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## The Monastic Enclosure

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**ABSTRACT:** The moral and physical enclosure of monks and nuns is central to the founding documents of Western monasticism. But even there it encountered the need for monasteries to interact with their societies, through recruits, hospitality, and the monastic economy. The increasing intensity of this tension is traced through key reforming texts, until later English visitations open up religious houses to closer scrutiny, ironically aided by inmates' quandary over whether to conceal or reveal their secrets.

**KEYWORDS:** monasticism; enclosure; Benedictines; Cistercians; visitation; Benedict XII; reform

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# The Monastic Enclosure

BENJAMIN THOMPSON

Of the many forms of openness discussed in this book, monasticism touches on a good number: physical, spiritual, intellectual, individual, and institutional. Physical openness, and its antithesis or complement, closedness, is embodied not only in celibacy, but also movement: the freedom of religious to leave the precinct, and the liberty afforded to others to enter it. The founding text of Western monasticism, the Rule of Benedict, prohibited these freedoms; but they varied between different monastic rules, orders, and cultures, and they changed over time, in principle and practice. Spiritual openness was naturally fundamental to monastic culture. The human responds to God opening himself to humanity in the Incarnation with an open soul, the ordinary Christian in the routine of prayer and confession, the mystic by a complete emptying out of self to allow the divine to fill it. Between these extremes, the monastic practice of obedience, which at first sight seems restricted and closed, sought to train the will to be open to the will of God and ultimately to conform to it.

Religious houses have not traditionally been identified with intellectual openness. Their early medieval learning is held to have been challenged by the high medieval secular scholars who advocated rational questioning of inherited truth and opening texts up to interpretation. Apart from the injustice this does to monastic thinkers, monasteries also played a role in preserving texts and keeping them

available, or open, especially in the early period, and they continued to disseminate them through society, for instance in preaching or reproducing devotional books, right through to the printing press. Internal monastic practice centred around the inculcation of liturgical, biblical, and regulatory texts and their elucidation, or opening up, for the religious. And the external history of monasticism can be seen as a contest over the interpretation of its key texts, above all the Rule, both between and within orders.

Individuals are both closed and open, both unique and part of a larger continuum. They have their own identity distinct from all others, defined by the boundaries of the self; but they are interdependent and formed through interaction with other people and the societies they inhabit. The relationship between the individual and the community is a key feature of monasticism. We may view monasteries institutionally in the same way. Each was unique, and the Rule prescribed independence for each house; but increasingly most were part of orders or provinces, and members of Church, kingdom, and Christendom. Competition between houses and orders and with other parts of the Church helped to define identities. The boundary between the monastery and its immediate local society will be of particular interest here: how far could the enclosure prescribed by the Rule be maintained and isolate a house from external influences?

Monastic history can be written both from the inside and the outside.<sup>1</sup> Internal evidence is plentiful for the liturgy, for regimes of regulation and governance, and for texts written and copied by monks attesting to their learning, culture, and sometimes spirituality.<sup>2</sup> Visit-

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1 For a general introduction (including the matters discussed above): C. H. Lawrence, *Medieval Monasticism: Forms of Religious Life in Western Europe in the Middle Ages*, 2nd edn (London: Longman, 1989); and now much more fully, *The Cambridge History of Medieval Monasticism in the Latin West*, ed. by Alison I. Beach and Isabelle Cochelin, 2 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), and, less comprehensively, *The Oxford Handbook of Christian Monasticism*, ed. by Bernice M. Kaczynski (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020); for England, still, David Knowles, *The Monastic Order in England*, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963) and *The Religious Orders in England*, 3 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1948–59). Only a tiny proportion of the vast literature on monasticism can be cited here. For a thoughtful essay, see Ludo J. R. Milis, *Angelic Monks and Earthly Men: Monasticism and its Meaning to Medieval Society* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1992), although I offer a different interpretation.

2 See e.g. Knowles, *Monastic Order*, chs 23–31.

ations and financial accounts can give us a more mundane glimpse into a house's experience.<sup>3</sup> Equally plentiful are records of the acquisition, tenure, and exploitation of property, which locate a religious house in its economy and local society, its nexus of patrons and benefactors, tenants and servants, supporters and competitors.<sup>4</sup> Wider evidence sees the monastery as an object of the jurisdiction of Crown, episcopate, and religious orders. I first came across monasticism through the Cistercian reforms and images of the isolation of Fountains and Rievaulx, and later stayed at the Trappist Caldey Island; but my doctoral work was very much from the outside, on the role of religious houses in local society.<sup>5</sup> Knitting together these two perspectives is the core challenge for the monastic historian.

In principle they are complementary: sealing off monks and nuns from society was intended to open them up to God. Selected monastic officials engaged with the external world so as to ensure the house's material viability and allow others the necessary isolation. But this balance could be easily upset, in practice by the pull of the world beyond what was strictly necessary, or in principle by monastic idealism to change it and pressures on religious to demonstrate their utility in it. The internal/external dichotomy might therefore be experienced as tension rather than complement, whether for the individual — St Bernard oscillating between seeking union with God in his bare cell and participating in the great affairs of Europe — or the institution (we will observe tensions between enclosed religious and worldly officials), or in competing ideals about how far religious should contribute to society. Whether enclosure and openness were complementary or in conflict is in itself a matter of interest.

Openness can therefore be approached, a little paradoxically, through the monastic enclosure. The Benedictine Rule prescribed a near-impermeable barrier around the monastery in order to restrict interaction with society outside, to prevent both religious leaving the precinct, and others entering it. But the enclosure was also a metaphor

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3 See the final section below.

4 See e.g., from a large literature, Barbara F. Harvey, *Westminster Abbey and its Estates in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977).

