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Chapter Two The Medieval Monastic Paradox

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Chapter 2

The Medieval Monastic Paradox

I realize that to begin this history with the Christian monasteries of Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages may well call to mind hooded monks pacing abbey cloisters with manuscript books in hand, or nuns in wimple and tunic bent over desks, copying and illuminating such works, as Gregorian chants fill the air. Such cinematic images are not out of place as a backdrop to this first section of this book, although they do tend to obscure the daily hardship and sacrifice practiced by the monks and nuns whose lives I discuss. But then I, too, turn away from the gritty, rough-hewn discomforts of monastic life as I focus on how monk and nun, abbot and abbess, participated in the manuscript culture of the fourth to twelfth centuries in the Latin West. My interest is in the indebtedness of Western scholarship to early Christian monasticism, which proves to be remarkable not only in light of the barbaric tenor of the times, but as abbey and church were not, in the first instance, the great protectors of learning.

“The struggle of Christianity against intellectualism in all its forms,” according to Max Weber, was the “hallmark” of this new religion in its early years.¹ “Anti-intellectualism currents in early Christianity” are reflected in the church’s original focus on “the poor in spirit, rather than scholars,” notes this pioneer of historical sociology, writing in the first decade of the twentieth century at Heidelberg University, for Christianity lacked “the ritualistic and legalistic scholarship of Judaism and the soteriology of the Gnostic intellectual aristocrats” from the same period of Late

¹ Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretative Sociology*, eds. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 512.

Antiquity.² All that Weber is willing to grant the early church, intellectually, is “the strong influence of monastic rationalism,” which he sees evolving into the Protestant ethic of asceticism that was to prove vital, for Weber, to the success of capitalism.³

However dated Weber’s sweeping characterizations may seem today, his analysis points to the enigma by which “intellectualism in all its forms” took root in the Christian West. The history set out in this chapter starts out promisingly enough, with the intellectual flair of Saint Jerome and Saint Augustine in the fourth and into the fifth centuries. But they are superbly educated holdovers of Late Antiquity, and the devotion to learning that they brought to monasticism would be rarely seen for centuries to come after the Fall of Rome and the Rule of Benedict, whose extreme asceticism came to dominate monasticism from the sixth century onward. At the time, the learned risked charges of vanity and pride; their questioning and curiosity forged a path to heresy; and their treasured libraries brought worldly possessions into conflict with a life of prayer whose only pious goal was to look into the face of God.⁴

So how was it that the great and varied learning, which I review in later chapters, of the Venerable Bede, Hildegard of Bingen, and Anselm of Canterbury found its place within the abbey walls of the medieval monastery? How did the

² Ibid., 510, 512. In contrast to Weber’s position, Anthony Grafton and Megan Williams emphasize how “Christians inherited much, intellectually, from the great Jewish community that had existed at Alexandria before it was destroyed in the Jewish rebellion that erupted in Egypt in about 117”; *Christianity and the Transformation of the Book: Origen, Eusebius, and the Library of Caesarea* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 76.

³ Weber, *Economy and Society*, 513. Weber allows that monastic rationality and asceticism were eventually transferred, through the Protestant Reformation, “into everyday life,” where they “began to dominate worldly morality,” and as such contributed to “the tremendous cosmos of the modern economic order;” Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Rise of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (New York: HarperCollins Academic, 1930/1991), 181.

⁴ Peter Brown: “The union of hearts and minds in a monastery... showed the first hesitant stages of the creation of an ideal community that would reach fulfillment only in Heavenly Jerusalem at the end of time.” *Through the Eye of a Needle: Wealth, the Fall of Rome, and the Making of Christianity in the West, 350-550 AD* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 180.

monasteries play such a key role in the ninth-century Carolingian Renaissance? How did the few available works of Plato and Aristotle in Latin become common, despite their pagan standing, to many monastic libraries? How did a monastery not far from Rome become home to the first printing press outside of Germany?

The paradox of this peculiar medieval institution is that it did, indeed, prove to be well suited to fostering a degree of learning to which it was opposed in principle. The well-endowed, self-governing, highly disciplined monastery, operating at a remove from the world, enabled it to accumulate and retain manuscripts to a far greater extent than the cathedral and court libraries that were more susceptible to losses from war, riots, and theft.⁵

To resolve the paradox within their own lives, learned nuns and monks sought to demonstrate the value of such learning to the community; they proved its service to the piety and charity of the whole rather than detracting from them; they treated their work as part of a common good to be shared not only within their religious house but among the greater network of monasteries. All of this had an effect on their thinking about manuscripts and texts, and about composing, copying, and compiling these works. The intangible text was thought of as an object that could be ascribed to God or to a mortal author, known, unknown or multiple; it had a regulated, if often disputed, spiritual and intellectual standing that placed it within or outside this community; and that needed to be preserved, copied, corrected, assessed, and shared. This body of work reflected at many points over time, as I go on to show, what can be termed for

⁵ Ronald G. Witt, *The Two Latin Cultures and the Foundation of Renaissance Humanism in Medieval Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 10-11. Witt cautions that this preservation factor can lead to an exaggerated sense of monastic learning relative to other institutions; *ibid.*

medieval monastic life as the intellectual properties of learning.

Before turning in this chapter to the lives of the saints Jerome, Augustine, Benedict, and Radegund, as well as the statesman Cassiodorus, let me offer a word on the origins of Christian monasticism. The monastic life involves a vow to turn one's back on the world. Monasticism emulates Jesus' forty days of solitude and fasting in the desert (Matt. 4.1-11). It began in Christianity's third century with a number of the pious heading into the desert beyond the edge of the Nile's floodplains to escape persecution and the schisms within the church.⁶ The most celebrated and influential among the early monastics was Antony of Egypt. The son of wealthy landowners at the turn of the third century, he walked away from that world to embrace solitude and piety in an abandoned desert fortress. He was followed there by others, who believed his holiness could cure their ills, which only drove him deeper into the wilderness.

The hermit's solitary worship, known as eremitic monasticism, was soon supplanted by the more congenial cohabiting of monastics, led by Pachomius in fourth-century Egypt, who established religious houses for men or women along the Nile.⁷ This cenobitic form of monasticism (from Greek for "communal life") drew its scriptural inspiration from the communal association of Jesus' apostles after his

⁶ John M. McCulloh, "Confessor Saints and the Origins of Monasticism: The Lives of Saints Antony and Martin," in *The Middle Ages in Text and Texture: Reflections on Medieval Sources*, ed. Jason Glenn (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011), 22-23. Douglas Burton-Christie identifies "the considerable dispute among historians regarding the origins of monasticism, the major influences upon its rise and growth and its effects on the world," while providing a catalogue of reasons for its early desert form including that it was "a quest for knowledge (gnosis); a flight from taxes; a refuge from the law; a new form of martyrdom; revival of an earlier Jewish ascetical movement; a rejection of classical culture; an expression of Manichean dualism; a response to a call from the Gospels"; *The Word in the Desert: Scripture and the Quest for Holiness in Early Christian Monasticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 4-5.

⁷ "By the middle of the fourth century," George Ovitt Jr. writes of monasticism's spread: "the deserts of Egypt were heavily populated by men and women who practiced Christian asceticism, and who lived the harsh life credited by Philo to the Therapeutae"; "Manual Labor and Early Medieval Monasticism," *Viator* 17 (1986), 4.

ascension to heaven, and perhaps more directly from Jewish monastic communities outside of Alexandria in the first century BCE.⁸ Women were active in monasticism from the outset, with those of noble birth and marriage often leading the early monasteries. The gendered segregation of religious communities only took place after considerable debate, leading to double monasteries, as well as independent women's houses.

While this book focuses on the Latin West, monasticism also took hold in the Eastern Roman Empire. Cenobitic monasticism spread through the Greek-speaking regions of Asia Minor, led by Eustathius of Antioch and Basil of Caesarea. Saint Basil, in particular, promoted the value of the monks' constant collective labors over the far less productive and often harrowing mortification of the flesh common to hermit-monks.⁹ Basil was an advocate for the value of learning, both sacred and profane: "We must be conversant with poets, with historians, with orators," he wrote, "indeed, with all men who may further our soul's salvation."¹⁰

In the Latin West, such learning was more commonly condemned: "The philosophers are the patriarchs of the heretics," is how the Christian writer Quintus

⁸ Joan E. Taylor and Philip R. Davies describe the second-century Essenes as offering "more egalitarian and communal" Jewish monastic communities, compared to the Therapeutae, who were devoted to worshipping God in contemplative communities around Alexandria, according to the Jewish philosopher Philo; "The So-Called Therapeutae of 'De Vita Contemplativa': Identity and Character," *Harvard Theological Review* 91, no. 1 (1998), 3-24.

⁹ M. L. W. Laistner, *Thought and Letters in Western Europe, A.D. 500 to 900*, 2nd ed. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1957), 31. There was particular influence of the "exegetical traditions of Philo" and, to a more limited extent, the "ascetic practices of groups like the Therapeutae," a Jewish monastic group, on early Christian practice; *ibid.*, 76.

