

## MONASTIC LIFE

### The Monastic Tradition

The institutions of the village and castle discussed in the previous two chapters had their roots in native European traditions, either of classical Rome, or the barbarian tribes of the north. Medieval Europe was also profoundly affected by a third cultural tradition, that of the ancient Near East, imported to Europe during the centuries of Roman ascendancy. The medium for this influence was Christianity, which began its life as a sect within Judaism but soon attracted converts outside the Jewish community; in time it came to be adopted as the state religion of the Roman Empire and subsequently as the official religion of the nascent kingdoms of medieval Europe.

Judaism had traditionally been a religion concerned primarily with the present life and with governing conduct in the material world. By the time of Roman ascendancy in the Near East, certain sects among the Jews had begun to gravitate toward a more otherworldly form of spirituality, rejecting the things of the physical world as evil; most famous among these sects is the Essenes, the secluded community of religious Jews who wrote the Dead Sea Scrolls. Christianity drew on such trends toward otherworldly Judaism, as reflected in Christ's admonition to the just man who wishes to seek a perfect life: "If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess, and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me" (Matthew 19:21). The otherworldly aspirations of Christians found ample scope in the first few centuries of Christianity, as sustained official persecution made the profession of their faith an invitation to hardship, ruin, and



THE MONK EADWINE. Unknown miniaturist (English), ca. 1150. Illumination on parchment.



even death. The official toleration of Christianity in 313 and its establishment as the state religion in 380 meant that a new path had to be found for those who wished to seek salvation through hardship.

The new path lay through the deserts of Egypt. Already before the edict of toleration, it appears that some Christians in Egypt were retiring from the world to the solitude of the desert. The Greek word for desert, *eremia*, gave these recluses the name "hermits." Their course of life attracted even more followers in the fourth century, and before long there were communities of hermits living semisolitary lives in loose association, gathering only for communal religious services. Some of these communities began to adopt a more formalized structure, living under the authority of an older, experienced hermit, called *abba*, the Syriac and Aramaic word for father (hence the word "abbot"). Such a community was known in Greek as a *koinobion*, "communal way of life," and its members were termed coenobites, but their origin as solitary hermits was reflected in an alternative term, *monachos*, from the Greek *monos*, "one," the origin of the English word monk.

During the fourth and fifth centuries, these institutions were exported to other parts of the Roman Empire, including Western Europe. Eventually, Western monasticism acquired a definitive shape, articulated by Saint Benedict of Nursia in the sixth century. Benedict, an Italian abbot, laid out a plan for monastic life and organization that ultimately became the standard in Western Europe. Benedictine monasticism was ascetic, requiring monks to live with minimal possessions, simple food, and austere accommodations, yet it avoided the excesses of heroic self-denial, stressing instead the role of communal cooperation as a means of achieving personal spiritual improvement. Benedict's rule for monastic life was concise and pragmatic, offering both a viable organizational structure and a healthy degree of flexibility. The Benedictine monk sought communion with God through a combination of physical labor and a daily cycle of communal worship that came to be known as the Divine Office. Over time, the Divine Office took precedence over other monastic activities, although some forms of work, particularly reading and writing, continued to play an important part in the monastic routine and ethos.



THE CONSECRATION OF CLUNY ABBEY by Pope Urban II, a former Cluniac monk, in 1095. Illumination from a Book of Offices, twelfth century.

Among the Benedictine monasteries of high medieval Europe, Cluny, lying in the Burgundy region of France, was of outstanding importance and influence. Very little of the medieval monastery survives, as most of the complex was dismantled during the French Revolution, but the site has been excavated in the twentieth century, revealing a great deal of detail about its physical layout, and the life of its inhabitants is richly documented in surviving texts from the Middle Ages. Although Cluny's extraordinary wealth and importance set it apart from most other monasteries of the period, they also made it a particularly complete example of the monastic ideal. As an unusually rich establishment, Cluny was

able to afford multiple renovations and improvements that continually changed its appearance during the centuries of the High Middle Ages. This chapter will focus on the monastery as it was in the early twelfth century.<sup>1</sup>

### Monastic Orders

The earliest monasteries were communities of laymen. By the High Middle Ages, it was common for monks to be priests as well, but monasticism and priesthood were oriented toward different goals. The priest served principally as an intermediary between God and man, while the monk sought to achieve spiritual purity. The monks were termed "regular" clergy, meaning that they lived a communal life according to an established set of regulations, called a monastic rule (in Latin, *regula*). Those monasteries that followed the rule of St. Benedict were considered part of the Benedictine order, although there was no unifying organizational structure among them beyond the rule itself. There was some leeway in how the rule was interpreted, and in many cases the monastery codified its interpretation and elaboration of the rule as a "customal," essentially a set of by-laws that applied to that monastery alone. Our knowledge of life at Cluny around the year 1100 owes much to a customal compiled by the monk Ulrich in the late eleventh century.

For most of the early Middle Ages, the Benedictines were the only monastic order in Western Europe. Over the centuries, monasteries of the order became lax in applying the rule and less vigorous in their sense of religious vocation, and in the tenth century a major reform movement was initiated with the founding of Cluny. Cluny's first abbot was energetic and enthusiastic, and brought a renewed sense of zeal and discipline to the monastic world. Over the next two centuries, many new monasteries were established under Cluny's guidance, while older ones were placed under the authority of Cluny to help them reform. Cluniac monasteries still used the Benedictine rule and belonged to the Benedictine order, but where previously every Benedictine monastery had been a self-contained unit, Cluny sought to maintain its reformed version of Benedictinism by retaining authority over the monasteries it founded or reformed.

The Cluniac movement emphasized stricter adherence to the Benedictine rule, but there were many who saw the enormous wealth, power, and feudal involvement of Benedictine monasteries as grave obstacles to a virtuous life. Partly in response to Cluny, a new reform movement arose toward the end of the eleventh century at the nearby abbey of Cîteaux. The Cistercians established a new rule of their own, rejecting the opulence of the traditional Benedictine monastery and its reliance on income from feudal manors. The new Cistercian monasteries were much plainer in decoration, and the monks made their living by farming their own lands through hired labor and lay brothers, members of the monastic community who lived semimonastic lives, but were not actually monks.

Other reform movements led to the founding of additional monastic orders, and there were also other organizations that emulated the monastic ideal. It became increasingly common for cathedral canons to adopt a communal style of life under a formal rule, and eventually these "canons regular" established houses of their own, institutions that in some cases were hardly distinguishable from monasteries. In the twelfth century, the crusading zeal of the European aristocracy was conjoined with monastic asceticism and organization to create the military orders of the Templars and Hospitallers, knights who lived in communities under a quasi-monastic rule, but whose primary purpose was warfare in defense of the Christian states established by the Crusaders in the Holy Lands. In the thirteenth century, the revitalization of urban life fostered new versions of communal living in the form of the mendicant orders, or friars, discussed in Chapter 7.

### ORGANIZATION

Monasteries varied greatly in size. Cluny's population rose from 200 monks in the mid-eleventh century to 460 in the mid-twelfth, and even after the population declined again to 200 a century later, Cluny remained an outstandingly large establishment. Something under a hundred monks was more typical for a moderately large monastery. At the lower end of the scale, there were countless small monasteries consisting of a dozen monks under



the authority of an abbot, and even smaller communities not qualifying as actual monasteries, composed of as few as three or four monks living together. Overall, monks constituted a very small portion of the medieval population—probably well under 1 percent.

The potential size of a monastery was limited by its income. The physical facilities at Cluny were comparable to those of a major castle, and at its height, the population was that of a small medieval town. Such an institution required a substantial and reliable source of income, and as in other church institutions, this money was provided by endowments of property from the monastery's lay patrons. The properties were often in the form of rural manors, which the monastery held as manor lord, receiving income in cash and in kind in much the same way as did the landed aristocracy. Cluny's landholdings ranked it as a major feudal lord, and constituted hundreds of manors widely dispersed through southern and eastern France. Nearby landholdings were used principally as sources of agricultural produce to supply the monastic population. Cluny had about thirty of these holdings, called *granges*, most of which were within twenty-five miles of the monastery, although a few were up to seventy miles away. More distant holdings were administered as feudal manors, with the monastery receiving cash profits to support its operating costs.