5 My original approach was much influenced by Richard W. Southern, *Western Society and the Church in the Middle Ages* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), ch. 6. See various articles of my own cited here.

for spirituality, and was contrasted with external secularity, whose most striking manifestations were money, sex, and time. Time, so crucial to the rhythm of the monastic day, was to be used for God and the community, for the divine office and manual labour; but it was all too easily diverted towards secular busy-ness, even under the cover of necessary administration. Sex was the most egregious transgression of a code of personal behaviour requiring dedication to God and resistance or closure to the wiles of the world, for which it also functioned as a metaphor; it was also connected to meat-eating. Third, since goods were to be held in common, private property detracted from the common life and closed members off from each other individualistically; money functioned as a metaphor for the failure of community. Enclosure thus constituted both a set of literal rules for religious, and an analogue for the secularity which they might encounter outside, or which might enter the monastery.

This far-from-comprehensive three-part survey will proceed by scrutinizing a selection of texts from nearly a millennium of monastic history. First, the Rule itself, Lanfranc's Cluniac-influenced customs for post-Conquest English monasticism, and the early Cistercian statutes are considered. Second, the papal reform proposals of the 1330s provide a focus for the state of the enclosure at that point. While all these texts were normative, they were also increasingly informed by practice. Finally, the later Middle Ages are analysed through late medieval visitations: these might *prima facie* seem to depict actual practice, but turn out to be at least as valuable for the discourses and assumptions they recorded and perpetuated — openly or not, as we shall see.

#### RULES AND CUSTOMS

The Rule of Benedict was clear that the monastery was an enclosed space in which the brothers were trained in the Lord's service, and which should not be unnecessarily breached by dealings with the outside world.<sup>6</sup> The whole text is very internalized in its tone and

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6 Many editions and translations are available, including online. *RB 1980: The Rule of St Benedict in Latin and English with Notes*, ed. and trans. by Timothy Fry (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1981), is the most frequently cited modern scholarly edition. Privileging the Rule is of course problematic: Albrecht Diem and

coverage; it is almost entirely devoted, after a statement of monastic ideals, to detailed prescriptions for the liturgy, monastic discipline, and the regulation of the monastery's daily life. Ideally, the house is to be constituted so that all necessities such as water, the mill, and the garden are placed inside the precinct and various crafts ('*artes diversas*') can be conducted there, with no need for monks to wander outside to the detriment of their souls (c. 66). There is hardly any comment on the world beyond the monastery, and the monks' contact with it is tightly controlled: they will be punished if they leave the enclosure ('*claustra monasterii*'), even for a small thing, without the abbot's permission (c. 67). Equally, there is very little reference to outsiders coming into the house, except as recruits or guests; there are no references to servants, except in the spiritual sense and to the monks serving each other (c. 35). Even the procedures for receiving postulants make no reference to their external origins, except that wandering monks from far away ('*de longiquis*') might ask to stay (c. 61). All such applicants are quickly incorporated into the monastery, and into the text of the Rule.

Nevertheless, it is briefly acknowledged that some brothers will be working too far away to come frequently to the oratory, and that others might need to go on business (c. 50). Moreover, hospitality and almsgiving are fundamental duties of the religious. Guests attract a detailed and careful account of their reception and provision: accommodation and food are always to be ready for them, they eat with the abbot at his table, and two monks by annual turns staff their kitchen (c. 53). Relief of the poor is the fourth of the seventy-three instruments of God's works (c. 4), although thereafter they are mentioned rather in passing: the cellarer is to provide for them (c. 31), great care is to be taken with the reception of the poor and travellers (c. 53), they might knock on the door of the house (c. 66), and worn-out clothes and those of novices may be given to them (cc. 55, 58). Even in this very internally focused rule, therefore, which does not comment at all on society outside, the world cannot be entirely kept out. The tension between the enclosure and the need for some contact cannot be avoided altogether.

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Philip Rousseau, 'Monastic Rules (Fourth to Ninth Century)', in *Cambridge History of Medieval Monasticism*, ed. by Beach and Cochelin, 1, pp. 162–94.

Nevertheless, there is a series of safeguards. The guestmaster is to handle guests, who not only eat separately with the abbot, but have a separate kitchen and accommodation so that they do not disturb the monks (cc. 31, 53, 56). Moreover no monk is to address them unless ordered to do so by the abbot. There are strict rules for monks working outside the monastery or sent on journeys: they must say the offices wherever they find themselves (c. 50); they must not eat outside if on a journey of less than a day, even if pressed, on pain of excommunication (c. 51); and they must not relate what they have seen or heard in the world, which is very destructive ('quia plurima destructio est'; c. 67). The porter was to act as the intermediary between the monastery and the world, in a no-man's-land which enabled him to control the interface (c. 66). Letters and gifts sent from outside were carefully regulated: nothing was to be received but through the abbot, who could decide to give anything to another brother even if sent by family (c. 54). Nobles bringing oblates must promise not to give them anything (c. 59), just as new monks divest themselves of all their property and clothes (c. 58). Private property is to be completely forbidden, because monks should not even control their own bodies and wills; everything is to be distributed only by the abbot (cc. 33–34, 55). Thus the Rule exerts careful control not only over contact with the world but also over worldliness. Indeed, while there are plentiful emphasis on the use of time and strict injunctions against property, women are simply not mentioned at all in the text.

Western monasticism's subsequent evolution through the Anianic and Cluniac reforms informed Archbishop Lanfranc's *Constitutiones*, written in the 1070s both specifically for his cathedral priory at Canterbury and more generally to remould conquered English monasticism.<sup>7</sup> Although the sense of interiority remains strong in a document that is still primarily internally focused, the world outside is slightly more present than in the Rule. The rules for monks going on journeys are more detailed and elaborate, with instructions for their blessing when departing and returning and for saying the offices, as well as the injunction to avoid 'curiositatem, scurrilitatem, otiositatem' (c. 97).