¹⁰ Basil, "Address to Young Men," in *Three Thousand Years of Educational Wisdom: Selections from the Great Documents*, ed. Robert Ulich, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1954/1982), 154. Laistner describes how in the East they "sanctioned contemporary higher education as a preparation for the Christian teacher and theologian"; *Thought and Letters*, 46. Monasticism breeds "athletes of Christ... striving eagerly," claimed ironic Saint Basil, "to be the last of all"; cited by Geoffrey Galt Harpham, *The Ascetic Imperative in Both Culture and Criticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 28.

Tertullian put it in the third century, referring to Plato and Aristotle.¹¹ It was Tertullian who asked, “What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What concord is there between the academy and the Church?”¹² If learning got off to a rockier start in the West, it still had the advantage of a warmer collective sense of *vita communis*, which led to cooperative networks among the monasteries in the West through which manuscripts, when they were copied, could be more readily shared. These “transregional communities,” in the estimation of historian Michael Mitterauer at the University of Vienna, were part of what set Europe on its “special path.”¹³

The Scholar-Monk Jerome

Jerome was born in 347 in the Roman town of Stridon not far from the eastern shore of the Adriatic Sea. Having been sent to Rome around the age of twelve to be schooled, he only sought the path of monasticism after making the best of that educational opportunity. After giving the life of a hermit a trial run in the Syrian desert, he returned to Rome to serve Pope Damasus, further his learning, and serve as a spiritual guide to those who would later become his monastic patrons. Having had his fill of Rome by the age of forty-one, he took up residence in a monastery near Bethlehem. It was there that he continued his Biblical studies and spiritual counsel for the remainder of his days. In seeking to distance himself from Roman society of Late Antiquity and devote himself to a life of Christian piety, he still proved particularly effective in taking the

¹¹ Quintus Tertullian, *De Anima*, ed. J. H. Waszink (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 7.

¹² Quintus Tertullian, *The Prescription against Heretics*, trans. Peter Holmes, vol. 3, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*. Eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951), 433.

¹³ Michael Mitterauer, *Why Europe? The Medieval Origins of Its Special Path*, trans. Gerald Chapple (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 185.

trappings of a Roman education and applying them to Christian ends.

More than any other of those who were later designated Fathers of the Church, Jerome was the lone figure of scholarly labor-without-end, preparing translations, compiling and composing commentaries and prefaces, and offering guidance and learned reflection to his patrons through extended letters. In numerous Renaissance portraits, Jerome is depicted as the solitary scholar-monk surrounded by books at his desk, which was often set in a stately study of the High Middle Ages and far removed from the modest monastic cell that he occupied outside of Bethlehem.¹⁴ In these portraits, a lion is often found sitting peacefully on the floor, as Jerome was said to have removed a thorn from its paw with his pen. He stood for the power and diligence of learning to undo the violent beastliness of the world.

One key to Jerome's success was the generous support of his patrons, which included a number of wealthy widow-ascetics with whom he had become friends while in Rome, giving rise to unsavory rumors, naturally, as it was Rome. Their continuing patronage enabled Jerome to fashion an exceedingly fine monastic library, rich not only in Christian literature, but with Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, and Virgil, as well as Roman and Jewish histories. He was able to hire secretaries and scribes, all of which enabled him to operate the equivalent of a scholarly publishing house, as part of a one-man center for advanced studies in Scripture, unequalled in Late Antiquity and for many centuries to follow. If he carried a good deal of his learned manner from Rome to

¹⁴ Among Renaissance portraits of Saint Jerome are those by Niccolò Antonio Colantonio, Marinus van Reymerswaele, Albrecht Dürer, Jan Van Eyck, Antonello da Messina, and Vittore Carpaccio; Jerome also served during this period as an imagined artist's model for demonstrations in new scholarly apparatuses such as book-wheels, book-holders, two-sided lecterns, and the box-study; Dora Thornton, *The Scholar in his Study: Ownership and Experience in Renaissance Italy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 54-68.

Bethlehem, he also ensured that the fruits of that learning made their way back to Rome. He saw to the distribution of his work, arranging for annual manuscript shipments to Rome, where his friends and patrons would see the work copied, placed in libraries, and spoken about in ways that were conveyed back to the author.¹⁵

What, then, of the monastic vows of poverty and the renouncing of all property? Hadn't the desert father Theodore of Pherme sold his books and given the money to the poor, following the fourth-century *Sayings of the Desert Fathers* that it was "best of all to possess nothing"?¹⁶ Jerome countered with claims to monastic humility and the charity of his learning, given that he only sought to help others learn of God's wisdom. This was to become a key motif for learned nuns and monks during the Middle Ages: "I am writing not a panegyric or a declamation but a commentary," he proclaimed in his Preface to his third book of *Commentary on Galatians*, "consequently I hope that my own words receive no praise but that others' sage words be understood as they are originally written down. The task is to elucidate obscure points, to touch only briefly on what is already clear, and to linger over things that are difficult to figure out."¹⁷

Jerome also stressed the labor of learning, making it clear that a part of himself was invested in this work, adding to a sense that a text was a property worked by an intellect, much as farmers cultivate their fields. He made it clear to his readers that he

¹⁵ Mark Vessey, "Erasmus' Jerome: The Publishing of a Christian Author," *Erasmus of Rotterdam Society Yearbook* 14, no. 1 (1994), 74; Vessey: "Jerome was an exceptional Christian writer, the first (in either Greek or Latin) to make serious claims for a specifically religious literary occupation and, of all the fathers, the one most visibly interested in the material production and dissemination of his own texts"; "Erasmus' Jerome," 98. Megan Hale Williams: "Alongside his biblical manuscripts, Jerome must have had an even larger and more costly collection of Jewish and Christian works, filling hundreds if not thousands, of codices"; *The Monk and the Book: Jerome and the Making of Christian Scholarship* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 154.

¹⁶ *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, trans. Benedicta Ward (Kalamazoo: Cistercian, 1975), 73.

¹⁷ Jerome, *Commentary on Galatians*, trans. Andrew Cain, *The Fathers of the Church*, vol. 121 (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2010), 206.

toiled without respite on translations, commentaries, and letters: “Stealing the hours of the night,” as he put it in his preface to the *Commentary on Ezekiel*, “I am endeavoring by the light of the lamp to dictate these comments... and am trying to mitigate with exposition the weariness of a mind which is a stranger to rest.”¹⁸ This point in favor of the individual effort by which learning advanced was to remain a contentious one. For however sympathetic students may generally feel toward such expressions of studied weariness, monasticism was to favor the particular humility of manual (rather than manuscript) labor and of selfless anonymity in all things, more generally.

In his bridging of Late Antiquity and the opening of the Christian medieval era, Jerome brought to Christian learning a strong sense of the author’s responsibility for the shape of a work. He carefully identified each of the authors in a miniature catalogue of important works for Christians that he constructed; he made a point of listing his own publications in his *On Illustrious Men* (*De viris illustribus*). His Scriptural commentaries took up the attribution and composition of the text. He paid attention to the authors’ language and style, demonstrating to readers how these qualities contributed to an understanding of the work. Consider his defense of Paul’s authorship of the “Letter to the Hebrews,” despite it going without Paul’s name on it and its “distance of language and style,” in Jerome’s words, from Paul’s other letters. Jerome explains the attribution through his understanding of Paul: “It is truly not a wonder, if he is seen more eloquent in his own language, that is in Hebrew, rather than

¹⁸ Jerome, “Preface to the Commentary on Ezekiel,” in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, eds. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, trans. W. H. Freemantle, 2nd series, vol. 6 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1893), 500.

in a foreign one, that is in Greek, in which language the other letters are written.”¹⁹

A knowledge of a work’s author, Jerome demonstrates, adds to the sense and sensibility of the text. This is not about the author’s exclusive ownership of the text. Apostles and monastics renounce such worldly matters. It is about helping the reader gain a greater sense of the author’s project through the whole of their work. This is why Jerome paid such attention to the accuracy and integrity of copies and translations. He was known to threaten copyists with damnation for transcription errors, establishing, in effect, a holy order of the exact copy of the author’s original and complete work.²⁰ Through these practices and principles, Jerome sought to establish for Christianity the value of attending to the intellectual properties of a text within the scope of an author’s corpus.²¹

Jerome brought a similar level of concern for the authenticity of the sources on which he based his translations. He sought out the early Hebrew versions of Biblical texts, rather than relying on Greek translations for his own Latin version. This entailed taking the time to learn Hebrew and consult Jewish scholars to establish the *Hebraica veritas*, as he referred to it, on which to base his work.²² As a result, he felt warranted

¹⁹ Jerome, “Beginning of the Prologue to the Letters of Paul the Apostle,” trans. Kevin P. Edgecomb (Biblicalia, online blog) from *Biblica Sacra Iuxta Vulgatam Versionem*, 4th ed. (Stuttgart: Württembergische Bibelanstalt, 1994).