Other patrons donated urban properties, yielding cash rents to the monastery as landlord. In some cases a patron might donate a parish church that lay in his possession, providing income in the form of tithes. All of these sources of support tended to entangle the monastery in the secular world that the monks were theoretically supposed to have left behind. As a property holder, the monastery had to manage its estates, and often defend its rights by law. Since manorial properties generally entailed feudal obligations, many monasteries were obliged to engage knights to serve the lords from whom the manors were held. As holders of parish churches, monasteries had to collect tithes and hire a parish priest. Their involvement in parishes often brought them in conflict with the hierarchy of the secular church, since monasteries themselves were independent of the authority of the regional bishop, but as parish rectors they were subject to episcopal oversight.

### The Abbot

The administration of the monastery, both as a religious institution and as a political and economic entity, involved a hierarchy of specialized officers. The rule of St. Benedict achieved flexibility by relying heavily on the discretion of the abbot. The abbot was the absolute authority within the monastery. He was required by the rule to consult the older and wiser monks, but he was not obliged to follow their advice. The abbot was normally chosen by the senior monks, but once in place only his superiors in the church had the right to countermand his will or remove him from office. If the order to which the monastery belonged did not have an organizational hierarchy, this would require direct intervention by the pope. Usually an abbot was expected to hold his post until prevented by death or debility. The abbot was chosen from within the monastery's order, but not always from within the monastery itself. Nor was he necessarily an old man. At Cluny it was common to choose a monk in his late twenties, who could provide years of stability and continuity during his long years of life.

The abbot had principal responsibility for the monastery's interaction with other monasteries and with the world at large, including attending meetings of the order, dealing with lay patrons, and overseeing the monastery's legal rights and obligations. The abbot of a major monastery like Cluny was an extremely important political figure, comparable in power and status to a substantial feudal lord—the abbot of Cluny even had the right to mint coinage. Within Cluny, the monks were expected to do great reverence to the abbot. They were obliged to bow deeply when they encountered him, kiss his hands when giving or receiving anything from him, and when his name was mentioned in a letter as it was read aloud, all were to bow toward him.

### The Priors

Since the abbot had so many responsibilities outside of the monastery, the day-to-day running of internal matters within the monastery often fell to his second-in-command, the prior. Some monasteries, particularly the smaller ones, had no abbot at all, and were instead under the authority of a prior—these were called priories as opposed to abbeys. Cluny was so large that it required two priors.

The grand prior was responsible for overseeing the abbey's affairs as a feudal landholder. He was aided by a number of deacons who oversaw the manorial granges that supplied Cluny with its food. The claustral prior was charged with the administration of Cluny's monks. He had a number of inspectors who helped him make the rounds of the monastery each day. He also oversaw the work of the masters of the oblates and of the novices.

### Other Officers

A large monastery like Cluny had a substantial roster of monks in administrative offices, termed "obedientaries," sometimes with additional subobedientaries to assist them. Cluny's obedientiary staff was typical of a large monastery. Two officers were assigned to the needs of the monastic church. The precentor oversaw the celebration of divine services, and since this was drawn from liturgical books, he was also in charge of the library and scriptorium. The material needs of the church, as well as the offerings made by visitors, were the concern of the sacristan.

Other officers looked after the monastic population. The chamberlain was in charge of collecting and distributing monastic income and property, and especially attended to the monks' personal clothing and gear; he was assisted by one or more deputies. The cellarer was responsible for the monastery's supply of food, drink, and fuel for its fires. He was assisted by a deputy cellarer, a keeper of the granary, a keeper of the wine, and a gardener. The rectorian was in charge of the dining hall where the monks took their meals. The infirmary was in the hands of an infirmarian, assisted by three lay brothers.

Other officers were responsible for charity and hospitality. The keeper of the guest house saw to the needs of privileged guests, while the almoner looked after ordinary travelers and oversaw the monastery's charitable activities. Horses and other riding beasts were in the hands of a stable master. One of the older monks would serve as porter, lodging in the monastery gatehouse so that he could supervise the arrival of visitors.

The obedientaries' responsibilities were very time-consuming, and they could be excused from the Divine Office to allow them to fulfill their official duties. A few offices rotated on a weekly basis, including the priest in charge of

celebrating communal masses, a reader responsible for reading during meals in the refectory, and four cooks who prepared food in the monastic kitchen.

### The Chapter

Although the monastery was not a democratic institution, it was fairly participatory by medieval standards. Every morning after mass all the monks assembled in the chapter house where they handled current business. If there were novices to consider for admission to the monastery, it was discussed at this time. This was also an occasion for administering discipline. Monks were expected to report on one another's misdeeds, and a monk who had transgressed was required to prostrate himself before the abbot. At the abbot's discretion, he might be beaten, and for more serious offenses he might be placed under a regime of punishment involving exclusion from communal activities and even imprisonment. The daily meeting of the community was termed the chapter, and the abbot was expected to consult with the chapter on important matters, allowing the monks to voice their opinions, although the function of the chapter was principally advisory, and the final word always rested with the abbot himself.

### THE MONKS

Monks were sworn to a life of personal poverty, but this does not mean that they were recruited from among the poor. In fact, they were predominantly drawn from the aristocracy. Recruits were expected to bring a significant donation to their monastery, and it was the upper classes who had land and money to offer. While monks were individually poor since they were not permitted to own personal property, the monastery collectively was a rich institution, and monks enjoyed a standard of living far above that of ordinary medieval people. They had regular and sufficient meals regardless of the state of the harvest; they had wine to drink and occasional fine foods, at least at Cluny and other establishments that took a moderate approach to asceticism; they lived in well-constructed stone facilities with good sanitation; and there was ample provision for them in illness and old age. The monastic way of life was austere, but it offered enough advantages that there was always a demand among the aristocracy for monastic positions.



LADY PRESENTING MONKS FROM WEINGARTEN ABBEY with a sacred relic. Illumination from a 1489 German manuscript.

Aristocratic parents with multiple sons needed to find an appropriate career for the younger ones, and sending them to monasteries was a good option, offering an acceptable standard of living, a stable future, and even prospects of prestige and power. Of course, this practice of treating monasticism as a career rather than a vocation meant that many monks were not deeply committed to the monastic ideal, to the detriment of monastic discipline.

Most monasteries recruited their population principally from the surrounding region. This was less true in the case of a major establishment like Cluny, the highly esteemed head of an extensive international order. Cluny attracted a more diverse population than most

monasteries, drawn from across Western Europe. Some of its monks came from other Cluniac monasteries, sent by their abbots to live at the mother house. Some came from other monastic orders. A monk was generally expected to remain in his monastery for life, but he was permitted to leave a less strict house for a stricter one, and Cluny had a high reputation for its adherence to the Benedictine rule. Some recruits came to the monastery from a life as secular clergymen, others as laymen. Although the bulk of Cluny's population were presumably native French speakers, the daily language of the monastery, as of the church in general, was Latin. The monks used Latin among themselves, and any new monk who was ignorant of the language had to learn it. Monks might need the local vernacular to communicate with lay brothers and visitors, but since communication

with nonmonks was strictly limited, a monk could spend his lifetime at Cluny without knowing French.

### Oblates

The process of admission to a monastery depended on the situation of the candidate. Some monasteries, including Cluny, accepted children, generally from the ages of five to seven or later. These children, called *oblates* ("offered ones"), were principally a feature of Benedictine monasteries. They were not numerous at Cluny, having been reduced to six in the eleventh century. By the thirteenth century, the church had decided that a boy could not be bound permanently to the monastic life by his parents, so that when he came of age he could choose whether to become a monk or not. The later reformed orders generally refused to accept oblates at all, since the presence of children could easily disrupt monastic discipline, and the practice disappeared in the course of the thirteenth century.

The oblates at Cluny had minimal contact with the monks. They were under the watch of two or more masters and were never allowed to be alone: they were always required to operate in pairs at least, with a master walking between them. If one woke up in the middle of the night needing to use the latrine, he woke the closest master, who lit a lantern, roused another boy, and walked between them to the latrine. The oblates were integrated into the liturgical life of the monastery, with particular roles assigned to them in the execution of the Divine Office and other communal devotions. They lived according to a moderated version of monastic discipline. They were allowed more food, and very small boys might even have extra rations brought to them in the cloister between meals. At meal-times each boy was sent to eat at one of the tables of the monks, where he took his food standing across from a reliable monk who would report him for discipline if necessary. The Cluny customal also made provision for a small table to be provided for any boy for whom the effort of standing was too difficult, and the twelfth-century statutes of Cluny abolished the custom of requiring the oblates to stand, on the grounds that it was too hard for young children. The oblates had their own chapter, in which they were expected to reveal one another's misdeeds as did the monks. Instead of the monk's tunic, they wore a linen shirt, with a

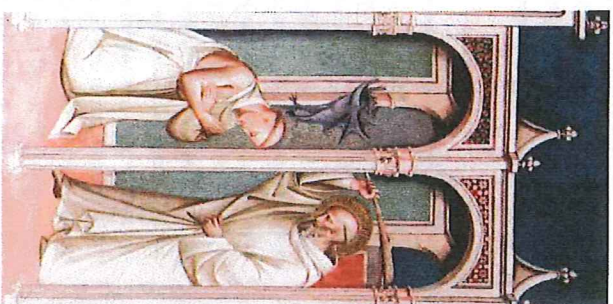


hooded gown over it; when the abbot judged them ready, the hood was removed, and they were given a cowl. They were taught the skills necessary for a monk: reading, writing, arithmetic, and Latin, as well as singing and reading music so that they could take part in the Divine Office.