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7 *The Monastic Constitutions of Lanfranc*, ed. and trans. by David Knowles, rev. by C. N. L. Brooke (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), pp. xvi–xx, xxviii–xlii; the edition tracks the synergies with the Cluniac customs.

Obedientiaries returning with their servants were to be checked by the guestmaster for correct behaviour (c. 90). A brother might die when away from the house and need to be brought back on a horse (c. 114). The almoner was to go round the locality to find the poor and relieve their wants (c. 91), a Cluniac practice that in fact did not catch on in England.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, the poor are much more present than in the Rule, not only on major festivals such as Maundy Thursday (when they were led into the cloister and personally given tuppence by each monk; cc. 28–32), but also in the distributions of food in memory of deceased abbots (three poor men daily for a year) or monks (one pauper for a month, at the abbot's discretion; cc. 82, 113).<sup>9</sup> There are many more details about the reception of guests, whether layperson, cleric, or monk (c. 90). Visitors might be shown round the buildings, although not in riding-boots or barefoot. Laity might be admitted to adore the cross on Good Friday (cc. 40–45). Nobles brought in their sons to be oblates (c. 105), and might also come to ask for confraternity with the house, when they would sit beside the abbot (c. 108); laypeople could also be buried in the precinct (c. 87). There are now several mentions of servants around the monastery, although monks were not to talk to them unnecessarily (cc. 85, 90, 91). Moreover, women appear in the text: the almoner should be careful not to enter a house where a sick woman was lying but only to send necessaries with servants (c. 91); and women could apparently seek confraternity in person, presumably if they were noble enough (c. 108).<sup>10</sup> If these signs are occasional, it is hard to avoid the sense of the world edging its way into the cloister.

It was these and other incursions that provoked the semi-eremitical reaction that we associate above all with the Cistercians.<sup>11</sup> Monasteries were not to be constructed in cities, castles, or towns,

8 *Constitutions of Lanfranc*, p. 132 n. 334.

9 Regular daily distributions may be simply assumed; they are very present at Cluny: 'Antiquiores Consuetudines Cluniacensis Monasterii Collectore Udalrico Monacho Benedictino', *Patrologia Latina* [PL], ed. by J.-P. Migne, 221 vols (Paris: Garnier, 1844–64), 149. 635–778 (henceforth 'Ulrich'), III. 24; 'Ordo Cluniacensis per Bernardum Saeculi XI. Scriptorem', in *Vetus Disciplina Monastica*, ed. by Marquard Herrgott (Paris: Caroli Osmont, 1726), pp. 134–364 (henceforth 'Bernard'), I. 3, 9, 13.

10 Such must be the meaning of the exception 'si mulier non sit' attached to the kissing of the brothers.

11 *Narrative and Legislative Texts from Early Cîteaux*, ed. by Chrysogonus Waddell (Cîteaux: Commentarii cistercienses, 1999), pp. 458–68.



'but in places removed from contact with people' (sed in locis a conversatione hominum semotis; c. 1). Monks were not to stay outside the cloister (c. 6), and women were absolutely forbidden to enter it, or monastic granges, whatever the necessity (c. 7). The emphasis on basic simplicity replicated these injunctions metaphorically: the Rule was to be followed closely in questions of food, clothing, and *mores* (c. 2). Clothing was to be 'simplex et vilis', without cloaks, shirts, or wool (c. 4); vestments must not have silk, gold, or gems (c. 10). There was to be no white bread (c. 14), nor meat or even fat or lard in abbeys or granges, unless for the sick (c. 24). But the Cistercian insistence on self-sufficiency required some reconfiguration of the monastery's relationship with the world. Refusing external revenues (rents, churches, altars, burial fees, tithes, manors, serfs, taxes on lands, dues from ovens or mills), which were hostile to monastic purity (c. 9), monks were instead to cultivate land, far from the habitations of seculars, by the labour of their own hands (c. 5). But such monks would struggle to attend the offices eight times a day, and the expansion of a house's estates might require external pernoctation. Circumventing the ban on serfs or hired servants, therefore, the order created a labour force of *conversi* or lay brothers to cultivate the monastic granges: they took vows for a modified form of monastic life without the liturgical obligations or rigorous discipline of a choir monk, as the monks' partners in temporal and spiritual things (c. 8). This arrangement was partly an exercise in relabelling, and raised questions of supervision which are hinted at in the statutes: monks might be sent to a grange, but must not stay long (c. 6). Thus the Cistercian attempt to remove the monastery from the world still required negotiation with it, and compromises which were not to have an entirely successful future.<sup>12</sup>

The relationship between the individual and the community within the monastery was configured in different ways in these texts. Closure to the world aimed to maximize, within the community, openness of the religious to each other. The Rule prescribed, for the parts of the day not occupied in communal liturgy, manual labour and spiritual

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12 Janet Burton and Julie Kerr, *The Cistercians in the Middle Ages* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2011), pp. 155–56.

reading (c. 48), which the Cistercians interpreted to require a threefold balance that they set out to restore.<sup>13</sup> But the Rule actually said rather little about labour and reading, and devoted most of its space to collective activities in church, chapter, and refectory; the overall emphasis is on the life lived in common. In fact, Benedictine practice between the seventh and eleventh centuries saw public liturgy expand to occupy most of the day, above all at Cluny.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, Lanfranc, following Cluniac texts, enjoined frequent saying of individual ‘psalmi familiares’ through the day: as each monk prayed for their family, friends, and benefactors, they maintained at least an imaginative connection to the world they had left.<sup>15</sup> The Cistercians went further in carving out individual spiritual space: they cut centuries of liturgical accretion back to the precise provisions of the Rule so as to restore not only manual labour but also private prayer and spiritual reading (c. 2).<sup>16</sup> Monks could cultivate a more direct connection with God individually, rather than with and through fellow-monks.