²⁰ Jerome posted this appeal at the beginning of Eusebius’ history of the church: “I adjure thee who mayest copy this book, by our Lord Jesus Christ, and by his glorious advent when he comes to judge the quick and the dead, to compare what thou shalt write, and correct it carefully by the exemplars which thou hast followed, and also to transcribe this adjuration, and place it in the copy which thou has written out”; translated by Vessey, “Erasmus’ Jerome,” 95.

²¹ Michel Foucault: “Even while Saint Jerome’s four principles of [authorial] authenticity might seem largely inadequate to modern critics, they, nevertheless, define the critical modalities now used to display the author function”; “What Is an Author?” in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 129.

²² Williams, *Monk and the Book*, 81-95. Williams notes how this reliance does not prevent Jerome from condemning the Jews for failing to follow God’s commandments; *ibid.*, 226.

in making the scholar's claim to proprietary mastery of a text, as he sets out in the Preface to Samuel and Kings: "First read, then, my Samuel and Kings; mine, I say, mine. For whatever by diligent translation and by anxious emendation we have learnt and made our own, is ours."²³ This, for me, brings to the fore the property of accreditation among the six that I associate with learning. For Jerome, the learned earn a claim to a work through their labor and fidelity, and a claim that had much to do with the work's intellectual properties and with the work as a distinctive property.

For all the care that Jerome took with these texts, he still faced rebukes from others who shared this sense of a right in such works. Augustine of Hippo, his junior by seven years, called him out for showing less than "scrupulous fidelity" in noting his sources, to which Jerome responded that Augustine seemed "not to understand" the nature of the works he was translating.²⁴ Others charged Jerome with plagiarizing Origen, a third-century Alexandrian Christian theologian, even though Jerome credited Origen for heroic and tireless Biblical commentaries (which Jerome translated into Latin), although he did later obscure his debt to Origen after the man fell from grace within the church.²⁵ Still, Jerome was prepared at the time to admit to the "incompetence" of his methods. In his preface to his *Commentary on Galatians*, he confesses that, "I summoned my secretary and dictated either my own or others' ideas, all the while paying no attention to the method, the words, or the opinions belonging to

²³ Jerome, "Preface, The Books of Samuel and Kings," in *St. Jerome's Letters and Select Works*, 491.

²⁴ Augustine, "Letter LXXI (A.D. 403)," in *The Confessions and Letters of St. Augustine*, vol. 1 of *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, eds. Philip Schaff (New York: Charles Scribner's and Sons, 1907), 327; Jerome, "Letter LXXV (A.D. 404)," in *ibid.*, 341.

²⁵ Mark Vessey writes of the "imitation and rivalry" that marks Jerome's relation to Origen; "Jerome's Origen: The Making of a Christian Literary Persona," *Studia Patristica: Papers Presented to the International Conference on Patristic Studies* 28 (1993), 145.

each.”²⁶

For all that Jerome did to apply the learning of Antiquity to Christian ends, he also managed to cast a big chill on this enterprise. In 384, he wrote a long and decidedly strange letter on virginity to Eustochium, herself a “desert mother” supervising a nearby Bethlehem monastery. He describes in the letter a feverish nightmare that he had had a decade earlier during Lent. He sets the nightmare up by reporting how, “for the sake of the kingdom of heaven I cut myself off from home” and yet “could not bring myself to forgo the library which with great care and labor I had got together at Rome.”²⁷ The contradictions were apparent: “I would fast, only to read Cicero afterwards.”²⁸ Then, in his fevered dream it was Judgment Day and his assertion that he was a Christian was met with nothing less than, “Thou liest; thou art a Ciceronian, not a Christian. For ‘where thy treasure is, there will thy heart be also’ (Matt. 6. 21).”²⁹ Jerome had been betrayed by the very (treasured) works sitting on his desk. He vowed at the time, he tells Eustochium, that he would no longer “possess worldly books or read them.”³⁰

He may have kept his promise for a decade or so, before allowing himself once again that “almost all the books of all writers are replete with learning.”³¹ His report of the dream travelled far and was used to great effect by those who sought to discourage such learning, yet his more lasting contribution was in staking the scholar’s claim to

²⁶ Jerome, *Commentary on Galatians*, 58. See Williams, *Monk and the Book*, 190-192.

²⁷ Jerome, “Letter 22 to Eustochium, The Virgin’s Profession, Written 384 A.D.” in *Jerome: Selected Letters*, trans. F. A. Wright (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1933), 125.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., 127. On Jerome as more *Ciceronianus* than *Christianus*, Roger Ray points to Jerome’s rhetorical debts to Cicero; “Bede’s Vera Lex Historiae,” *Speculum* 55, no. 1 (1980), 4.

³⁰ Jerome, “Letter 22,” 128.

³¹ Cited by Pease, “The Attitude of Jerome towards Pagan Literature,” *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 50 (1919), 165-66.

the use of others' work. In a later letter from the year 397 to Magnus, the Roman orator, he points to the Apostle Paul's use of the Greek poet-philosopher Epimenides and the classical dramatist Menander, as an example of how Paul "had learned from the true David to wrench the sword of the enemy out of his hand and with his own blade to cut off the head of the arrogant Goliath."³² He writes as well of how, in Deuteronomy, God allowed that if one sheared the hair off a captive woman, she could be taken as a wife: "Is it surprising that I too, admiring the fairness of her form and the grace of her eloquence, desire to make that secular wisdom which is my captive and my handmaid, a matron of the true Israel?"³³ He reassures his readers that this "has always been the practice of the learned in this matter."³⁴ The practice amounts, I would point out, to an intellectual property right of use with such wisdom, which overrides any apprehensions over its pagan origins, commonly referred to as Egyptian gold (with more on this below), by redirecting it to Christian ends.³⁵

In all of his learned activity, Jerome really does seem like the original Christian man of letters, as suggested by Mark Vessey, Professor of English at the University of British Columbia.³⁶ Jerome was able to forge such a life out of Antiquity's tradition of the patronized author, to which he added the monastic qualities of humility, charity, communality, and labor. Nothing quite like his prolific monastic arrangement would

³² Jerome, "Letter LXX: To Magnus an Orator of Rome," in *St. Jerome: Letters and Select Works*, 149.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid., 151.

³⁵ Paul J. Griffiths: "Later in his career [Jerome] responds to a criticism that he is himself too free with his quotations from and use of non-Christian literature and philosophy by listing and analyzing all the instances of the uses of non-Christian literature in Scripture"; "Seeking Egyptian Gold: A Fundamental Metaphor for the Christian Intellectual Life in a Religiously Diverse Age," *Cresset* 63, no. 5 (2000), 9.

³⁶ Ibid., 88, 75. Vessey: "Jerome thus not only issued his own works, he also issued a deliberately composed textual image of their author"; "Erasmus' Jerome," 76. Bernhard Bischoff writes of the twenty-eight public libraries found in fourth-century descriptions of Rome; *Manuscripts and Libraries in the Age of Charlemagne* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 7.

exist again. Its mix of personal patronage, extensive staff support, expansive library, and distribution network was a winning combination for scholarship, although Erasmus does find something similar, as we shall see, in the early printing shop.

Augustine of Hippo

Like Jerome, Augustine was both inspired and troubled by his inner liberal-arts demons. Augustine's monasticism was also something of a personal arrangement of convenience. For Augustine, however, the monastery involved friends sharing a life in common, a form of "spiritual communism," as Princeton historian Peter Brown puts it.³⁷ Augustine, who was born in 354 in Roman Africa, had been a popular teacher of rhetoric in Carthage and later in Rome prior to his conversion to Christianity. At the age of eighteen, he had been particularly moved by Cicero's *Hortensius*: "It changed my life," is how he put it in his *Confessions*, and, as a result, "I pined for deathless wisdom."³⁸ Still, he went on to be "a peddler of glibness in the marketplace," selling to boys "the weapons of their distraction."³⁹ In his adeptness as a scholar, he also cornered a portion of the liberal arts textbook market, issuing works on grammar, rhetoric, dialectic, arithmetic, geometry, and music. It all came to an end in 386, when in a moment of bookish fervor in a garden in Milan, he put his life in Christ's hands: "I leaped up, not doubting that it was by divine prompting that I should open the book [Paul's Epistle to the Romans] and read what first I hit on."⁴⁰

Five years later, he arrived in Hippo and turned his house into a monastery,

³⁷ Brown, *Through the Eye of the Needle*, 180.