## Novices

Anyone who joined the monastery at the age of fifteen years or more became a novice. The novitiate began with a ceremony of initiation followed by a mass,

during which the novice was shaved and given the tonsure, the distinctive hairstyle of the clergyman, which involved shaving the crown of the head to leave a circle of hair just above the level of the ears. The novice wore the same clothes as the oblate, with a monk's tunic substituted for the linen shirt. The novitiate lasted one year, during which the novice participated to a limited degree in monastic activities and learned the requirements of monastic life. The novices were separated from the monks at most times, with their own dormitory, refectory, and latrine, and, like the oblates, they were never permitted to be alone. At the end of the year, the novice was allowed to take his vows, pledging himself to the monastic life and becoming a full member of the monastic community. During the ceremony of initiation, the novice's hooded gown was removed, and replaced by the monastic cowl. For the next three days, the new monk was required to keep the hood of the cowl over his head, sleep in his full habit, and keep continual silence. On the third day, the priest of the week kissed him and pushed back his hood, at which point he be-



SAINT BENEDICT FREES A NOVICE MONK FROM A DEMON. *Spinello Aretino (Italian), 1387. France.*

gan the customary life of the monk. In the twelfth century, Cluny tightened its rules on the admission of monks, requiring them to be at least twenty years of age. Most novices were youths, but they also included older men who chose to retire to monastic life.

## Monks

The monk's vows were considered permanently binding, and the new monk was in principle bound to the monastery for the rest of his life—he was not even permitted to pass the cloister gate without permission, or to talk with any lay person, even the lay brothers who worked within the monastery. Everything the monk needed for the rest of his days was provided within the precincts of the monastery. In this way, the monk could leave behind the outside world. In practice, however, many monks did have contact with the world beyond the cloister. Monastic officers were required by their work to interact with laymen and spend time in the outer areas of the monastery, or even beyond the monastery walls, serving as ambassadors from the monastery or administering its business affairs. In some cases a monk was permitted to transfer to a new monastery, either for his own spiritual benefit, or to provide experience or expertise for an institution in need. During the thirteenth century, with rising educational standards in the secular world, many monasteries began to send monks to university, and some monasteries established houses at universities to serve as residences for members of their order—Cluny had such an establishment in Paris.

## Lay Brothers and Laborers

Not all of the inhabitants of the monastery were monks. Like other monasteries, Cluny had a supplementary population of lay brothers, recruited from the lower classes, who provided manual labor for the monastery: the monastery's bakers, laundresses, and wood gatherers were drawn from the lay brothers. The lay brothers lived under a quasi-monastic rule and wore the tonsure, but they had limited participation in the monastic life: they observed but did not take part in the Divine Office, and they were probably illiterate in almost every case. The lay brothers at Cluny resided in a building in the outer courtyard of the monastery,



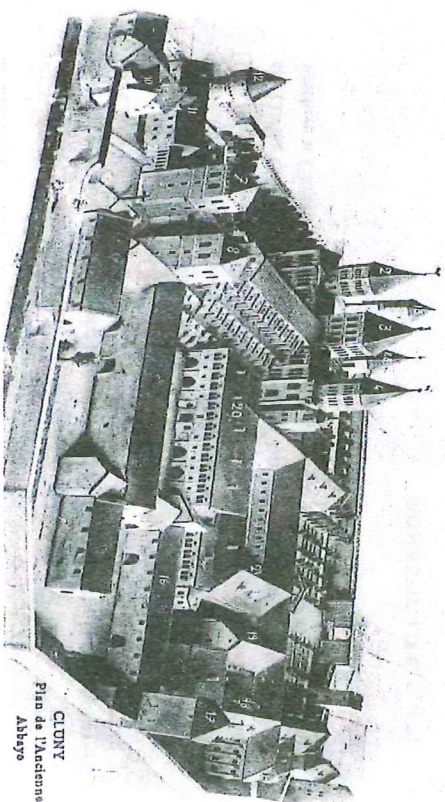
with its own dormitory, refectory, and latrine. Monasteries that lacked lay brothers relied on hired labor instead, and even Cluny made some use of hired workers.

## THE MONASTERY

### The Cloister

Although monasteries varied greatly in size, wealth, and ethos, the idea of a typical medieval monastery has much more meaning than it does for villages, castles, or towns. Monasticism evolved with a degree of planning, coordination, and even deliberate standardization that was not possible for secular institutions. The standardization of monastic life is especially evident in the physical layout of the monastery. The typical monastic ground plan shows the influence of the Roman villa. Its distinctive feature and the central point of its physical space was the cloister, a sheltered arcade surrounding a square open area, recalling the characteristic square courtyard of Roman times. The entry to the cloister lay at its northwestern corner, toward the main gate of the monastery. Monks were not permitted to pass from the cloister to the outer area of the monastery unless their official duties required it, and visitors were only allowed within the cloister by express permission. Lay visitors were only admitted to the cloister when the monks were in church, and women were forbidden at all times. The contrast between the pure space of the cloister and the sinful world outside is evoked in a story told about Cluny by Peter the Venerable, one of the monastery's twelfth-century abbots:

There was an Italian brother named John, who disliked the severity of monastic discipline, and went so far as to contemplate fleeing the monastery. Then the devil himself came to him in the likeness of an abbot. For two demons, under the appearance of monks, followed this brother to a secluded spot in the monastery, where he sat deep in thought. Then the devil, believing that he had found an opportune moment for deception, appeared to him, and sat by his side, and said, "I came this way now, brother, for the purpose of visiting with my hosts, but having chanced to see you, I perceived that you



LAYOUT OF CLUNY ABBEY, a Benedictine monastery in *Saône-et-Loire, France*, built in the Romanesque style between the tenth–twelfth centuries. From a postcard, ca. 1900.

#### LEGEND

1. Grand Church
2. Belfry of Bishops
3. Bell Choir
4. Clocher de l'Eau Benite ("Holy Water Belfry")
5. Clocher de l'Horloge ("Clock Belfry")
6. Narthex, or entry vestibule
7. Tower of Archives and Treasure
8. Tower of Justice
9. Main entryway
10. Palais Jean de Bourbon
11. Palais Jacques d'Amboise
12. Fabry Tower
13. Round tower
14. Entrance to the stable yard
15. Stables
16. Storehouse
17. Tour des Fromages ("Cheese Tower")
18. Refectory
19. Chapel of the Virgin
20. Palace of Pope Gelasius II
21. Monastic buildings
22. Garden facade
23. Garden doors
24. Passage for the Palace of the Church Abbot
25. Clocher des Lampes ("Lamp Belfry")



are afflicted with great distress. . . . Therefore, tell me, your interested friend, who you are and why you are unhappy." This brother feared to open the secrets of his heart to an apparent stranger, and responded only that he was Italian by birth, to which this devil in monk's clothing responded, "I am also an abbot of the same region, and I can help you well in all things. For I know, although you remain silent, that the abbot and the others of this monastery treat you poorly, nor do they respect you as you deserve, and what's more, they constantly vex you with outrage and insults. Therefore I advise that you take heed, leave this utterly horrible place, and come away with me. For I am prepared to take you away from these evils, and lead you to my abbey, which is called Ironvault, and exalt you with every honor." To these things the brother responded, "I can hardly leave this place, because the gate of the monastery prevents it, and I am surrounded by a multitude of other monks." Then the devil said, "Nor can I help you, as long as you remain here. But find some means to get past the enclosure of the monastery. Once you have done that, I will be there at once, and will take you to my place as I said." But merciful God . . . did not let the enemy proceed any further. . . . For while this was taking place, the community of brothers was sitting in the refectory for their customary dinner hour. When it was finished, the prior struck once a little bell as is the custom. When this sound was heard, at once the demon . . . was made by divine power to rush away from the brother to whom he was speaking. It ran at full tilt toward the latrines that were nearby, where in full sight of this brother it cast itself into the bottom of them. Thus God's mercy rescued the brother from the temptation of the most evil enemy, and cast the filthy spirit out of his house through a place suitable to his filthiness.<sup>2</sup>