Flight from the world did not mean it could be ignored: the necessity of survival, the need for recruits, and the demands of hospitality and almsgiving all required some negotiation with it. And the complexities of relationships within the monastery opened up more dimensions of monastic openness.

#### REFORM IN THE 1330s

The Cistercians were only one manifestation of the high medieval ferment of religious movements seeking to configure their relationship to the world in increasingly different ways.<sup>17</sup> Some were even more ascetic, such as the Carthusian monks who lived in individual cells and spent very little time in communal activity. Others lived more in the world so as to minister to it, while still living under vows and by different standards; the friars, recalling earlier movements of wandering

13 Knowles, *Monastic Order*, pp. 211–12.

14 Lawrence, *Medieval Monasticism*, pp. 80–81, 100–01.

15 *Constitutions of Lanfranc*, pp. xxii–xxv, 6, 10, 12, 20, 26, 32, 74, 124, 136.

16 See n. 13 above; Cistercian statutes, cc. 22, 47 (in *Narrative and Legislative Texts from Early Cîteaux*).

17 For the general developments in this paragraph, Lawrence, *Medieval Monasticism*, chs 8, 10–12.

hermits, went further than the canons in rejecting landed property and living by mendicancy. Hospitals, military orders, increasing space for women, and other developments all testified to a diversification of the ways in which people sought to live a religious life with different forms and degrees of (un)worldliness. If there had ever been a 'Benedictine monopoly', it was firmly ended in the long twelfth century.

The Cistercians also exemplify the corollary of these multiple inspirations: their channelling into institutions and religious orders. The Rule itself had been one of many late antique attempts to institutionalize world-rejecting asceticism into a cenobitic or collective form of life. As 'a little rule for a beginning' for 'a school in the Lord's service', it acknowledged the need to train recruits in the ascetic life and to perpetuate spiritual inspiration beyond a single generation within institutional structures.<sup>18</sup> Rules, constitutions, general chapters, and visitation — typically thought to have been perfected by the Cistercians — were designed to preserve ascetic standards and prevent inevitable decline. But institutionalization also involved compromise and itself risked diluting original fervour. Thus both the ever-present possibility of actual decline in standards and the institutionalization which was designed to prevent it made current reality vulnerable to criticism in the light of a primitive ideal.<sup>19</sup> Calls for correction and reform were endemic to monastic orders, as they were throughout the Church as a whole.<sup>20</sup>

The Benedictines caught up with the better-structured new orders in 1215 with their organization by Innocent III into provincial chapters.<sup>21</sup> This generated systematic evidence of provincial legislation, along with sporadic records of visitation.<sup>22</sup> But by the early fourteenth

18 'Minimam inchoationis regulam', 'dominici scola servitii' (*Rule of Benedict*, prologue, c. 73); see also Lawrence, *Medieval Monasticism*, pp. 11–25.

19 I have no space here to discuss a further pressure that shaped the development of religious houses and orders, the demands of society on them; for some earlier thoughts, see my 'Introduction: Monasteries and Medieval Society', in *Monasteries and Society in Medieval England: Proceedings of the 1994 Harlaxton Symposium*, ed. by Benjamin Thompson (Stamford: Watkins, 1999), pp. 1–33.

20 Benjamin Thompson, 'The Polemic of Reform in the Later Medieval English Church', in *Polemic: Language as Violence in Medieval and Early Modern Discourse*, ed. by Almut Suerbaum, George Southcombe, and Benjamin Thompson (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2015), pp. 183–222.

21 Lateran IV, c. 12.

22 *Documents Illustrating the Activities of the General and Provincial Chapters of the English Black Monks, 1215–1540*, ed. by William A. Pantin, Camden Society, 3rd ser., 45, 47,

century there was felt to be a more urgent need for a general reform, which the Avignon Pope Benedict XII (formerly the heresy-hunter of Montailou fame, Jacques Fournier) supplied between 1335 and 1339 for his own Cistercians, as well as the Augustinians and Benedictines.<sup>23</sup> His 1336 *Summi magistri* for the latter attempted to restore many key features of the Rule, especially the enclosure.<sup>24</sup> Women were to be absolutely excluded from wherever the monks went, even their mothers and sisters (c. 20). Nor were monks to consort in such places with seculars, or indeed animals. Their interaction with servants was to be limited to necessary conversation, and was not to include eating and drinking with them (c. 21). Everyone was to sleep together in one room, not in private (c. 27). Brothers were to attend all the hours and the major Mass, and priests were to say Mass regularly (c. 28). The licence of the superior was required to leave the monastery, and only for reasonable cause (c. 25). Monks were to maintain traditional dress and were not to be given money for food or clothes (cc. 18, 24). Various other clauses forbade monks to own their own property or engage in private commerce (e.g. c. 17), including the temptation to keep items outside the monastery, on its estates, or with relatives and friends (c. 16). Thus the main elements of the Rule's vision of separation from the world and from worldliness were firmly and clearly restated.

Several indications show, however, that this attempt to uphold the original standard was to some extent hopeless. In the first place, the reiteration of these prohibitions in provincial legislation and visitations cannot be regarded as purely formulaic.<sup>25</sup> Second, Benedict XII had to compromise explicitly on one of the most basic regular provisions of all, meat-eating. While emphasizing 'moderatio, sobrietas et modestia' (c. 27), he accepted what had become common practice, that meat could be eaten on four days of the week by rotating monks to eat in

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54, 3 vols (London: Camden Society, 1931–37); Christopher R. Cheney, *Episcopal Visitation of Monasteries in the Thirteenth Century*, 2nd edn (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1983 [1st edn, 1931]).

