central features of a monastic complex in houses Benedictine, Cluniac, Cistercian, Augustinian, Premonstratensian – what-you-will – retained an extraordinary uniformity, reflecting a common ritual pattern and a fashion which cuts deep into the spiritual and social culture of western Christendom in the central Middle Ages. This is only a partial explanation; there is much here which still eludes us.

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[17] J. Venn, *Biographical History of Gonville and Caius College*, III (Cambridge 1901), p. 364, no. 30.

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[18] See e. g. Brooke and Swaan (n. 6), chap. 6 and notes on p. 253, especially n. 10.

[19] Brooke and Swaan, pl. 238, 243.