³⁸ Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Gary Wills (London: Penguin, 2002), 3.3.7 45.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 9.2.2 186.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 8.5.29 181.

vowing to live a celibate, contemplative, and communal life. It was more of a retreat into friendship and study than the rigorously disciplined order that marked monasticism after Benedict, although there is a monastic rule, intended to bring greater order to this religious life, attributed by some to Augustine.⁴¹ In 395, at the age of forty, Augustine agreed to serve the church as bishop of Hippo. Still, he set up a similarly communal life for himself, living among the secular clergy in a religious house beside the church.⁴²

In the *Confessions*, among the most widely read works of the Middle Ages, Augustine sets out how God led him to a Christian sense of learning, purged of vain pride. At one point he credits God with showing him how “the proud [in learning] you rebuff, while favoring the lowly,” as “you brought to me a man, himself inflated with raging winds of pride, to acquaint me with certain books of the Platonists, translated into Latin from the Greek.”⁴³ Yet vanity is easily dismissed and overcome by humility. Elsewhere in the *Confessions*, he launches a more determined attack, much as Jerome had, on “transgressive knowledge (*curiositas*),” as Gary Wills translates the title of the fifth chapter of Book Ten.⁴⁴ Curiosity, as the driving force of learning, is for Augustine

⁴¹ Among the rules attributed to Augustine, with controversy over the work’s authorship, although it was followed by the Augustinian monastic order (to which Martin Luther belonged): “Let them work from early morning til noon and take leisure for three hours from noon til three,” and “no one should claim anything as his own”; Augustine, “Regula Sancti Augustini, C. 397” in George Lawless, *Augustine of Hippo and his Monastic Rule* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 75.

⁴² Peter Brown: “The most important feature of Augustine’s intellectual activity in his middle-age, as he himself saw it, was that it took place in a community, the Catholic Church”; *Augustine of Hippo* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 267.

⁴³ Augustine, *Confessions*, 7.4.13 147. See also Elizabeth A. Clark: “Granted also that many sayings preserved in these collections [e.g., *Sayings of the Fathers*] suggest a hostility to ‘book-culture’; in some, highly educated monks decry their own secular learning, deemed worthless when compared to the ‘wisdom’ of their unlettered colleagues”; *Reading Renunciation: Asceticism and Scripture in Early Christianity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 53.

⁴⁴ Augustine, *Confessions*, 10.5 244.

a sin comparable to “cravings of the flesh,” and “this is a craving to know.”⁴⁵ He refers to this craving to know as “another way we can be tested”: “This [craving] also leads men to pry into the arcane elements of nature, which are beyond our scope – knowing them would serve no purpose, yet men make of that knowing its own purpose.”⁴⁶

Augustine warned friends of “reprehensible curiosity,” as well as “vain and perishing curiosity.”⁴⁷ It figured in his critique of Manichaeism, after he converted from this Gnostic faith to Christianity: “Individuals who... suppose themselves to be engaged in a great enterprise when they busy themselves with intense and eager curiosity exploring that universal mass of matter we call the world... Let the mind, therefore, refrain from desiring this vain sort of knowledge if it wishes to keep itself chaste for God.”⁴⁸ Recognizing that learning had been a force for good and evil in his own life, Augustine sought to hone a Christian basis for it. Yet by singling out the exploration of the world and its matter, he makes a sweeping condemnation of the natural sciences. This question of when and in what ways learning acts in the service of faith was to haunt Christianity, as Weber noted. Augustine did not condemn learning

⁴⁵ Ibid., 10.5.54 245.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 10.5.54-55 244-45.

⁴⁷ Augustine of Hippo, “Letter 138: Augustine to Marcellinus (411/412),” *Political Writings*, ed. E. M. Atkins and R. J. Dodaro (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 42; Augustine of Hippo, “Of True Religion,” *Earlier Writings*, ed. John H. S. Burleigh (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1953), 251. Saint Ambrose, bishop of Milan, during this era: “Why do you desire to examine curiously what is not helpful for your salvation and what you are not allowed to know?”; cited by Richard Newhauser, “Augustinian *Vitium curiositatis* and its Reception,” in *Saint Augustine and his Influence in the Middle Ages*, eds. Edward B. King and Jacqueline T. Schaefer (Sewanee: Press of the University of the South, 1988), 103.

⁴⁸ Augustine, *The Catholic and Manichaean Ways of Life*, trans. Donald A. Gallagher and Idella J. Gallagher (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1966), 21.38 32-33. Augustine is invoking the “sin of the intellect,” as Newhauser aptly names this weapon in the church’s fight against heresy; “Augustinian *Vitium Curiositatis*,” 103. Caution is Augustine’s theme with extra-Christian learning: “Do not venture without due care into any branches of learning which are pursued outside the church of Christ... discriminate sensibly and carefully between them”; *On Christian Teaching*, 2.38.57 63.

outright but identified the particular danger of curiosity as a driving intellectual force, and it remained a point of Christian censure through to the Early Modern era.⁴⁹

On the other hand and in learning's favor, Augustine defended the Christian use of works by those who lack this Christian purpose. In *On Christian Teaching* (*De doctrina Christiana*) composed around 396, as his time as a monk was coming to an end, he extols the usefulness of Aristotle, while warning his Christian readers not to adopt this Greek's philosophy as a guide to life itself: "The rules about syllogism and definitions and classifications [via Aristotle], on the other hand, greatly help people to understand, provided that they avoid the error of thinking that when they have mastered them they have learnt the actual truth about the happy life."⁵⁰ He advises readers on the scholar's rights (and duties) in using others' work: "Any statements by those who are called philosophers, especially the Platonists, which happen to be true and consistent with our faith should not cause alarm, but be claimed for our own use, as it were from owners who have no right to them."⁵¹ And he provides a property rights analogy from the Bible to establish why such use of Egyptian gold, as it was referred

⁴⁹ Joanna Picciotto credits Francis Bacon with the Christian redemption of curiosity: "By transferring the primal scene of discovery from Eve's eating of the fruit to Adam's naming the creatures – and by linking the act of naming to the work of experiment – Bacon redeemed curiosity from its association with original sin: associated with investigative labor rather than appetite, the first sin became the first virtue"; *Labors of Innocence in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 3. Current defenders of Augustine's condemnation of curiosity include the Dominican Joseph Torchia: "Augustine, I think, can provide a cogent, much needed voice in a world that takes for granted things like the mapping of the genome, genetic engineering, and screening, cloning, stem cell research"; *Restless Mind: Curiositas and the Scope of Inquiry in St. Augustine's Psychology* (Marquette: Marquette University Press, 2013), 248.

⁵⁰ Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, trans. R. P. H. Green (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1997), Preface 3, 2.37.55–62. Augustine composed *De Doctrina Christiana* on assuming the bishopric of Hippo for the preparation of clergy; Brian Stock, *Augustine the Reader: Meditation, Self-Knowledge, and the Ethics of Interpretation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 190.

⁵¹ Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, 2.39.60–64. Mark Vessey: Augustine "also promotes the idea, explicitly formulated in *De Doctrina Christiana*, that the useful and salutary practice of arts otherwise known as liberal is already exemplified in the sacred texts of Christianity"; "Introduction," in *Augustine and the Disciplines: From Classiacum to Confessions*, eds. Karla Pollmann and Mary Vessey (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 17.

to, is fair and worthwhile:

Like the treasures of the ancient Egyptians, who possessed not only idols and heavy burdens, which the people of Israel hated and shunned, but also vessels and ornaments of silver and gold, and clothes, which on leaving Egypt the people of Israel, in order to make better use of them, surreptitiously claimed for themselves (they did this not on their own authority but at God's command, and the Egyptians in their ignorance actually gave them the things of which they had made poor use) [Exod. 3:21-2, 12:35-6].⁵²

As if not entirely comfortable with the analogy of the Israelites' biblical pilfering, even at God's command (and to recover unpaid wages), Augustine offers what amounts to a natural law theory of intellectual property, making it clear that such property arises out of the commons. For "any statements by those who are called philosophers," he sets out how "these treasures [are] like the silver and gold, which they did not create but dug, as it were, from the mines of providence, which is everywhere."⁵³ In his work on the concept of free will, Augustine again asserts that "the beauty of truth and wisdom" is common to all people, and cannot "be the private property of any of them," just as the expression of such wisdom "does not exclude those who come by any packed crowd of hearers" and are able to overhear and thereby learn.⁵⁴

⁵² Ibid., 2.40.60-64-65. See Griffiths, "Egyptian Gold."

⁵³ Ibid., 2.40.60-65.

⁵⁴ Augustine, "On Free Will" (*De libero arbitrio*), in *Augustine: Earlier Writings*, trans. John H. S.

On the other hand, Augustine addresses the violation of his own authorial property rights (however limited he envisions them) in a letter to Bishop Aurelius of Carthage, sometime after 420. Augustine writes of how “books were taken or stolen from me before I had completed them and before I had polished them after having checked them.”⁵⁵ Urged by the bishop and others to see his pirated, ill-finished works through to proper publication, he describes how he “took care to complete, with the help of the Lord, this very laborious work” and “corrected” them.⁵⁶ It was then that he “gave permission that they be heard, copied, and read by anyone.”⁵⁷ The principal difference with these property rights, then and today, is that the unapproved copying to which he felt he had a right to object, was more of an intellectual and pedagogical issue for Augustine, rather than a commercial matter: “If I had been able to carry out my plan in them,” he further assures the bishop about his work on *The Trinity*, “the books would have been less complicated and clearer as much as the difficulty in explaining such important topics and our ability would have permitted.”⁵⁸

Burleigh (London: SCM, 1953), 156, 159.