- 23 Peter McDonald, 'The Papacy and Monastic Observance in the Later Middle Ages: The *Benedictina* in England', *Journal of Religious History*, 14.2 (1986), pp. 117–32 (p. 118).  
 24 *Concilia Magnae Britanniae et Hiberniae, a Synodo Verolamiensi A.D. CCCC XLVI. ad Londinensem A.D. M DCCXVII*, ed. by David Wilkins, 4 vols (London: R. Gosling), II, pp. 585–651.  
 25 Cheney, *Episcopal Visitation*; *English Black Monks, passim* (e.g. the first set of statutes of 1218–19, I, 8–14); and see the final section below.

the infirmary. His self-consciousness about making this concession is shown in the accompanying ban on seculars being present to observe the practice, to prevent them denigrating the religious life, an attempt to enclose the monastery from public knowledge. And third, the whole programme was soon undermined both by his successor and by local action.<sup>26</sup> Clement VI suspended all the penalties enforcing *Summi magistris*, leaving it to visitors armed largely with exhortation. Then the English Benedictines watered them down by various quasi-legal fixes, such as creative accounting with the numbers on which the permitted proportion of meat-eaters was calculated, and other little exceptions: private use of a house's property and alms was acceptable for pious purposes, as was possession of small personal items; silence in the refectory was only to be observed while the president was eating, after which quiet chat was permitted.

*Summi magistris* also shows that monks lived in a more complex world, especially with respect to the monastic economy and the interconnections between houses. The splitting of monasteries' sometimes widely scattered estates between different obedientiaries combined with the insistence on the direct management of manors (a feature of the English economy from c. 1200) required increasing numbers of monastic officials to engage in business, handle goods and money, and leave the precinct. To ensure that monasteries were not defrauded by private interest, Benedict XII banned inessential leases and the delegation of the food-administration to non-monks (cc. 15, 19). It was accepted that obedientiaries out on business would not attend the hours (c. 28), and that monks might have to be absent overnight, in which case they must have cowl and breviary with them (c. 25). Thus the insistence on retaining monastic control of the economy required brothers to be out in the world far more than the Rule had envisaged.<sup>27</sup> The many connections between houses had the same effect. They were now either members of monastic orders or collected into provincial chapters; and larger houses also had dependent priories, cells, and granges, as well as parochial and other benefices sometimes staffed

26 McDonald, 'Benedictina in England', pp. 124–25.

27 See common legislation around monks visiting other monasteries: Ulrich, III, 22; Bernard, I, 9; *Constitutions of Lanfranc*, p. 130; *English Black Monks*, I, 82 (also II, 17–18, 39, 83, etc.).

by monks. *Summi magistri* legislated for brothers posted to a house's manors, parishes, benefices, or dependent priories: they must live in pairs (at least), follow all the rules, say the hours, live in common, and not go out on the town to eat or drink, and so on (c. 26). Discipline in cells was a long-standing problem, exacerbated in the English case by the number of priories and properties owned by French abbeys, many of them run by a monk or two sent across the Channel: often the cells produced little economic benefit for the mother-house, which was intent rather on maintaining established, if far-flung rights.<sup>28</sup> Thus the ways in which religious houses were distributed and interconnected diluted the absolute enclosure and autonomy depicted in the Rule and required a number of compromises with its principles. The text of *Summi magistri* shows us, therefore, against its will, a much more complex pattern of Benedictine interaction with the world than the internally focused Rule had suggested.

Benedict XII's own positive agenda for the monastic orders exacerbated this tension. He famously sought to modernize the monastic orders with respect to education, where the secular Church and the friars had overtaken them. Knowledge of theology and law would feed back into the monastery a better understanding of both divine excellence and human justice (c. 7). Thus each house was to have a master to teach the trivium (c. 7), and if it had twenty brethren or more it was to send a monk to the university (c. 8). This meant that some monks would be permanently out in the schools, for whom the prohibitions on receiving stipends and on private chambers were suspended (c. 9). A monk-schoolmaster would also have his own money for books and other necessities; and in the absence of a suitable monk the stipendiary schoolmaster was to be a resident secular, another incursion into the precinct. The Benedictines (and other orders) could not be autonomous in a world in which they had to compete and which made demands on them.

Late medieval monasticism was faced with a series of paradoxical challenges. The enclosure was breaking down not just (presumably)

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28 *English Black Monks*, III, index, s.v. 'monks': not to live alone, sent to cells, e.g. I, pp. 17, 267–68, II, pp. 51–52, III, pp. 115–16; Cheney, *Episcopal Visitation*, pp. 160, 170; Marjorie Morgan, *The English Lands of the Abbey of Bec* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1946), pp. 14–20, 33–37.

because of the laxity of humanity, but also because a more diverse and complex world had grown around it and threatened its distinctiveness: other ecclesiastical bodies could now perform all the functions which had once been the preserve of the Benedictines. *Summi magistri* contains contradictory responses to these predicaments. One was to reaffirm the enclosure: yet both the compromises in the text and its hobbling in the aftermath made clear that this was impossible. The other was to accept that monks needed to compete in the world and prove their social utility.<sup>29</sup> But, as well as itself breaking down the enclosure, this threatened to raise the question whether religious were necessary at all, a contradiction that ran through the remaining two monastic centuries to the Reformation.