The arcade of the cloister served as a general utility area for the monks. The oblates had their school here, and the monks read, talked, and worked in this area. A whetstone was suspended in the cloister for the monks to use in sharpening their knives, and there was a large trough for laundering clothes. At Cluny's cloister gate was the almshouse, where eighteen indigent laymen resided, living semimonastic lives supported by the monastery. The building on the west

side of the cloister, called the cellar, was used to store supplies brought in from outside; it also served as lodging for the cellarer and his wine keeper. At the southwest corner of the cloister were the food preparation facilities, including a bakehouse and two separate kitchens. The monastic kitchen, which faced the cloister, was staffed by monks, and at Cluny it provided only vegetable stews and beans—not even other legumes were cooked in this kitchen. The lay kitchen, facing the outer courtyard, provided food for the lay brothers and guests of the monastery, as well as fish, spiced dishes, and other foods permitted to the monks but not allowed in the monastic kitchen. The kitchens had running water, and access to the stream running as a drain underneath.

On the south side of the cloister was the monks' refectory, where they took their meals. This was a particularly fine hall, well lit with thirty-six large glazed windows, and decorated with wall paintings that included scenes from the Old and New Testaments, a large figure of Christ surrounded by the principal founders and benefactors of the monastery, and a depiction of the Last Judgment. The monks ate at six long tables running lengthwise along the room, while across the head of the room were three tables for the chief officers of the monastery: the abbot's table on a dais in the center, with the grand prior's table to his right and the claustral prior's table to his left. Clerical guests of the monastery also sat at these tables. There was a small bell in the refectory, used to signal mealtimes for the monks. Just outside the refectory was the *lavabo*, a large basin at which the monks washed their hands before every meal. There were three towels at the lavabo: one for the monks, a second for the oblates, and a third for the lay brothers. These were changed twice a week, and the water replaced once a week.

Next to the refectory was the calefactory, a heated room where the monks went to warm themselves. It also functioned as a service area where work was done that might otherwise disturb the tranquility of the cloister—for example, monks who missed the communal shaving might be shaved in this room. At the southeast corner of the cloister was the chamber, a workshop used by the chamberlain and his staff. On the east side of the cloister was the parlor, a room where monks could hold conversations, and the chapter house, a large room that served for the daily communal

meeting of the monks. Above the rooms on the east side of the cloister was the dormitory, the long hall in which the monks slept. The dormitory at Cluny was a particularly fine room, with ninety-seven glazed windows, each over seven feet tall and two-and-a-half feet wide. These windows provided ample light during the day, and at night three oil lamps burned constantly to dispel the darkness—the twelfth-century statutes of Cluny emphasized that monks should not sleep in the dark. At the north end of the dormitory was the night-stair leading into the church, which allowed the monks to attend nighttime devotions without venturing into the cold outdoors. A day-stair led down into the cloister.

At the south end of the dormitory a short walkway led to the latrine, built close to the dormitory but as a separate structure. This was divided into forty-five cubicles, each illuminated by a window two feet tall and half-a-foot wide; two oil lamps were kept lit in the room all night. A pile of straw lay on the floor, so that the monks could grab a handful to wipe themselves after defecating. The latrine was built over a drainage channel of running water.

The north arcade was the warmest and brightest part of the cloister, since it faced southward. Like other monasteries, Cluny used this area as a scriptorium where the monks might read and write, and it was equipped with large high desks called carrels. At the eastern end of the scriptorium was the large cupboard in which the precentor stored the monastery's books.

Adjoining this arcade was the monastery church. This was principally for the use of the monastic community, although at some monasteries it served as a parish church as well. At Cluny, the church was accessible to the public, although visitors were allowed only in the nave, at the western end of the church, where they had no contact with the monks in the choir at the eastern end. In monastic churches the choir was elongated, and had stalls equipped with seats to allow the monks to rest during the Divine Office. The church was lit in the day by a hundred and sixty windows, and at night by four large chandeliers with wax candles. Additional candlelight was provided at ground level close to the monks, to allow them to read their chants. An enormous new church was begun at Cluny in about 1085; its high altar was consecrated in 1095, but the building itself was not finished until the twelfth century.

The buildings of the cloister were the heart of the monastery, and were more or less common to every substantial establishment. Not all monasteries followed precisely the same plan: in a few cases, the cloister was on the north side of the church, with the entire complex laid out in a mirror image. This reversal was sometimes dictated by local topography, and it was the normal arrangement in nunneries. On the whole, monastic ground plans were more noteworthy for their consistency than their variety, and even nonmonastic orders, such as the mendicant friars, followed much the same pattern.

#### Ancillary Buildings

The rest of the monastery supplemented the buildings of the cloister. Cluny's wealth was reflected in its unusually complete collection of additional buildings. In a smaller monastery only some of these facilities might be found, as multiple functions were combined in a single structure. Where additional buildings existed, their layout generally resembled that of Cluny. To the east of the cloister was the infirmary, housing ill or aged monks. At Cluny this included a dormitory with its own kitchen, refectory, and latrine. The infirmary had five chambers, one of which was reserved for the dying. The capacity of the chambers may be judged by the older infirmary, replaced in the late eleventh century, whose four chambers for sick monks each held eight beds. Also in this area Cluny had a secondary church and the monastic cemetery with a chapel. All of these buildings were connected by a series of covered walkways: unless he passed the cloister gate, the monk at Cluny was never obliged to walk on open ground.

To the south of the main cloister at Cluny were additional monastic buildings. These included the lesser cloister, reserved for meditation and quiet work; a cloister and dormitory for novices; and facilities for craftsmen employed in precious work for the church such as glazing and goldsmithing. Also nearby was a "privy washing room," with water on tap, where the monks could launder their braies, and a bathhouse equipped with twelve barrels in which the monks could bathe at appointed times. Like other monasteries, Cluny had a garden to supply the community with herbs and vegetables, as well as ponds to stock fish



for the table; this appears to have been at the eastern end of the complex, near the infirmary.

To the west of the cloister were the exterior areas where the monastery interacted with the outside world. The whole monastic complex was encircled by a wall, with access through a gatehouse. The wall served in part to separate the monastery symbolically from the sinful world outside, but it also helped to minimize and control contact between the monks and the exterior world. At times it might even serve a military purpose. In 1125, Pons de Melgueil, a former abbot of Cluny who had been forced to resign his office, assembled a following of mercenaries and fugitive monks and marched on the monastery. The grand prior, himself a former knight of some distinction, shut the gates and prepared to defend the enclosure, but Pons's forces broke down the gates while his supporters within the monastery overthrew the prior and welcomed the invaders. Military action against a monastery was uncommon but not unknown; in the latter part of the twelfth century, new fortifications were built around Cluny in response to depredations in the area by the count of Chalon.

Adjoining the gatehouse was a large building that held the stables and a hostel for travelers, with adjacent latrines. Between the main gate and the cloister were the lodgings for Cluny's lay brothers, again with their own latrines, and a refectory that they shared with visitors lodged in the hostel. To the north of this was the guest house for privileged visitors. This building had a dormitory at each end: the one for male guests had forty beds, the women's dormitory had thirty, with as many cubicles in the latrines adjoining each dormitory. Between the dormitories was a joint refectory, equipped with fine curtains and bench covers for use on special occasions. On the south side of this building was the palace, a special facility for the monastery's most important guests. Adjoining the guest house were workshops for the monastery's tailors and shoemakers, and a cenerery for lay members of the monastic community.