⁵⁵ Augustine of Hippo, “Letter 174,” in *The Works of Saint Augustine, Letters 156-210*, vol. 3, trans. Roland J. Teske (Hyde Park: New City Press, 2004), 132. Peter J. Lucas describes how such acts of piracy had become, by the fifteenth century, step five in what he summarized as the ten-step process of manuscript publication – “(5) An unauthorized copy might escape at this stage without the author’s approval” – following a showing of “the work to a particular friend privately for comment” and coming before a recopying of the work incorporating corrections and amendments; Peter J. Lucas, *From Author to Audience: John Capgrave and Medieval Publication* (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 1997), 2.

⁵⁶ Augustine, “Letter 174,” 132.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 132-33. Possidius, a biographer at work shortly after Augustine’s death, further extends this permission: “If anyone wants to make a copy of [any item] he should apply to the church in Hippo, where the best texts can generally be found. Or he may make inquiries anywhere else he can and should make a copy of what he finds and preserve it, and not begrudge lending it in his turn to someone asking to copy it”; cited by Harry Y. Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church: A History of Early Christian Texts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 138.

⁵⁸ Augustine, “Letter 174,” 133. Augustine requested that the good bishop share his position with the world by ensuring that “this letter be placed at the beginning of the same books, though set apart”; *ibid.*

The need for more time to make the work “less complicated and clearer” is itself a much-played theme in the labor of learning.⁵⁹ Augustine’s sense that he has a right to sign off on a work – as much a safeguard for readers as for his reputation as a writer – might be taken as an early assumption that such writing has rights associated with it. Once released, the author steps aside, and “anyone,” as Augustine notes, can read, copy, and hear the work that belongs, after all, to humankind in common.

Yet he also recognizes a continuing responsibility for works once made public. In his final years, he composes a work he entitles *Retractions*, in which he proposes corrections for no less than ninety-three of his works: “I have decided, moreover, to write this work that I might put it into the hands of men from whom I cannot recall for correction the writings I have already published.”⁶⁰

Although Augustine was revered and read throughout the Middle Ages, the liberal arts education that had formed him as a scholar was largely lost to Western monasticism following the fall of Rome. Almost a century after Augustine’s death in 430, the Byzantine Christian Emperor Justinian saw fit to shut the Neoplatonic School in Athens, at the behest of local Christians perturbed by its teaching of “pagan” philosophy and astronomy.⁶¹ Christians would have to rebuild learning’s place in the West, with that process facilitated by the economic, cultural, and political properties of a monasticism deeply influenced by the Rule of Benedict, which was to be so

⁵⁹ Among the more famously attributed lines in this regard is from Blaise Pascal, originally, in a letter to the Reverend Fathers, The Jesuits: “The present letter is a very long one, simply because I had no time to make it shorter”; “Letter 16 (December 4, 1656),” *The Provincial Letters of Blaise Pascal*, trans. Thomas M’Crie (London: Chatto and Windus, 1857), 305.

⁶⁰ Augustine, *The Retractions*, trans. Mary Inez Bogan, R.S.M. (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 1968), 5.

⁶¹ Edwards Watts, “Justinian, Malalas, and the End of Athenian Philosophical Teaching in A.D. 529,” *Journal of Roman Studies* 94 (2004), 169, 182. Watts notes that the philosophers were later deprived of their property and at that point departed for Persia.

effectively championed by Pope Gregory the Great. While the Rule cut learning little slack, it instantiated a form of life that, hour by hour, made learning's return inevitable and a service to religious houses.

The Rule of Saint Benedict

Within half a century or so of Augustine's death, the young Benedict of Nursia, born in 480 of a noble family, was becoming increasingly disillusioned with his Roman schooling. As a devout Christian, he was struck by the distinct failure of the liberal arts to lead his classmates to more righteous lives. In Pope Gregory's hagiography, composed within decades of the saint's death, the young Benedict is portrayed as rejecting the sheer folly of such schooling: "But when he [Benedict] saw that many of the students rushed headlong into vice, he withdrew from the world he had just entered, lest, in acquiring worldly knowledge, he might also fall down the same terrific precipice. Despising, therefore, the study of letters, he desired only to please God by a holy life."⁶² The striking opposition that Gregory sets between the pursuit of learning and the pleasing of God pervades the Benedictine regard for learning far more pervasively than in the works of Jerome or Augustine.

Gregory gives the divide a fine turn by identifying Benedict as "skillfully ignorant, and wisely unlearned."⁶³ The pope-biographer, who founded seven

⁶² Cited by Frederick Homes Dudden, *Gregory the Great: His Place in History and Thought*, vol. 1 (New York: Longmans, Green, 1905), 287.

⁶³ Cited by Putnam Fennell Jones, "The Gregorian Mission and English Education," *Speculum* 3, no. 3 (1928), 337. Jones also notes Gregory's line from his commentary on the Book of Job: "Holy Scripture is incomparably superior to every form of knowledge and science"; *ibid.*, 338. As if to confirm Benedict's refusal of learnedness, David Knowles judges his command of Latin to be nothing less than "the breakdown of classical grammar"; *The Evolution of Medieval Thought* (New York: Vintage, 1962), 71. In his lectures to young monks, the modern Benedictine Jean Leclercq sums up Benedict's regard for

monasteries on his own, did much to set monasticism on a path away from the liberal arts throughout the Latin West of his day.⁶⁴ As Gregory has it, after young Benedict turned away from his liberal studies, he is said to have fled Rome with his childhood nurse in tow. He initially found redemption as a solitary hermit in a cave, presumably after sending his nurse home, where he remained for some three years. His reputation for holiness spread and a group of nearby monks asked him to forsake his solitude in favor of leading their monastery. Benedict accepted the invitation, which led to the founding of Monte Cassino in 529, the year that the Platonic Academy in Athens was closed by the Justinian.⁶⁵ Under Benedict's guidance, the monastery at Monte Cassino grew, with schools set up for instructing children destined to join the Order. In his time as abbot, Benedict is thought to have set down the pious principles of monastic living in *The Rule of Benedict (Regula Benedicti)*.⁶⁶

learning: "Studies undertaken, and then, not precisely scorned, but renounced and transcended, for the sake of the kingdom of God"; *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture*, trans. C. Misrahi (New York: Fordham University Press, 1961), 12.

⁶⁴ Laistner also notes Gregory's upbraiding of bishops for speaking publicly on secular authors; *Thought and Letters*, 109. Laistner on Gregory's contribution to monasticism: "As an intense admirer of St. Benedict, Gregory strove to increase the number of religious houses not only in Italy and Sicily, but wherever his authority was of sufficient weight, to remedy abuses in existing monasteries and convents, and to secure the general adoption of the Benedictine Rule": *ibid.*, 104. Compare to Martin Irvine, who cites Gregory on the Augustinian approach to secular learning: "Although learning in secular books is not in itself useful for the spiritual conflict of the saints, if this learning is united to sacred Scripture, we are taught more precisely in the knowledge of Scripture. Indeed, it is to this end only that the liberal arts are to be taught"; cited in *Making of Textual Culture: 'Grammatica' and Literary Theory 350-1100*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 195.

⁶⁵ Josef Pieper seizes upon the initiation of the Benedictine monastery and the end of Plato's Academy as symbolizing a turn from Antiquity to the Middle Ages; *Scholasticism: Personalities and Problems of Medieval Philosophy*, trans. Richard Winston and Clare Winston (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), 16. Pieper cites Hegel, who had little time for the Middle Ages, on the closing of the Academy as "the downfall of the physical establishments of pagan philosophy"; *ibid.*

⁶⁶ *The Rule of Benedict*, trans. Carolinne White (London: Penguin, 2008). Giorgio Agamben observes that, "the fourth and fifth centuries of the Christian era witnessed the birth of a peculiar literature that, at least at first glance, does not seem to have had precedents in the classical world: monastic rules"; *The Highest Poverty: Monastic Rules and Form-of-Life*, trans. Adam Kotsko (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), 3. He also points to the lack of precedents for monasticism's "temporal scansion," which is to say the strict governance of time as a matter of discipline and regularity for this form of institutional and communal life: *ibid.*, 19.

Medieval monasticism did not want for rules. Saints Pachomius, Basil, Cassian, and Columbanus all contributed guides for Christian monasteries, which often grew out of their own service as abbots. The fifth-century rule of Ceasarius of Arles had a large and literate influence on nunneries; it recommended admitting girls “at an age [of six or seven] where they could learn to read and obey,” while requiring nuns to read while they worked.⁶⁷ Yet it is Benedict’s Rule that prevailed across the Latin West, in its simplicity, attention to detail, and unfailing devotion to piety.⁶⁸ In the later Middle Ages, periods of monastic reform often involved a rededication of the monastery to the Rule of Benedict. The Rule consists of 73 brief chapters dedicated to the order and regulation of monastic life. Yet for all of its attention to the regulation of that life, the Rule also wisely allows, in its conclusion, that it is but a “little rule for beginners” and not a complete guide to monasticism.⁶⁹

In its Prologue, the Rule initially frames the monastery’s purpose in educational terms: “And so we intend to establish a school for the Lord’s service.”⁷⁰ Its chapters prescribe appropriate clothing, footwear, and sleeping arrangements, with little on the

⁶⁷ Cited by Pierre Riché, *Education and Culture in the Barbarian West: From the Sixth through the Eighth Century*, trans. John J. Contreni (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1976), 112, 116.