#### LATER MIDDLE AGES: INTEGRATION AND OPENNESS

*Prima facie*, we can get close to late medieval monasteries through visitation records, which seem to 'open up' what was actually happening in them to external (and modern scholarly) scrutiny.<sup>30</sup> Prosecuting counsel can easily compile a collection of lurid images in order to condemn late medieval monasticism: the dogs thronging the cloister; monks out hunting or drinking; high-level commercial activity such as the prior with his own thousand sheep; the fancy 'frokkes' and linen underwear; the dancing in the guesthouse at Norwich; sodomy, pregnant nuns, and monks who had suspect access to women; the 'lunaticus' and violent prior of Wymondham who (quite apart from only

29 Benjamin Thompson, 'Monasteries, Society and Reform in Late Medieval England', in *The Religious Orders in Pre-Reformation England*, ed. by James G. Clark (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2002), pp. 165–95 (pp. 182–84).

30 Below, I use mainly *Visitations of the Diocese of Norwich, AD 1492–1532*, ed. by Augustus Jessopp, Camden Society, new ser., 43 (London: Camden Society, 1888; henceforth *Norwich*); but similar examples can usually be found not only in *English Black Monks*, but also in *Visitations of Religious Houses in the Diocese of Lincoln*, ed. by A. Hamilton Thompson, Canterbury and York Society, 7, 14, 21, 3 vols (London: Canterbury and York Society, 1915–27; henceforth *Lincoln*); *Visitations in the Diocese of Lincoln, 1517–1531*, ed. by A. Hamilton Thompson, Lincoln Record Society, 33, 35, 37, 3 vols (Lincoln: Lincoln Record Society, 1940–47; henceforth *Lincoln, 1517–1531*); *Collectanea Anglo-Premonstratensia*, ed. by Francis A. Gasquet, Camden Society, 3rd ser., 6, 10, 12, 3 vols (London: Camden Society, 1904–06); see Knowles, *Religious Orders*, I, pp. 78–112, II, pp. 204–18, III, pp. 39–51, 62–86. I am unable here to notice differences between male and female houses, but hope to do so elsewhere. Some houses visited were Augustinian as well as Benedictine.

attending matins once a month) inter alia drew a sword, struck two brothers with a stone in the cloister, and maliciously broke a brother's claricord, a kind of harp.<sup>31</sup> The point of visitations was to reveal and correct excesses, and the fact that we know about these and other enormities shows that they too were not tolerated by either religious or visitors.

Nevertheless, the assumptions which the parties brought to visitations reveal the weakening of the enclosure, partly because of the emphasis on regulating rather than preventing irregular practice. There were plenty of legitimate reasons for monks to be outside the precinct. Apart from business and benefices, holidays to friends or relatives were acceptable, albeit at only one per year, and walks beyond the precinct were normal but should not go too far.<sup>32</sup> Similarly, seculars were no longer to be excluded from religious houses, but their presence was to be monitored; friends were to come to the parlour in the infirmary, not to monks' chambers; the movements of female servants were to be confined to certain areas.<sup>33</sup> The number of horses kept by monasteries and their frequency of use by monks were to be limited.<sup>34</sup> The same mindset applied to the forms of worldliness entrenched in the cloister, such as the regulation of dress or meat-eating. The privatization of both space and property was now routine, as we have seen with respect to individual chambers; concern focused on their number, the equity of distribution, who went into them, what they did in them (for instance, sleeping), and what was kept in them; one monk was found to have stolen a cookery book 'furtive'.<sup>35</sup> Wages distributed on anniversaries or in lieu of pittances allowed monks to save or spend their own money, but this was to be regulated: cash was to be kept by an official until applied for, and it was to be spent only on necessities, not 'voluptuose'

31 See e.g. *Norwich*, pp. 191, 213, 215, 279 (dogs); 21, 121, 280–83 (hunting); 99, 116–17, 122, 162 (drinking); 21, 114 (commerce); 74, 77–78, 97, 201, 274, 279–82 (clothes); 75 (dancing); 109 (pregnancy), 204, 250 (sodomy), 72–78, 86–89, 96–100, 102–03, 184, etc. (suspect women); 96–99 (lunatic prior).

32 *English Black Monks*, II, pp. 114, 123, I, 67, III, p. 84; *Lincoln*, I, p. 80, III, p. 379.

33 *Norwich*, pp. 77, 79, 142; *Lincoln*, I, p. 74; Christopher R. Cheney, 'Norwich Cathedral Priory in the Fourteenth Century', *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, 20 (1936), pp. 3–30 (art. xxi).

34 *English Black Monks*, II, p. 111.

35 See the suspect women, n. 31 above; *Norwich*, pp. 54, 97, 199, 201, 204–05.



on food, drink, and worse.<sup>36</sup> The visitations reveal in time-and-place detail how the large principles of monastic texts up to even 1336 had been largely abandoned in favour of regulating excesses.

There is in fact a revealing converse strain in visitation-complaint about the failure to maintain acceptable living standards. The buildings were not kept repaired and had become ruinous; windows were broken and draughty.<sup>37</sup> Pittances and wages were not paid properly or fully; the wine was sour, meals were sparse, the meat was poor, it was too salty, there were no spices.<sup>38</sup> The habits were in poor shape; monks did not have enough firewood in winter; there were no seats in the cloister and no light in the dormitory.<sup>39</sup> Such complaints disclose at least middling expectations of material comfort, as against the poverty of the Rule. They also extend to the rigour of life. Monks were not being permitted their accustomed recreations; the rotation of duties and relaxations, whether saying the Mass and offices or eating meat in the infirmary, was not drawn up fairly; they were not permitted horses for journeys; they were forced to celebrate or attend even when ill; officials were over-zealous in correction.<sup>40</sup> These sensitivities around the distribution of favours and penalties underpin what seem to be frequent reports of divisions within communities. Sometimes the juniors thought that the obedientiaries and seniors were running things in their own interests: older monks were keeping the young in ignorance of the finances, or the seniors made the juniors perform all the divine offices in their own absence.<sup>41</sup> On the other hand some superiors favoured the younger monks as companions and officers, sidelining the seniors' influence.<sup>42</sup> This competition for the fruits of both comfort and leisure is revealing of a set of expectations almost opposite to that of the Rule.