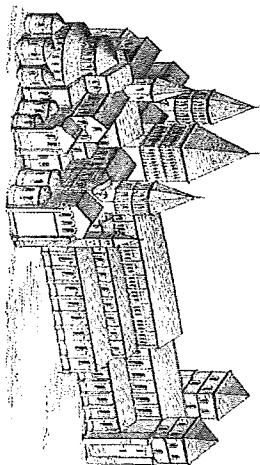
### Monastic Architecture

A well-endowed monastery might be the site of a great deal of ongoing development even after the basic complex was complete, with new structures added or

old ones replaced; the tranquility of the monastic environment could be disrupted for years at a time. At Cluny, the new basilica begun in the late eleventh century required twenty years to finish. Monastic construction materials and techniques represented the highest standards of the time. During construction, temporary facilities of wood were erected, but the finished

buildings were of stone. Ideally, this consisted of solid stone blocks; less expensive was stone rubble held together with mortar. In either case, the surface was covered with limewash and plaster, and rubble walls were adorned with horizontal and vertical lines to make them resemble solid blocks. A Benedictine monastery like Cluny might also be elaborately decorated. The wall paintings of the refectory have already been mentioned; there were also marble columns in the cloister arcade, and innumerable carved decorations in the monastery's stonework. Such opulence was criticized by the Cistercians, whose buildings were more simply adorned, although equally well constructed. As in other medieval buildings, the floors at Cluny were strewn with rushes, which the custom says were changed six times a year.

One of the most striking features of the monastery was its sanitation system. In an age when running water was unusual even for an aristocratic household, it was a more or less standard feature of monastic planning. Cluny was typical in having diverted a stream into a channel that ran through its south side. This channel served all the working areas of the monastery, passing under the kitchens, where a hole in the floor allowed direct access to the water, and then past the bathhouse and underneath the monks' latrine. Other channels served the other latrines in the complex. In addition, Cluny, like other monasteries, had a raised cistern. From this cistern a system of conduits provided water to various points in the monastery, with water pressure provided by gravity. Some monastic cisterns



THE THIRD CHURCH OF CLUNY ABBEY, viewed from the northeast.

were fed by wooden, ceramic, or lead pipelines from an elevated source such as a spring, and some even had a system of settling tanks to ensure the water quality.

The setting of the monastery varied. Usually it was founded on land granted by a lay patron; the complex was then constructed somewhere on the donated land. The monastery was often sited on the floor of a river valley, which provided flat ground on which to construct the monastic buildings, as well as ready access to water for the needs of the monastic community. Some monasteries were founded in rural settings, others were adjacent to towns. In time, the monastery itself proved a base for urban development. The demand for goods and services at a substantial monastery was a significant spur to economic activity, and during the early Middle Ages the monastery was in many cases the most stable political force in its district. By the High Middle Ages, many towns had grown up around monasteries, and in others a monastery on the outskirts of a town gave rise to a significant suburb. When the monastery of Cluny was founded, the place was little more than a manor house and village, but by 1100, the village had become a substantial town.

### MODE OF LIFE

Living conditions within the monastery varied. The rule of the order and the customs of the monastery might be rigorous or lenient; some abbots were stricter than others, and at various times and places the trend in monastic practice leaned toward easing the rules or toward reforming laxity. At a time when most people worked extremely hard to maintain a fairly low standard of living, and when even the privileged classes lived in somewhat spartan conditions in peacetime and under genuine hardship in time of war, the rigors of monastic life were probably less significant than its stability.

### Food

The approved monastic diet was simple but adequate. In fact, monks had the highest dietary standard of the Middle Ages as judged by modern nutritional science. Meat was forbidden except for the sick, although fish was permitted. The bulk of the diet was derived from grains, legumes, vegetables, and fruits. The basic monastic meal at Cluny consisted of bread, wine, boiled beans flavored

with a bit of fat, and boiled vegetables according to the season; the ordinary seasoning was salt. In addition to their basic diet, every two monks shared a plate of supplementary food on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, and each had a plate of his own on Tuesdays, Thursdays, Saturdays, and Sundays. Each monk also had an additional plate on certain holidays and special occasions of celebration, as when the abbot returned from a journey. A variety of supplementary foods were permitted. Eggs, cheese, and fruit were regularly included in the diet, and on certain holidays there might be dumplings, pancakes, cakes, and other special breadstuffs. On Thursdays, Sundays, and certain festive occasions, the additional plate consisted of seafood. A range of seafoods are mentioned as monastic fare in the Cluny customs, including eel, lamprey, salmon, pike, and trout. Flavorings included honey, pepper, and mustard. The staple drink at Cluny was wine; ale was not common in this part of France, but it was consumed at other monasteries. On special occasions the monks were issued *pinent*, a flavored wine mixed with honey and spices. The monks ate two meals a day during the summer, but only one during the winter and on fasting days. The daily ration was a pound of bread, but on days when two meals were served, the monk could have an extra half ration if he finished his portion during the first meal.

The diet at Cluny was fairly generous. Some monasteries, notably those of the Cistercian order, were more austere, while others were extremely lax. Abbot Peter the Venerable of Cluny commented acerbically on the diet in use at many monasteries:

Beans, cheese, eggs, and even fish have become loathsome. . . . Roast or boiled pork, a plump heifer, rabbit, and hare, a goose selected from the flock, chicken, in fact every kind of meat and fowl cover the table of these holy monks. But now even these things lose their appeal. It has come to . . . royal and imported luxuries. Now a monk cannot be satisfied but on wild goats, stags, boars, or bears. The forests must be searched, we have need of huntsmen! Pheasants, partridges, and pigeons must be caught by the fowler's cunning, lest the servant of God should die of hunger!



## Clothing

Monks wore uniform attire derived from lay clothing of the late classical and early medieval period. The basic garment of Cluny's monks was a plain woolen tunic girded with a leather belt. Over this the monk wore the cowl, a loose sleeveless garment reaching to the ankles in front and back, with a deep hood attached. The hood helped keep the monk's head warm in the cold environment of the monastery, while submerging the identity of the individual into his monastic character. It also served as protection against the evils of the outside

world: when the monks of Cluny traveled through a large town, they were required to lower their hoods over their faces.

On top of the cowl the monk wore a loose gown with broad and very long sleeves that helped keep him warm in winter and minimized visible flesh—the sleeves usually covered his hands. During the winter he wore a sheepskin mantle on top of the gown or instead of it. The color of his outfit depended on the order. Cluniac monks wore the Benedictine black habit, while the Cistercians wore undyed white wool. The rule and custom both required that clothes were to be made of plain, inexpensive fabric.

The monks at Cluny also wore hose and shoes. For underwear they wore a pair of linen drawers like the braies of the layman. The Cistercians differed from other monks in permitting no underwear, a peculiarity that their detractors were quick to mock. Each monk at Cluny was allotted two gowns, two cowls, two tunics, two pairs of braies, three fur-lined mantles, a furred hood, five pairs of socks, two pairs of day shoes, a pair of wooly night shoes for winter, and a lighter pair for summer use. He received a new gown and cowl every Christmas, new socks at Martinmas,



**MOURNING MONK.**  
*French, ca. 1450. Notice that the monk wears a cowl and long, loose gown.*

new shoes on Maundy Thursday, and a new mantle every other Michaelmas—the new clothes were placed by the chamberlain on each monk's bed. The tunic, braies, and other items were replaced as necessary: the monk washed the old garments and handed them in to the chamberlain, who then provided new ones. The discarded garments were distributed to the poor. At his discretion, the chamberlain might also provide additional warm clothing for an infirm monk, such as sheepskin shoes or puttees for the shins. The monk's garments were marked with his name in ink, but on the braies, which were washed periodically in hot water, his name was stitched in thread.

The monastery had elaborate provisions for laundry. The monk who needed to wash his braies removed them from under his outer clothes, folded them at once, wrapped them in a tunic, and tied up the bundle with the tunic's sleeves. He then proceeded to the monastic kitchen to fetch the brass laundry cauldron in which washing water was heated and mixed with lye. There was a laundry trough in the cloister, carved into separate compartments so that the braies could be washed separately from the other garments. The water was poured into the trough and the laundry left there to soak during the chapter meeting. In the afternoon the monk washed his clothes, then hung them to dry in the cloister. Clothes hanging in the cloister had to be taken down before the next meal. Alternatively, the monk deposited his clothes into the common laundry chest, located below the dormitory. These clothes were collected every Tuesday, and returned on Saturday afternoon. When a monk's shoes needed oiling, he could wash them and leave them for the assistant chamberlain to collect, or go to the kitchen where he received cooking fat to oil them himself. If a monk's clothes needed mending, he put them in a chest especially for this purpose in the chapter house, where the assistant chamberlain picked them up and delivered them to the monastery's resident tailors.