⁶⁸ R. Kevin Seasoltz, O.S.B. writes that, “with the Carolingian reform and the Synod of Aix-la-Chapelle in 817, St. Benedict’s Rule was established as the only legitimate rule of monastic life in the West”; “Monastic Autonomy and Exemption: Charism and Institution,” *Jurist* 34 (1974), 316.

⁶⁹ *Rule*, 73 104. Laistner attributes the widespread success of the *Rule* to how it called for obedience to its strictures while allowing “the widest possible discretion” for the abbot: “This happy combination of authority in certain basic principles with great latitude in dealing with matters of detail”; *Thought and Letters*, 95. This was no less crucial for the succor that the *Rule* gave to discipline and freedom in learned pursuits.

⁷⁰ *Rule*, Prologue, 9. M. T. Clanchy notes on this passage that: “St. Benedict had indeed founded ‘a school of the Lord’s service,’ but it was not a school of this world”: *Abelard: A Medieval Life* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 211. Peter Brown: “It was an elementary school... a school of morals which was as exacting, in its own way, as any Roman [elementary] school... blows from the strap included”; *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity, A.D. 200-1000*, 3rd ed. (New York: Wiley, 2013), 225.

pursuit of learning beyond a commitment to reading.⁷¹ Abbots are to be elected for the wisdom of their teaching, to be sure, just as deans (in charge of ten monks) are chosen for “their learning and wisdom.”⁷² But the getting of that wisdom and learning do not fall within the Rule. Monks are assumed to be literate, with the Rule referring to daily reading, mealtime reading, and readings at the night office.

What is to come of all that reading? It “begins with grammar,” declares the twentieth-century Benedictine monk Jean Leclercq, and “terminates in compunction, in desire of heaven.”⁷³ There is no suggestion in the Rule, for example, that the study of the Patristic Fathers, which includes Jerome and Augustine, leads to an emulation of their intellectual engagement with Scripture and secular works. It amounted to a “mortification of the intellect,” in the words of John Henry Newman, nineteenth-century leader of the Oxford Movement within the Church of England and a later convert to Catholicism, as he identifies the “mission of Saint Benedict.”⁷⁴ Monastic penitents aspired to no more than, Newman writes, “the bare ordinary use of reason, without caring to improve it or make the most of it.”⁷⁵

The Rule’s approach to sacred reading (*lectio divina*) provides a primary instance of this monastic paradox in practice and regulation. The Rule depicts this

⁷¹ In contrast to the *Regula Magistri*, which is thought to have formed the basis of Benedict’s Rule, and which distinguished scribes (*scriptores*) from craftsmen (*artifices*) and, according to Malcolm B. Parkes, “prescribed that any of their products superfluous to the community’s immediate needs should be sold for less than the market rates in the outside world”; *Their Hand Before Our Eyes: A Closer Look at Scribes*, Lyell Lectures (1999) (Hampshire, UK: Ashgate, 2008), 6.

⁷² *Rule*, 64–93, 21–42. The Rule of Saint Augustine, which was drawn from a letter sent by Augustine to some religious women and employed by the Augustinian mendicant movement in the thirteenth century, is also notably free of concerns of learned interests; *The Rule of St. Augustine*, Robert Russell (Brothers of the Order of Hermits of Saint Augustine, 1976).

⁷³ Leclercq, *Love of Learning and the Desire for God*, 72.

⁷⁴ John Henry Newman, “Mission of Saint Benedict” in *Historical Sketches*, vol. 2 (London: Longmans Green, 1906), 376.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

divine reading to be a matter of piety alone. It sets out a disciplined, daily, silent and absorbed time for reading. Yet the sheer amount of time set aside for reading was surely the first step in a monastic mission creep toward learning. The act of reading figures prominently in the Rule's chapter entitled, "Daily Manual Labor." The chapter begins with labor's prophylactic qualities, whether it is manual and literate work: "Idleness is the enemy of the soul and so brothers ought to engage in manual labor at set times and at other times biblical study."⁷⁶ At best, this divine study was to be directed toward "a meeting with God in and through his Word," as the contemporary Cistercian monk M. Basil Pennington names it.⁷⁷ The Rule sets out that reading was to be disciplined and monitored by "one or two older monks," lest the younger monk slip into "wasting his time doing nothing or chatting."⁷⁸

The two to four hours set aside for solitary reading daily (depending on seasonal light) was not the whole of it. The Rule specifies that "the brothers' meals should always be accompanied by reading."⁷⁹ The mealtime reader for the week "should receive a little to eat and drink before he begins," while asking "all the brothers to pray for him, so that God may preserve him from a spirit of pride."⁸⁰ This need to wear one's learning lightly on the sleeve of one's robes reflects the humility of monastic life.

⁷⁶ *Rule*, 48 72.

⁷⁷ M. Basil Pennington, O.C.S.O., "Lectio and Love: An Introduction to the Cistercian Tradition," in *In the School of Love: An Anthology of Early Cistercian Texts* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 2006), 15.

⁷⁸ *Rule*, 48 73.

⁷⁹ *Rule*, 38 61. D. H. Turner: "Four hours or so were occupied by liturgical prayer, about the same time by spiritual reading, and manual work took up six hours or so"; "This Little Rule for Beginners," in *The Benedictines in Britain*, eds. D. H. Turner, Rachel Stockdale, Dom Philip Jebb and David Rogers (New York: Braziller, 1980), 15.

⁸⁰ *Rule*, 38 61. Rabanus Maurus, ninth-century abbot of Fulda in Germany, for example, advised that the selected reader "must be imbued with learning and conversant with books"; cited by George Haven Putnam, *Books and their Makers During the Middle Ages*, vol. 1 (New York: Hillary House, 1896), 116.

The Rule also ensures that each monk had a book to read in his cell. It requires that members gather together at Lent for an annual distribution of the monastery's books among them (excluding the Bible, service books, classical literature, history, and the sciences), which they then held onto for the year.⁸¹ Still, the Rule does not address the composition of texts, nor their copying, compiling, binding, or other activities associated with books. A library for the storage of books is mentioned, with the communal collection presumably based on donations and gifts.

Now consider how the allotment of a single book over the course of a year could lead, at least for some, to extended ruminations on the nature of the text, moving from study (*lectio*) to meditation (*meditatio*) on its style, structure, and significance, forming the basis of, say, a commentary on parts of the work that might begin in its broad margins. Similarly, the disciplined tone of this daily reading proved a boon for the studious. Nuns and monks turned their extended reading opportunities into increasingly learned glosses, compilations, and commentaries. The only activity allotted a greater block of time was manual labor in this well-regulated order.

While most monastics held that study did not qualify as labor, some did allow that the preparation, composition and copying of the hand-crafted manuscripts counted. Jerome, you may recall, emphasized the labor of exegesis, while Florentius of Valeranica, a tenth-century scribe, makes vivid the bodily cost of copying in a note he left in the margins of Gregory the Great's *Moralia in Job*: "Because one who does not

⁸¹ The *Rule* states: "During these days of Lent let all receive books from the library, and let them read them through in order"; *ibid.* The practice formed one many monastery-university continuities, judging by the statutes of Oriel College from 1329, which refers to the "common books (*libri communes*)" being brought out on feast day with the senior scholar given his first choice for a year-long loan of a work; cited by Putnam, *Books and their Maker*, 151.

know how to write thinks it no labor, I will describe it for you, if you want to know how great is the burden of writing: it mists the eyes, it curves the back, it breaks the belly and the ribs, it fills the kidneys with pain, and the body with all kinds of suffering...As the last port is sweet to the sailor, so the last line to the scribe.”⁸²

In the Rule’s most famous of strictures, a member of a monastic order should not “presume... to possess anything of his own – nothing whatever, not a book or a writing table or pen or anything at all, for monks should not even count their own bodies and wills as their own.”⁸³ In this way, the Rule not only emphasized the communal nature of property within the monastery, beginning with the sharing of books, but denounced self-possession and self-expression, both of which infuse our notions of independent scholarly work, as well as authorship more generally. This was consistent with the understated manner in which manuscript books of this era were referenced by an *incipit* made up of the opening words of the work. The selfless and communal themes of monasticism, along with the emphasis on humility, meant that writing done within the monastery was not about asserting authorship claims to works.