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36 Cheney, 'Norwich Cathedral Priory', arts xvi–xvii.

37 *Norwich*, *passim* (e.g. pp. 18, 71–79, 85–87, 95–101, 101–06, 198).

38 *Norwich*, pp. 61, 96, 101, 106, 198, 280–82 (wages); 16, 26, 86, 96, 121, 139, 145, 283, 286–87, 290–91 (food and wine); *Lincoln*, III, p. 376 (spices).

39 *Norwich*, pp. 4, 23, 102, 105, 128, 185.

40 *Norwich*, pp. 61, 73, 74, 76, 108, 118, 139, 211, 249 (recreations); 26, 53, 138–40, 193, 216, 250, 253 (correction); *Lincoln*, I, pp. 37, 105–06, II, pp. 55–59, 305, 309, 316 (horses).

41 *Norwich*, pp. 73, 197–98, 203, 205, 253, 281–83, 290.

42 *Norwich*, pp. 74, 77, 143, 165; and for general tensions with unruly juniors, e.g. pp. 109, 202.

These tensions even had an effect on the core monastic function of collective liturgy. Houses that were struggling for material viability were likely to underperform. Debt was frequently reported, and the failure of officials to account or make inventories was common. Thus not enough monks were maintained, or enough boys in the almonry (who sang at some hours); or enough monks at the university or schooling in the house.<sup>43</sup> The vestments were in a poor state, and the books, especially liturgical ones, were not kept in good order (in one case doves were said to be befowling them); the bells needed repair, there was no clock.<sup>44</sup> Perhaps more insidiously, the elaboration of offices and obediences had broken the community down into different departments and groups. Obedientaries might form a strong majority of the strength of a smaller monastery, and one third of a large one.<sup>45</sup> There was therefore a perennial concern over the religious' attendance at the divine office, which both sloth and legitimate business precluded.<sup>46</sup>

What visitation records reveal depends on the tension between their open- and closed-ness. The visitors' aim was to prise open the hidden secrets and defects of the house.<sup>47</sup> They did this, after an 'opening' ceremony, firstly through secret, one-to-one interviews which disclosed *detecta* only to the visitor and his staff. Then the *comperta* were revealed and injunctions published. How keen were visitors to find anything? That some were less intent than others is suggested by series of routine records depicting what may have been routine occasions; visitors' main object might be to assert jurisdiction and collect procurations rather than finding fault, exposing scandal, and putting themselves to the trouble of correction.<sup>48</sup> But, equally, zealous visitors like Bishop Alnwick of Lincoln were deeply concerned for the state of the houses, as witnessed by the detailed nature of the records they generated and their care in preserving them.<sup>49</sup>

43 *Norwich*, pp. 7, 96, 107, 161–64, 165, 192, 253.

44 *Norwich*, *passim*, e.g. pp. 77, 161–62 (incl. doves); 61, 98, 163, 209 (clocks).

45 See the officers named in the visitations as a proportion of all the religious, e.g. Walsingham, 1532, *Norwich*, pp. 314–15.

46 A frequent complaint throughout visitations; see nn. 41–42 above.

47 For procedure see Hamilton Thompson's introductions in *Lincoln*, I, pp. ix–xii, II, pp. xliv–lxii.

48 See many of the 1532 visitations in *Norwich*, pp. 270–319.

49 *Lincoln*, II–III; cf. the often lighter *Lincoln, 1517–1531*, II–III.

Although the religious were obliged to open up about their house's faults, those in lax institutions might have a common incentive to close ranks and keep them hidden. The more open to the world they were, the greater the premium on keeping this close. We have explicit reports of brothers agreeing not to report anything.<sup>50</sup> In fact, the visitations where some or all report 'omnia bene' raise suspicion.<sup>51</sup> Apart from a possible desire to conceal enormities, they may suggest lax expectations which did not see anything much wrong in behaviour which would have horrified the founding fathers, or was reported by others. Sometimes in such cases it is evident that everything was far from good.<sup>52</sup> Deponents occasionally revealed that their superior had told them to keep quiet.<sup>53</sup> Corrupt heads had an evident incentive to go down this path: correcting the abbot of St Benet's misdeeds would cost him two hundred marks.<sup>54</sup> We know of these instances, of course, because brethren did not comply and opened up. This was often a result of a house divided by rivalries and resentments; monks out of favour with the ruling clique had the opposite incentive to blab to the visitors, often motivated by the unequal distribution of the fruits of monastic living. Hence the sense of querulousness and division that seems to pervade all-too-many religious houses, with resentments boiling over into reports of bad language and insults, quarrels and dissensions, and occasionally violence.<sup>55</sup> One visitor anticipated further trouble around his own injunctions and enjoined the brothers not to quarrel (openly?) about the *comperta* but to live peacefully thereafter.<sup>56</sup> Thus the impression these reports give may itself be distorted, precisely because the visitation process encouraged mutual complaint, covered by the relative anonymity of the individual interview. Perhaps these apparently dramatic snapshots of internal dissensions may paint too lurid a picture of houses which in practice exhibit merely a few containable

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50 *Norwich*, p. 126.

51 See n. 48 above; and *Norwich, Lincoln and Lincoln, 1517–1531, passim*.

52 Also *Lincoln, 1517–1531*, I, pp. lxxiv–lxxv, lxxxI.

53 *Norwich*, p. 114; *Lincoln*, II, p. 193.