## Gear

In addition to clothing, the Benedictine rule provided that each monk be issued a knife, a pen, writing tables, a needle, and a handkerchief. The rules at Cluny also mention a linen belt for the monk's braies, a leather belt to gird the tunic,



a wooden comb with case, a sheath for the knife, and a needlecase and thread. The rule also allowed each monk a mattress, bedsheet, blanket, and pillow; the mattress was to be stuffed with straw, although feather mattresses were among the most common violations of monastic discipline. Monasteries like Cluny, in colder climates than Saint Benedict's Italy, allowed additional bedclothes. The Cluny customs mention sheepskin, catskin, or rabbitskin coverlets, a felled woollen blanket, and a bed cover. Each monk at Cluny also had a cup and a dish, and a measured flagon to receive his daily ration of wine.

### Bodily Care

Monastic hygiene was reasonably good in comparison to the rest of society. Running water was common in monasteries, and monks were required to wash their faces every morning and their hands several times each day. The kitchen had a special conduit that provided detergent (perhaps a mild lye) so that the staff could wash their hands frequently. On certain days, the monks who had served as cooks the previous week ritually washed the feet of the rest of the monks, and provision was also made for washing the monks' feet after any barefoot procession. Full bathing was much rarer, since bathing was regarded in ascetic circles as a dangerous physical indulgence. Cluny permitted baths only twice a year, just before Christmas and Easter. Other monasteries also allowed a bath at Pentecost. Additional bathing required permission. This was probably below the usual standard of the upper classes, but above that of the peasantry. In spite of monastic mistrust of bathing, Cluny had a rather well-appointed bathhouse, with twelve tubs.

The monk's tonsure required periodic shaving. Shaving gear was kept by the chamberlain in a locked box at the entrance to the dormitory. At permitted times, at the discretion of the chamberlain, the monks gathered in the cloister, seated in two rows, one against the wall of the cloister, the other against the pillars of the arcade, ready to be shaved. Razors were distributed down one line, shaving basins down the other, and the monks on one side shaved the others while singing psalms. Beards were also shaved at this time, although the interval between shavings meant that the monks usually had some facial hair.

Perhaps the most prominent source of bodily discomfort, at least at night and during the winter, was the chill. Few rooms in the monastery had fires—principally just the kitchen and calefactory—and the cold was pervasive. The twelfth-century monastic chronicler Orderic Vitalis was sometimes unable to write because his fingers were too cold to grip the pen.<sup>4</sup> The custom of Cluny allowed monks to enter the kitchen to thaw frozen ink, and mentioned visits to the kitchen by the abbot to warm himself.

### Care of the Sick

One of the most remarkable aspects of monastic life was its provision for the sick and the elderly. A monk who felt unwell could ask to be excused from his monastic duties. If after a few days he had not recovered, he was sent to the infirmary. He stayed there under the care of the infirmarian and his assistants, and if his condition was beyond the capacity of the infirmarian, a practitioner might be brought in from the outside to examine the monk. While in the infirmary, the monk was allowed more food, even meat, to help him regain his strength. Once recovered, he was obliged to prostrate himself in the chapter meeting, and ask for forgiveness for his lapse from monastic discipline. A terminally ill or enfeebled monk received care for the rest of his days, and even had a lay brother assigned as his full-time attendant during his final decline. When death approached, the community was summoned to the infirmary—one of the rare times monks were permitted to run—to observe the traditional ceremony for a monk's passing, in which the dying monk was placed on a goatskin strewn with ashes, while the community chanted psalms to aid his passage to heaven.



DEATH AND ASCENSION OF ST. FRANCIS. Giotto (Italian), ca. 1325. Monks pray over St. Francis on his deathbed.



## Monastic Etiquette

Life at Cluny was governed by an elaborate code of decorum that in part may have reflected the monks' aristocratic background. Other than the imminent death of a member of the community, the only circumstance in which running was permitted was a fire in the monastery. While riding, the monk was also required to keep his mount at a walk. The custumal of Cluny even instructed the monks in how to walk, sit, and stand. Walking, the monk was expected to keep his head bowed; standing, he was to have both feet even; and seated, he was to be at least an ell's distance from his neighbor, with his habit drawn up into his lap so that his feet were visible and the skirts of his garments did not touch the floor. Between psalms of the Divine Office, a monk was allowed to rest on the seat of his stall, but only if the monks next to him were standing. Although the rules of monastic behavior were demanding, they were also pragmatic. When the bells rang to summon the monks to services, they continued long enough to allow for a visit to the privy before entering the choir. The custumal also made provision for monks who needed to leave the choir during the Divine Office in instances of urgent need, such as a sudden nosebleed.

The monks of Cluny had a distinctive bow that the custumal of Ulrich describes with great precision. It was called "before and behind," because the monk bowed so deeply that he began looking forward but ended looking backward, inclining his body from the waist, with his back straight, not arched. The monk bowed repeatedly in this manner during the course of the day: to greet a superior; on entering the church, chapter house, or refectory; before sitting down to a meal. When he spoke, the monk was required to say "our" instead of "my," except when speaking of his mother or father. When speaking of another monk, he added the title *Domnus* (from the Latin *dominus*, lord) to his name; for oblates and himself, the title was "Brother."

Much of the etiquette of the monastery was oriented to ensure that a minimum of skin was visible. In the morning, the monk dressed himself under the covers, and if he needed to remove his cowl during the day to have it cleaned, he was required to have his mantle or gown on over it. Yet although monastic discipline and attire sought to minimize attention to the body, it was also customary for

monks to kiss one another as the usual form of welcome, a practice that was also common in medieval society in general.

When traveling, the monk was expected to adhere to a daily routine of hymns and prayers. He was to have a fellow monk with him at all times, and was not permitted to sit at table with a woman or accept anything from her hands. He was enjoined not to bear the lay brother who accompanied him, nor to make conversation with him while eating. While riding, he was obliged to wear his gown over his cowl, and if he removed his cowl at night, he had to keep it within arm's reach.

## Monastic Silence

One aspect of monastic life that would be striking to the modern observer is the rarity of ordinary speech. Conversation was forbidden at all times in the church, monastic kitchen, dormitory, and refectory. It was allowed in the cloister in the morning after the chapter meeting, and in the afternoon after the midday meal. Even when conversation was permitted, it was governed by strict rules. Monks who wished to converse were expected to take a book and sit, and their conversation was to be quiet and only about spiritual matters, "or of those things which are indispensable to this temporal life."<sup>5</sup> Monks were not allowed to talk with nonmonks—even lay brothers—without permission, unless they held office in the monastery.

To facilitate essential communication when speech was forbidden, monks developed the use of sign language. The custumal of Cluny describes the hand signs for several dozen words that were taught to novices. Most are nouns related to food, but the custumal indicates that the full vocabulary was much more extensive. Excessive signing could itself be a problem, as one observer noted after visiting the priory of Canterbury: "They gesticulated with fingers, hands, and arms, and whistled to each other instead of speaking. . . . It would be more consonant with good order and decency to speak modestly in human speech than to indulge ridiculously in this mute chatter."<sup>6</sup>

The restrictions on conversation did not mean constant silence. Even in parts of the monastery where ordinary speech was forbidden, the sound of

human voices chanting hymns and psalms and reading religious texts was heard frequently. Monks spent much of their day in church performing the Divine Office, and even outside the church devotional singing and recitation was a constant feature of daily life. During meals, while the monks ate silently, one of them was assigned to read aloud from a suitable text, and the customs specify which hymns and psalms are to be sung even during such mundane activities as shaving and washing the dishes.

*SINGING MONKS. Simone Martini (Italian), ca. 1322–1326. Detail from a fresco.*



### Communal Life

The silence of the monastery and other customs that restricted interaction among the monks may have compensated somewhat for the constant lack of privacy in monastic life. Within the monastery, monks slept, ate, and worked communally, and when they were outside of the monastery, whether traveling on a mission or residing at a small monastic establishment or grange, they were always supposed to be in pairs at least. This aspect of monasticism would be hard on many modern people, but it was not all that remarkable in a society where even the upper classes had relatively little private space, taking their meals in the great hall and sleeping in close proximity to servants and other members of the household. Yet even the monks seem to have found their communal life difficult at times. The twelfth-century statutes of Cluny made provision for two monks to be appointed as overseers of the dormitory, "for frequently because of the lack of overseers, and the great number coming together there, large quarrels break out, which often cause their clothes and other monastic trappings to be lost, nor can they be easily found again."<sup>7</sup>

### The Sign Language of Cluny

For the sign for bread, make a circle with both thumbs and index fingers, since bread is usually round. . . .

For the sign for beans, place the tip of the index finger on top of the first joint of the thumb, and in this way make the thumb stick out. . . .