Take the authorship of the Rule of Benedict as an instance. There is no first-hand account of Benedict having composed the Rule. Benedict left behind no other writings, and the Rule relies, at many points, on an earlier monastic guide, the *Regula Magistri* by one known only as the Master.⁸⁴ The authorship of the *Regula Benedicti*

⁸² Cited by Raymond Clements and Timothy Graham, *Introduction to Manuscript Studies* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007), 23 (with thanks to George Hardin Brown for this source). See also Mark Vessey, “Jerome’s Origen, 135-145.

⁸³ *Rule*, 33 55. R. W. Southern points out that “when St. Benedict included in his Rule the provision that all things were to be held in common, he was expressing not just an ideal for a religious society, but the ideal for all society”; *Medieval Humanism and other Studies*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1971), 53.

⁸⁴ R. W. Southern, *Western Society and the Church in the Middle Ages* (London: Penguin, 1970), 221. Southern comments on the extent to which the Rule, which he judges the “most influential guide to

was an act of ascription led by Gregory the Great. This sense of sainted authorship becomes an intellectual property of the work; it adds to the Rule's coherence, integrity, and force, setting it apart from other similar monastic guides. Authorship gave it standing as a property or entity that warranted its preservation and protection as such.

I turn now to a further piece of this early monastic paradox, involving Cassiodorus, a contemporary of Benedict. On failing to establish a Christian school in Rome, Cassiodorus founded a learned monastery with a legendary library, only to have this approach to monastic life passed over in favor of Benedictine asceticism, which went on to dominate monasticism in the Latin West.

Cassiodorus

Flavius Magnus Aurelius Cassiodorus was a Roman statesman who in 525 floated the idea for a Christian proto-university in Rome. As Cassiodorus describes it in the Preface to *The Divine and Human Readings* (*Institutiones Divinarum et Saecularium Litterarum*), he had been “extremely sorry that the Divine Scriptures had no public teachers,” given that the secular schools “were swarming with students.”⁸⁵ He sought subscriptions to raise the necessary funds “to receive professors in the city of Rome, just as custom is said to have existed for a long time at Alexandria and is said even

spiritual life in western history,” borrowed from *Regula Magistri*, but adds that, “the mind of St. Benedict emerges more clearly than ever from a comparison of his work with its main source”; *ibid.*, 222, 223. Where Benedict, for example, mentions *school* once, *Regula Magistri* uses it “several times... in the sense of a school,” according to Riché; *Education and Culture in the Barbarian West*, 112. Riché continues, “according to the *Regula Magistri*, small children grouped in a *decada* were to study their letters three hours a day under the supervision of a learned monk”; *ibid.*, 113. As well, the learning of letters and Psalms is referred to as spiritual work (*in spiritali opera*); *ibid.*, 115.

⁸⁵ Cassiodorus, *An Introduction to the Divine and Human Readings*, trans. Leslie Webber Jones (New York: Columbia University Press, 1946), 67.

now to be zealously cultivated by the Hebrews in Nisibis.”⁸⁶ His goal was to balance long-term and immediate educational goals “that thereby the soul might obtain eternal salvation and tongue of the faithful be adorned with a holy and completely faultless eloquence.”⁸⁷ The times were not suited to new educational initiatives, however, and his “ardent desire could in no way be fulfilled because of the struggles that seethed and raged excessively in the Italian realm.”⁸⁸

Instead, on retiring from active political life, Cassiodorus established the abbey Vivarium and the hermitage Castellum on his estate at Scylacium in southern Italy. Serving as its monastic guidebook, *The Divine and Human Readings* set quite a different tone than the Rule of Benedict. It calls on “studious brothers” to “restrain your eager desires,” and follow the better course of “learning in the proper order what should be read.”⁸⁹ The book’s homage to classical and Christian texts made the work an inspiration for those who sought to improve medieval monastic libraries.⁹⁰ Cassiodorus was willing to give each area of learning its due, without requiring that secular works serve the interpretation of Scripture, as Augustine had encouraged if not always followed.⁹¹

At the outset of the chapters on “Secular Letters,” he begins by explaining how the word *book* (*liber*) comes from “free” – “a book, in other words, is the bark of a tree, removed and freed” – whereas *art* “is so called because it limits (*artet*) and binds

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 70.

⁹⁰ Jones, “Influence of Cassiodorus,” 441.

⁹¹ R. W. Southern, *The Making of the Middle Ages* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953), 165-166.

us with its rules.”⁹² On this theme of the book’s freedom to set itself from the tree (the pillars of society?), Cassiodorus was setting out an important scholarly principle in which inquiry is not ultimately rule-bound, except to question such binding. His interest in reading clearly went well beyond reciting one’s way to heaven’s gate, Benedictine style.

Cassiodorus assembled the monastic library at Vivarium out of works he secured from nearby Rome and from across the Mediterranean in Africa.⁹³ He also assembled a respected team of scribes and translators to produce new and improved editions, including Latin translations of Greek texts, as well as his own commentaries on Scripture, the liberal arts, and secular learning. He was also careful to establish standards for his scribes to follow in the editing of the texts they copied, with an exception made for Scripture, where nothing was to be altered and only the most respected of ancient copies were to be used as exemplars.⁹⁴ At the age of ninety, he composed *On Orthography* as a further guide for scribes in handling spelling conventions, comparable to the “house style” that publishers set for themselves.⁹⁵ Here then are Cassiodorus’ precepts of learning, if ahead of his time, within Christian monasticism. The freedom of inquiry sets the work apart, the fidelity to other’s work reflects a respect for their property, and the concern for conventions eased the meaning and learning of others from such properties.

And while the community at Vivarium did not survive Cassiodorus’ death, at least the grand library that he and the monks built found refuge in the Lateran Palace in

⁹² Cassiodorus, *Divine and Human Readings*, 144.

⁹³ Bischoff, *Manuscripts and Libraries in the Age of Charlemagne*, 3.

⁹⁴ James J. O’Donnell, *Cassiodorus* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 211.

⁹⁵ Riché, *Education and Culture in the Barbarian West*, 168.

Rome. Some of its works later made their way from there to France and England, with copies along the way adding to that vital circulation of scholarship that he had sought to promote.⁹⁶ The resulting Vivarium collection proved an influential source of historical and classical texts, representing something of a canon that the most progressive monasteries, in a scholarly sense, at least, sought to emulate through their collections during the Middle Ages.⁹⁷

Amid the declining stability and security of the Roman world, it was the Benedictine monasteries that held their own through the early Middle Ages. And yet over that period, as we will see below, almost everything Cassiodorus imagined for the scholarly contribution and achievement of Christian monasticism found its way into monastic life.⁹⁸ The spirit of learning that came to fruition in the monasteries during this time may have been inspired by Cassiodorus, but it was marked by the “regularity” of Benedictine monasticism – in adherence to the regulations of the Rule – which included the humility and communality that infused monastic walls, cloister, and scriptorium. The Benedictine monastery of the Middle Ages was not a house of learning. Still, it managed to provide a secure home for learning in an insecure era. It provided the novitiate with instruction in Latin, set aside hours for all to read, and made books a form of reverence and worship that involved the ongoing preservation and preparation of manuscripts.

Saint Radegund and the Sisters of Learning.

⁹⁶ Bischoff, *Manuscripts and Libraries in the Age of Charlemagne*, 7.

⁹⁷ Leslie W. Jones, “The Influence of Cassiodorus on Mediaeval Culture,” *Speculum* 20, no. 4 (1945), 435 n. 2.

⁹⁸ O'Donnell, *Cassiodorus*, 198.

A final piece of learning's monastic paradox is the extent of women's achievement in the medieval abbey and priory. This unmistakable contribution was to be effectively stymied before the Middle Ages had come to an end. Women were to be effectively excluded from cathedral schools, medieval universities, and church hierarchy. But before all of that, there was Radegund of Poitiers. Radegund was a Thuringian princess from a Germanic tribe that had been enslaved in 531 by the Frankish king, Chlothar I. Radegund was his prize of war while still a child, in anticipation of her future role as his bride. Once she had become another of the king's wives, she sought the intervention of the Bishop of Paris, Germain, who managed in 550 to convince Chlothar to grant Radegund both her freedom and a plot of land within the city walls of Poitiers. Here, she was to build the Convent of the Holy Cross, as a refuge for herself and other women of nobility.⁹⁹ Radegund's mission at Holy Cross could be called a forceful humility. She addressed her monastic purpose in a letter to the bishops: "I asked myself, with all the ardor of which I am capable, how I could best forward the cause of other women, and how, if our Lord so willed, my own personal desires might be of advantage to my sisters."¹⁰⁰ She declined the role of Holy Cross abbess, although she still exercised her authority by placing the monastery under Caesarius' *Rule for Virgins*.

This was a monastic rule that encouraged the development of literacy as a common right of all monastics. Radegund took that literacy imperative in both literary

⁹⁹ Jane E. Jeffrey, "Radegund and the Letter of Foundation," in *Women Writing Latin: From Roman Antiquity to Early Modern Europe*, eds. Laurie J. Churchill, Phyllis R. Brown, and Jane E. Jeffrey, vol. 2 (New York: Routledge, 2002), 11-12.