54 *Ibid.*, p. 126.

55 *Passim* and above; and for divided houses, e.g. *Norwich*, pp. xix, 71–79, 113–23, 196–206; *Lincoln, 1517–1531*, II, pp. lxxv–vi.

56 *Norwich*, p. 7; see also p. 123, where the visitor warned the prior (see n. 53 above) not to punish any of his canons for their conduct during the visitation.

rivalries. These records may therefore open up more than was really warranted — or the apparent openness of ‘omnia bene’ may in fact close down all sorts of hidden problems.

We may ask, finally, how were the *comperta* and injunctions published, or made open? Did these texts have active agency in the world to change future behaviour? Efficient bishops filed a copy in their chancery, and presumably deployed them in the scandalous cases where they planned to return in a few months.<sup>57</sup> But with the usual interval of several years or more, the chances are that such records languished, closed in the archives.<sup>58</sup> Indeed, summonses to visitations might include a demand for previous injunctions; but equally they might not.<sup>59</sup> The present injunctions were addressed to the house, and at Ramsey in 1432 Bishop Gray enjoined that they be put up in the dortor so that all the monks could see them.<sup>60</sup> But visitors explicitly did not want them published beyond the house, to save the honour and fame of the house.<sup>61</sup> Ultimately, once the visitation had been dissolved, the head recovered his jurisdiction: the prior of Walsingham had explicitly reminded — rather, threatened — his canons, ‘I will rule again.’<sup>62</sup> We have few visitation records in monastic archives: it was all too easy for heads and/or their monks to bury these texts and remove them from the consciousness of their fellows.<sup>63</sup> In closing them down, these documents were thus deprived of any power.

## CONCLUSION

Our view of late medieval monasticism is revealed in a kaleidoscopic dynamic of the openness and enclosure of the visitation procedure and the documents which recorded it. Monastic orders were as capable as individual religious houses at closing down attempts at reform, as we have seen with the *Benedictina* in England. Henry V, mindful of

57 See n. 47 above; *Lincoln*, II, pp. lv–lvi; *Norwich*, p. 7.

58 I have not found evidence of bishops bringing injunctions with them to ordinary visitations.

59 *Lincoln*, II, p. lxiii; *Norwich*, p. 21.

60 *Lincoln*, II, pp. 106–07.

61 *Lincoln*, II, pp. liv–lv, lix–lx.

62 *Norwich*, p. 114: ‘ego iterum regnabo’.

63 Cheney, *Episcopal Visitation*, pp. 13–15; *Lincoln*, II; *Lincoln, 1517–1531*, I, p. civ.

the comfort that memory of the monks' prayers brought him on the morning of Agincourt, aimed to return to 'pristine religion': greater monastic efficiency and the removal of distractions would produce unceasing prayer for the estate of realm and Church.<sup>64</sup> The thirteen articles he presented to the English Benedictines in 1421 propounded good administration but also addressed the key laxities of monastic life: horses, meat-eating, clothes, attendance at choir, private property, private chambers, and egress from the enclosure, the last two explicitly linked to access to women. The provincial chapter was obliged to engage openly with each article; but by skilful argument they closed them down to seven, with most of the loose practices essentially preserved. Their Tudor successors were more brazen when faced by Wolsey's demands for a return to 1336: they argued that religious did not want to be austere like the Carthusians or Observants, and that most would leave, denuding the monasteries and making them unable to keep up any kind of regular observance and divine service.<sup>65</sup> This was a straightforward admission that it was no longer possible for many to follow the Rule; if you wanted the monks' prayers, you would have to abandon asceticism.

It was this disjunction which Cromwell was finally able to exploit by putting monasteries into a double-bind. He exacerbated the tension between the monks' practical openness to society and their statutory enclosure. In his injunctions stability in the precinct headed the articles relating to the monastic life, followed by the exclusion of women and having only one entrance to the house.<sup>66</sup> Enforcing the enclosure flew in the face of centuries of monastic custom, but was firmly rooted in the authority of the Rule. He was thus able to create a crisis which enabled him to close down these too-open institutions. He succeeded in passing the 1536 Suppression Act in Parliament partly by manipulating an open book, in the form of the findings ('*comperta*') of his recent monastic visitation.<sup>67</sup> At a glance these appeared to show that large

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64 *English Black Monks*, II, pp. 98–134.

65 *Ibid.*, III, pp. 123–24.

66 *Concilia*, III, pp. 789–91.

67 Anthony N. Shaw, 'The *Compendium Compertorum* and the Making of the Suppression Act of 1536' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Warwick, 2003), pp. 335–54, 391–406.

numbers of monks had admitted to sexual immorality: in fact, a minority had admitted privately to self-abuse, but the book was laid out to give a visual illusion of mass confession, exploiting the openness of the visible page. Nor was this the last paradoxical conjunction of openness and enclosure in the Henrician Reformation. The genuinely enclosed and austere religious of the time, the Carthusians, who might have been able to argue for the survival of their end of the monastic spectrum on the grounds that they were still observing the old codes, and indeed might have supported Wolsey's programme, in fact opposed reform because it had become bound up with the rejection of the Pope and the enforcement of the royal supremacy and the succession.<sup>68</sup> In this final act of engagement with and openness to the world of politics, these enclosed orders guaranteed their own destruction.

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68 Knowles, *Religious Orders*, III, pp. 229–36.

Benjamin Thompson, 'The Monastic Enclosure', in *Openness in Medieval Europe*, ed. by Manuele Gragnolati and Almut Suerbaum, *Cultural Inquiry*, 23 (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2022), pp. 249–69 <[https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-23\\_13](https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-23_13)>

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