For the sign for portage made with vegetables, draw one finger over the other like someone who is slicing vegetables to be cooked.

For a general sign for fish, imitate the motion of the fish's tail in the water with your hand.

For the sign for cuttlefish, divide all your fingers from each other, and move them around in this way, because cuttlefish similarly appear to have multiple parts.

For the sign for a salmon . . . make the sign for a fish, and at the same time place your fist with the thumb standing upwards underneath your chin, which is the sign for pride, because the proud and rich are the ones who most usually have such fish. . . .

For the sign for honey, stick out your tongue just a bit, and apply your fingers to it as if you were going to lick them.

For the sign for raw leeks, stick out your thumb and index finger together.

For the sign for garlic or horseradish, open your mouth slightly and extend your finger toward it, on account of the sort of odor that comes from it.

For the sign for water, place all your fingers together, and move them sideways. . . .

For the sign for wine, act as if you were dipping your finger, and place it against your lips.

*continued on page 190*



For the sign for piment, shut your hand, and act as if you were grinding. . . .

For the sign for mustard, place your thumb on the joint of your little finger.

For the sign for vinegar, stroke your throat with your finger, because bitterness is tasted in the throat.

For the sign for a dish, hold out your hand flat. . . .

For the sign for the tunic, hold its sleeve with three fingers, the little finger and the two next to it.

For the sign for braies, do the same thing, and at the same time pull your hand up along your thigh like someone who is putting on his braies.

For the sign for the gown, take its sleeve in the same way one does with the tunic.

For the sign for the cowl, do the same, and at the same time pull back on the hood with two fingers.

*Sign used by someone asking permission to leave early from a meal:* He rises from the table, comes toward the dais, and with his hand stretched out, draws it away from his chest.

*Sign used by someone wishing to see a priest for confession:* Taking his hand out of his sleeve, he places it on his chest, which is the sign for confession.<sup>8</sup>

## THE MONASTIC DAY

The monastic routine was built around the daily cycle of the Divine Office. The cycle began before the night was over, with the bell ringing at about 2 or 3 a.m. to summon the monks to sing Nocturns (also called Matins) and Lauds. The monks, who slept in their tunics, put on their cowls under the covers

before rising from bed. Then they rose, pulled up the bedclothes, donned their night shoes, and drew their hoods over their heads. At this point they might visit the privy before proceeding down the night stairs into the church. Once in the church they took their places in the choir and began the chant. Drowsiness was a predictable problem at this hour, and provisions were made for a lantern bearer to pass among them at certain points in the service to find any who were asleep, and silently wake them by waving the lantern three times before their faces. If a monk did not wake after the third time, the watcher roused him and left the lantern with him; the monk was then required to take over the job.

If it was winter, the monks returned to bed after Lauds until first light; during the summer the interval between Lauds and first light was too short to warrant this. At first light the church bells were rung to summon the monks to Prime. During the winter, this occurred late enough in the morning that the monks might rise beforehand to celebrate private masses or begin their tasks for the day. At Prime, the monk put on his day shoes and knife, and proceeded down the day stairs to the wash stand near the refectory to wash his face and hands and comb his hair before entering the church. After Prime there was time for reading and work. At about 9 a.m. came Terce, a fairly short office, followed by the morning mass. After mass the community assembled in the chapter house. The meeting began with the reading of a passage from the Bible and a chapter from the order's rule (hence the meeting was called the chapter). This was followed by a sermon or discussion by the abbot or the prior. Then the community dealt with organizational business and handled disciplinary matters.

The chapter was over by about 10 a.m. Afterward, the monks had time for various activities. Conversation was permitted during this interval, or a monk might attend to mundane matters, such as trimming his nails, washing his tableware, sharpening his knife, washing his clothes, or visiting sick monks in the infirmary. At midday the monks returned to the choir for the brief office of Sext, followed by the High Mass of the day.

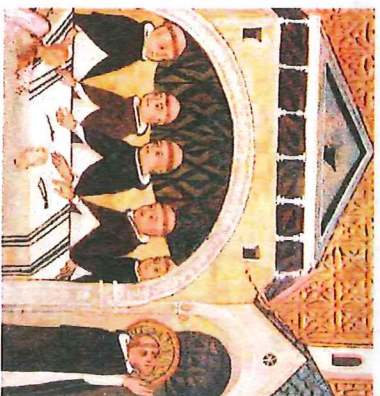


## The Shape of the Monastic Day

<b>2 or 3 A.M.</b>	<b>Nocturns (Matins) and Lauds</b> Winter: sleep, tasks, private masses
<b>Daylight: 4:30 A.M.</b> in summer; 7:30 A.M. in winter.	<b>Washing face and hands</b> <b>Prime</b> Silent working period
<b>9 A.M.</b>	<b>Terce</b> Morning mass Chapter meeting Nonsilent working period
<b>Midday</b>	<b>Sext</b> High Mass Summer: dinner Summer: silent working period Winter: nonsilent working period
<b>Afternoon: 2:30 P.M.</b> in summer; 1:30 P.M. in winter.	<b>None</b> Summer: drink Summer: nonsilent working and rest period Winter: dinner Winter: silent working period
<b>Evening: 6 P.M.</b> in summer; 4:15 P.M. in winter.	<b>Vespers</b> Summer: supper Summer: silent contemplative period Winter: light meal
<b>Night: 8 P.M.</b> in summer; 6:15 P.M. in winter.	<b>Compline</b> Bed

### Meals

In summer the High Mass was followed by the principal meal of the day. At mealtimes, the community all washed their hands and proceeded into the refectory. Prior to their arrival, the tables were set by the refectorian's three assistants. Each place had a spoon and bread, and if the bread was burnt, the scorched part was shaved off with a knife. Just



THE MONK'S REFECTION. Illumination from a fourteenth-century Italian manuscript.

before the monks entered, the wine was served. As they came in, they took the places assigned to them on the basis of seniority, bowed, and stood waiting for the arrival of the abbot or prior, who pronounced a blessing and rang a bell to signal the beginning of the meal. At this point the reader for the week began to read from an approved text, and the monks began to eat. No conversation was permitted in the refectory, although the monks used their sign language to communicate. The monks were not allowed to fetch anything other than water or salt; the food was brought by the cooks of the week. Each monk was expected to ensure that not even the smallest crumb fell to the ground. After the meal, he gathered the crumbs on the table with his knife, so they could be brushed into a plate; these crumbs were used to provide food for the poor. The monks were expected to remain at their tables until the meal was over, but a monk who needed to leave could ask the abbot for permission to go, and a monk who arrived late similarly needed permission to join the meal.

Food was eaten only in the refectory. A monk who was unwell or felt greatly in need of food might come to the chamberlain at midday or after Compline to ask to be let into the refectory. The monk might drink between mealtimes, but this was to be done seated, with both hands on the bowl. During the summer, water was provided for the monks every afternoon in the refectory.



### Afternoon and Evening

After midday the monk had time to read or sing hymns and psalms. He was also allowed to bring a book to the dormitory and read in bed, although he was not permitted to converse with other monks here, even in sign language, or even to glance at them in their beds. At about 3 p.m. came the office of None, again fairly short. In summer, the monks gathered after None for a drink. In winter and on fasting days the sole meal of the day was taken at this time. During the longer summer days the monks might be allowed a brief rest period in the afternoon. The latter part of the afternoon was given to another period for work, study, or private masses.

In the evening came the office of Vespers, which was fairly long. In summer, this was followed by the second meal of the day; in winter, a small bite of food was allowed before Compline. After the evening meal, the monks went to the dormitory to remove their knives and change their day shoes for their night shoes. In summer, they then returned to sit in the cloister, where they might read or write. At this time absolute silence was enjoined: the monks were commanded to ensure even that their pens made no noise on the parchment, and any monk who entered the cloister late had to walk slowly and make no sound. Compline, another brief office, took place at dusk. At the end of Compline the monks were sprinkled with holy water and covered their heads with their hoods. Then they retired to bed, leaving their hoods up until they were under the covers. Once under the covers, the monks removed their cowls, folding and placing them at the head of their beds for the next morning. The rules at Cluny allowed a monk to uncover only his feet and arms at night if he was hot. While the monks were retiring, the claustral prior toured the cloister to see that all was in order, ensuring that the doors were closed and locked, inspecting the dormitory, and even checking the latrines.