¹⁰⁰ Cited and translated by Marcelle Thiébaux, *The Writings of Medieval Women: An Anthology* (London: Routledge, 1994), 87.

and liturgical directions. Caesarius' *Rule* also emphasized strict enclosure for the sisterhood, as well as episcopal independence for the monastery, keeping it from the clutches of the local bishop and the secular church, in its pursuit of salvation at a safe remove from the world.¹⁰¹ The sisters who joined Holy Cross set to copying manuscripts and building a library in the spirit of Caesarius and Cassiodorus. Pierre Riché, University of Paris historian, notes how Radegund's monastery was "open to more literary and humanistic culture," as well as being given to a somewhat "relaxed" following of Caesarius's strictures: "The nuns played dice, took baths, and admitted men into the cloister."¹⁰² For her part, Radegund composed, in whole or in part, the two poems, "Letter to Artachis" and "The Thuringian War." She took up her pen against the ravages of war, drawing on an experience that she knew only too well: "A wife's naked feet trod in her husband's blood / And the tender sister stepped over the fallen brother."¹⁰³ In turn, she faced objections from the abbess of Caesaria of Arles, who condemned the expansiveness of her literary and learned interests.¹⁰⁴ And certainly, Radegund sought a greater reach and impact through her learning: "Whenever the different kingdoms made war on one another," writes her friend Bishop Venantius Fortunatus about her, "she sent such letters to one and then to the other pleading that they should not make war among themselves nor take up arms lest the land perish. And, likewise, she sent to their noble followers to give the high king salutary counsel

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 12. On enclosure, Bateson notes how "no nun might leave the walls of the house alive"; "Origin and Early History of the Double Monastery," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 13 (1899), 143. E. T. Dailey reports on how the nuns could not accompany the funeral procession of Radegund through the city; "Confinement and exclusion in the monasteries of sixth-century Gaul," *Early Medieval Europe* 22, no. 3 (2014), 313.

¹⁰² Riché, *Education and Culture in the Barbarian West*, 292.

¹⁰³ Radegund, "The Thuringian War," in *Sainted Women of the Dark Ages*, trans. Jo Ann McNamara (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992), 66. See McNamara's accompanying note on attribution.

¹⁰⁴ Riché, *Education and Culture in the Barbarian West*, 293.

so that their power might work to the welfare of the people and the land.”¹⁰⁵

Monasticism had afforded Radegund a way to pull away from a brutal world that was unlikely to afford her such learning, peace, and respite. It offered her a way, as well, to direct some part of that learning back into the world as a guide and inspiration to others. But then monasticism had its own set of contradictions for women. Its enclosure could involve literally sealing a woman off from the world in a room with only a window, as we will see with Hildegard of Bingen in Chapter 5. Women were often placed – although *incarcerated* may be a better word for it – in monasteries against their will. In this and other ways, the monastery, while removed from the world, remained within the prejudices of the larger society.

Still, within the convent and priory, women managed to find a space open to their leadership and counsel, as well as to their learning and teachings. It was often more than they could find at home.¹⁰⁶ Through monasticism, they served as prioress and abbess, if often with male oversight and collaboration; some also took charge of the double monasteries, that were not all that rare during the early Middle Ages, in which men and women had separate quarters but common workspaces in scriptoria and schoolrooms. (An end was put to establishing any further double monasteries by the Second Council of Nice in 787).¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁵ Venantius Fortunatus, “The Life of the Holy Radegund,” in *Sainted Women of the Dark Ages*, trans. Jo Ann McNamara (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992), 93. Dunn sees in Radegund “a picture of feminine values of intercession and peacemaking as well [as] humility in domestic tasks around the nunnery,” in contrast to “the ‘manly’ women characteristic of the earliest days of monasticism”; *Emergence of Monasticism*, 109.

¹⁰⁶ See Suzanne Fonay Wemple, for the “degree of dignity and autonomy unavailable to married women” that monasteries offered; *Women in Frankish Society: Marriage and the Cloister, 500 to 900* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), 157.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 160, 162. Wemple writes of how Burgundofara founded Faremoutiers Abbey as the first of the double monasteries in 617, beginning with the nunnery and then adding quarters for the monks; *ibid.*

If women were not always converts of their own making, they were able to take advantage of the favorable corporate conditions of Benedictine monasticism. They could, for example, direct its disciplined and regulated approach to sacred study toward Cassiodorus' example of striking a balance between divine and secular learning. Still, if the monasteries recruited from across the social classes, they still mirrored feudal class relations – despite the common vow of poverty – with ladies-in-waiting and laborers typically serving prioresses and abbots of noble birth.¹⁰⁸ And if the monastery offered women a refuge from unwanted and unfortunate marriages, its enclosure at a remove from the world weighed more heavily on nuns than on the monks.¹⁰⁹ For a monk might journey to obtain the copy of a book or to serve the church, while a nun would be enclosed without remit for years. Nunneries were particularly vulnerable to attacks from, for example, the Vikings prior to the Norman Conquest, who destroyed so many religious houses for women in England that only nine convents were still standing when William the Conqueror arrived in 1066.¹¹⁰

Still, throughout this history, the monastery was to remain a place of relative

Mary Bateson cites Justinian's Codex from 529 on the need for property that had been held in common by monks and nuns to be divided between them so that the sexes might better keep their distance; "Double Monastery," 144.

¹⁰⁸ James A. Raftis: "Insofar as studies can be accurately made of this matter, monks seem to have been recruited fairly widely and consistently from all classes"; "Western Monasticism and Economic Organization," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 3, no. 04 (1961), 454.

¹⁰⁹ Linda Eckstein: "The great honor paid by Christianity to the celibate life and the wide field of action opened to a princess in a religious house were strong inducements to the sisters and daughters of kings to take the veil"; *Women Under Monasticism* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1963), 80. Women also served as porters guarding the convent gate and speaking-window, to which relatives would come to visit. They were keepers of the monastery's books (*bibliothecarius*); they served as scribes and illuminators, as well as infirmarians and cellarers. Rebecca L. Garber draws on the Dominican *Nonnenbücher* or sister-books, in which women wrote about virtues and values in the form of vitae for different roles, using "conceptions of feminine exemplarity that would accord with the context of the cloistered Dominican nun"; *Feminine Figurae: Representations of Gender in Religious Texts by Medieval German Women Writers* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 61.

¹¹⁰ Janet Tibbetts Schulenburg, "The Heroics of Virginity: Brides of Christ and Sacrificial Mutilation," in *Women in the Middle Ages and Renaissance: Literary and Historical Perspectives*, ed. Mary Beth Rose (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1986), 45.

refuge and retreat for women and men. The pious incorporation of nuns and monks within gated communities attracted the beneficence of the nobility, creating centers of literacy across the Latin West in what were otherwise less conducive times for learning. Brown attests to the extent of their achievement by the seventh century: “In the largest and, in many ways, the wealthiest political unit in western Europe, monasticism had become a fully public institution, identified with stability and political success.”¹¹¹

This chapter has brought forward a number of starting positions for the intellectual properties of learning within the Christian monasticism of Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages. Jerome, for example, made much of his laboring over texts, and how these intense editing and translating efforts earned him a claim to these works. This was not about displacing the original authors (given it was often God); it was about scholars' rights and obligations to serve readers with more accurate editions, for which they were both credited and supported. Augustine furthered this sense of associated rights, by insisting on the author's say over the integrity and completeness of a work before it entered that commons of open scholarly use. He also defended a learned right of inquiry, bound by purpose rather than curiosity, that afforded the (academic) freedom to tap, for example, pagan sources to serve some greater good.

Yet Jerome and Augustine were engaged in a somewhat idiosyncratic monasticism. Neither developed the institutional framework for learning that would support and sustain this proto-intellectual property regime. That element of monastic regularity and sustainability was introduced by the Rule of Benedict. While the Rule

¹¹¹ Brown, *Rise of Western Christendom*, 231.

did not endorse learning, per se, the Benedictine monastery more than made up for that by providing the conditions for learning, with the daily assignment of reading time, the insistence on the communal sharing of books, and, by making manuscripts such an integral part of monastic life, the provisions for the production of books. The full resolution of the monastic paradox, however, comes with the Venerable Bede, introduced in the next chapter, who creates within Benedictine monasticism a warrant for learning and scholarship serving the salvation of others.

For his part, Cassiodorus demonstrated how far such institutions could go in support of learning, even if what he devised did not take root and spread at the time. His proto-university was thoroughly dedicated to the preservation and restoration of learned works as valuable properties and part of a canon. If his Vivarium was not to be a model for early Middle Ages monasticism, it still created an image and ideal of learning that was fully occupied with intellectual properties. When Cassiodorus celebrated what he saw as the freedom of the book as one of those properties, he might well be pointing to the works of Radegund. She demonstrated monasticism's capacities for opening up a space in which women could produce literate works that were unlikely to be otherwise sanctioned in the Christian West. Within this monastic network, the book was copied and circulated, forming part of a regulated life within which its role, as a source of intellectual propriety and expression would only grow through the early Middle Ages.