In addition to the major cycle of monastic offices, there were other devotions. The monks might recite prayers for the dead and supplications to the saints, especially on behalf of a patron, and in the morning before daybreak, ordained monks might celebrate private masses in smaller chapels in the church. There were also special masses and observations on the occasion of major church feasts,

as in ordinary parish churches. Particularly important in the life of Cluny were the processions made by the community every Sunday after the morning mass, passing from the church to the infirmary, then around the cloister past each of the monastic buildings.

### NUNS

Although male monasteries had the highest profile in medieval society, monasteries for women were also an important feature of the medieval world. In most respects the life of nuns was very similar to those of their male counterparts. The typical nuntery was laid out along much the same lines, albeit in mirror image, with the cloister on the north side of the church. The nuns themselves were recruited from the upper levels of society; in fact, nunneries tended, if anything, to be more socially exclusive than monasteries. This was perhaps because of a higher demand for places in nunneries. The son of a nobleman might make his living in a number of ways: he could inherit his father's position, rise through military service, or enter the secular clergy; in addition to the monastic option. For daughters there were only two principal choices: marrying a man who could support her, or entering a nuntery.

Like monks, nuns passed through a novitiate, and some were admitted as oblates. The reforms that curtailed the offering of boys to monasteries never went as far in the case of girls, in part because a female oblate who reached the age for taking vows was unlikely to have alternative options. Some aristocratic women also entered nunneries in their later years. Nunneries might also include lay sisters, but they relied more heavily on the hired labor of both female and male workers.

The nun's habit was a long tunic, with a veil that covered her head. Instead of the tonsure, her hair was cropped short. The veil was traditionally worn by married women as a sign of modesty, and this practice was adopted by nuns, not only for modesty, but as a symbol of their status as the brides of Christ. Most nuns were Benedictines. Monks were expected to refrain from excessive contact with women, and the various reformed orders from the tenth century onward were ambivalent about the idea of accepting affiliated

orders of nuns, although a few new orders of nuns did arise in the High Middle Ages. Even Cluny had its misgivings: the monastery's statutes in the twelfth century forbade the founding of a nunnery within four miles of a Cluniac house.

The organization of the nunnery was similar to that of a monastery, with authority vested in the hands of an abbess, assisted by a prioress and obedientiares. One major difference was that nuns could not be priests, since the priesthood was forbidden to women. As a result, every nunnery needed the services of a priest who could celebrate mass for the nuns. The activities in a nunnery were similar to those in a monastery: the daily cycle was built around the Divine Office, and the nuns' work often featured reading and writing. In addition, nuns were often called on to use their aristocratic skills in needlework to furnish richly embroidered cloths for liturgical use.

### FUNCTIONS OF THE MONASTERY

The Divine Office lay at the heart of the monastery's purpose, but the institution also fulfilled a variety of additional functions. We have already seen the political and economic activities of monasteries, which tended to distract from the monastery's spiritual functions, although they did allow some monks to contribute to society by bringing their own spiritual perspective to bear on the world outside the cloister. Other monastic activities were more directly related to the monastery's spiritual purpose. Almsgiving was considered an essential part of a virtuous Christian life and was integrated into the monastic routine. Surplus food and clothing were saved for distribution to the needy, and the almoner made a weekly tour through the town of Cluny, bringing bread and wine to any paupers who were sick. Cluny also supported eighteen paupers within its walls on a permanent basis, lodging them in the almshouse at the gate of the cloister. Some monasteries had facilities for the long-term housing of the elderly, typically people of substance who had given money or property to the monastery, or promised it as a legacy, in exchange for support during the donor's old age. Other monasteries simply furnished food and support to nonresident pensioners on similar terms.

The monastery also provided hospitality for travelers in an age when inns were not always easy to find. Many of the monastery's visitors were aristocrats, particularly lay patrons and other important figures, but others were ordinary folk, in many cases pilgrims making a journey to a shrine. Some of these were visitors to the monastery itself. Cluny attracted a constant stream of pilgrims who visited the abbey's collection of holy relics, most notably the ashes of Saints Peter and Paul. In the twelfth century Cluny also acquired a fragment of the Cross, a finger of St. Stephen, and a tooth of John the Baptist. Guests were allowed to stay overnight, receiving a pound of bread and a measure of wine on the day of their arrival, and half a pound of bread with wine on the second day. Pilgrims to Cluny were given a penny on their departure, provided they had not previously visited during the same year.

Also important was the monastery's role in learning and literacy. Christianity was a religion based on written texts, and literacy was essential to allow the monk to fulfill his spiritual obligations. During the early Middle Ages, literacy in the secular world was largely limited to priests, who were too few and too isolated to have much impact on the general level of learning in their society. Monasteries by contrast were concentrated literate communities that served as focal points for study and education. Monastic schools were especially influential during the early Middle Ages, at a time when other educational institutions were practically nonexistent; even some secular students acquired their learning in schools run by monasteries outside the cloister. During the High Middle Ages, other types of schools became more common, and literacy spread among the upper levels of lay society, so the predominance of monasteries as intellectual centers declined, although they still remained important participants in the intellectual life of medieval society. Cluny in particular had a high reputation for learning in the twelfth century.

A part of the intellectual importance of monasteries was their contribution to the study, preservation, and composition of written texts. The Benedictine rule made provision for work as an integral part of monastic life. Saint Benedict envisaged manual labor as an important part of monastic work, but by the High Middle Ages, the aristocratic population of the monasteries had largely



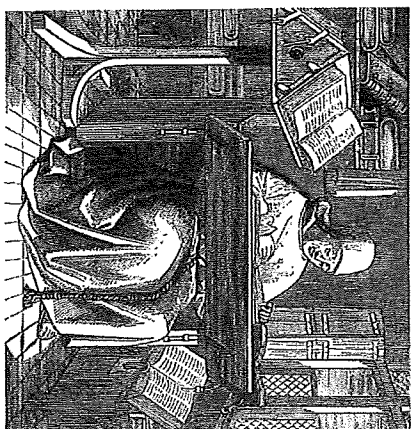
abandoned physical work in favor of the more genteel occupations of reading and writing. In some monasteries each monk was assigned a suitable text to read each year, which he was required to finish by the end of twelve months. The copying of books was also regarded as appropriate work for a monk. In principle, the monk was expected to read and copy only texts that advanced the spiritual goals of the monastery. In practice, this definition was extended to include a wide variety of secular writings: histories, because they showed the unfolding of God's plan for humanity; medical treatises, because they helped the monk attend to the sick; literature, because it taught styles of writing that the monk could employ in his own writings. Monastic copying contributed enormously to the availability of books in their own time, and to the survival of texts into the present day. Indeed, access to classical Roman literature today is largely due to the efforts of monastic copyists. Monastic production of books was especially important as all books had to be copied by hand, and for much of the Middle Ages the secular audience for books was too small for significant secular resources to be devoted to this labor-intensive work. Continual copying by monastic scribes meant that some monasteries assembled substantial libraries, in an age when such facilities were extremely rare. The library at Cluny held 570 volumes in the twelfth century, at a time when even a hundred books constituted a respectable institutional library, and two hundred and fifty was outstandingly large.<sup>9</sup> The monks were also the authors of important works of their own, and as with the books they copied, these were not exclusively spiritual in nature: much of our knowledge of medieval history derives from the works of monastic chroniclers.

Copying books is just one of the ways in which monasteries helped maintain Europe's link to its classical Roman heritage. The monastery, as an institution deliberately isolated from the outside world, was less directly affected by the decay of Roman institutions than was the secular church that served society at large. Of course, as institutions without military resources for self-defense, they were especially vulnerable to the violence of the times, yet they also had internal resources that made for institutional strength, many of them reflecting their Roman origins. Their emphasis on constitutional structures and on the authority of written rules provided direction and stability, an aspect of the monastery that

was emphatically Roman in spirit. Ironically, these spiritual institutions might be said to represent the heirs in the West to the warlike legions of Rome. They fostered a sense of purpose and discipline through a highly regimented lifestyle. This aspect of monastic life may in part reflect the background of Saint Pachomius, one of the principal authors of the monastic system, who was himself an ex-soldier of the Roman army. A powerful strain of military imagery runs through monastic language and thought, characterizing the life of the monk as a kind of spiritual warfare waged by the monastic army, evoked in the Benedictine rule itself:

My words are now directed to you, who, renouncing your desires, are taking up the very mighty and splendid arms of obedience to fight for the lord king Christ.<sup>10</sup>

Such language doubtless had a special appeal for the medieval monk, now cloistered, but remembering a childhood in the martial atmosphere of the aristocratic household.



A SCRIPTORIUM MONK copies a text from a book on his writing-table.