

Monasteries

Social theory in the year 1000 divided the community into those who worked (the peasants, traders, and craftsmen), those who fought and administered justice (the kings and lords), and those who prayed. This last group obviously included, as it would today, the parish clergy with their pastoral duties of care to the laity. But in the Middle Ages there was an even larger group of holy folk who did nothing but pray — the men and women who had dedicated their entire lives to God, and had gone to live in monasteries. In the year 1000 there were thirty or so monasteries dotted across the English countryside from Carlisle in the north down to St. Germans in Cornwall, and they were the economic centres of their communities.⁷³ They employed local labourers to work in their fields, but the monks carried out certain agricultural tasks themselves, since the combination of practical and spiritual was the essence of the monastic life as laid down by St. Benedict in the sixth century. Trying to formulate a routine that would keep good order in his own community of monks at Monte Cassino in southern Italy, Benedict produced a Rule that became the model for monasticism all over Christendom.

It was Benedictine monks who brought the word of God to England in 597. They ran the great cathedral churches at Canterbury, Rochester, Winchester, and Worcester. Their dormitories, refectories, libraries, and chapelhouses were part of the straggle of holy buildings that made up the

religious campus around each cathedral, and their haunting plainsong chants set the tone of the services, echoing around the choirs and off the pillars of England's principal houses of God.

The chant was the heartbeat of religious devotion in England in the year 1000. It was the channel by which man spoke to his God, either directly or by catching the ear of Mary or one of the saints. Its rhythmic beauty was an act of homage as well as an enticement to the divine listener, and as each monk made his music, he knew that he was practicing for the glorious day when he would stand as a member of one of the choirs of angels in Heaven, and raise his voice in the very presence of God Himself.

The chanting of the liturgy was one of the centralising forces of Christendom. Today it is usually referred to as the Gregorian chant, from the tradition that it was developed by Pope Gregory the Great — the same Gregory who dispatched missionaries to England — and one can certainly imagine the good Pope singing with Augustine and his companions as they dedicated themselves for their mission to the distant islands of the northwest. But there is no evidence that Gregory himself was particularly involved in the collecting together of these mesmerising melodies which had their roots in the Hebrew chants that were taken over and adapted by the first Christians. The chant was the product of practice and elaboration by the countless churchmen and women of the first millennium whose lives were given meaning by this inspiring and transcendent sound.

The chant uplifted people spiritually — and it provided physical uplift as well. The decades following the year 1000

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saw a significant growth in the building of monastic infirmaries, which were medical institutions in the modern sense of the word, but also offered refuge to the old and dying, as well as accommodation for travellers and pilgrims. "Let all guests who come to the monastery be entertained like Christ Himself," wrote St. Benedict, "because He will say, 'I was a stranger and you took me in.'"⁷⁴ Many of these infirmaries were built on deeply symbolic thoroughfares, beside bridges or rivers, or much-travelled roads, and though they could offer rest and seclusion and simple herbal remedies to those who were sick, the main constituent of their healing regimen was the primeval resonance of the Mass and the deeply affecting rhythms of the chant.

The monks rose in the middle of the night to sing their first prayers. Signing up for the monastic life meant saying goodbye forever to a full night's sleep, since two hours after midnight was the time set for the night office. Many monastic buildings had a staircase that went straight down from the dormitory into the chapel to ease the pain of going from sleep to their work of prayer in the cold and dark of a winter's night. This service in the small hours was called Matins, and afterwards the community went back to bed and slept again for three hours, before rising for good at 6 o'clock to sing Prime. Five other prayer times punctuated the day — Tierce, Sext, None, Vespers, and Compline, which was said at 7.00 p.m. in winter and 8.00 p.m. in summer, after which everyone went straight to bed.

Study and contemplation were the guiding themes of monastic life between prayer times. Every refectory had a pulpit or lectern from which one of the brethren would read while his comrades ate in silence — and a document

of the time sets out the signals and sign language with which the monks were taught to communicate in the absence of speech. St. Benedict insisted in his Rule that monks should be silent for as much of the day and night as possible, but he also ordained that they could communicate with signs, and the details of these signals have come down to us through an Anglo-Saxon manual of monastic sign language from the cathedral at Canterbury.

The manual was almost certainly produced in the same Canterbury writing studio as the Julius Work Calendar, and at about the same time, and it provides some rich insights not only into the lives of monks, but into many practical details of daily existence in the years around 1000 A.D.⁷⁵ So you would like a little wine? "Then make with your two fingers as if you were undoing the tap of a cask." Pass the butter? "Stroke with three fingers on the inside of your hand." A little pepper perhaps? "Knock with one index finger on the other." Salt? "Shake your hands with your three fingers together, as if you were salting something." Reading the 127 different signs set out in *Monasteriales Indicia*, one gets the impression that meal-times in a Benedictine refectory were rather like a gathering of baseball coaches, all furiously beckoning, squeezing their ear lobes, meaningfully rubbing their fingers up and down the sides of their noses, and smoothing their hands over their stomachs.

We learn of the hierarchy inside the monastery. The sign for the abbot was to put two fingers to one's head and take hold of a hank of hair, as if tugging the forelock — and indicating, perhaps, that below the bald patch of the tonsure, monks grew their hair quite long. The provost, or but-sar, was indicated by a single index finger raised over the

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head, the sign of the ox, because he was the provider of such things, while the cellarer was indicated by a circular turning of the hand and wrist, as if unlocking a door with a key. The sign for the "master of the boys" (putting two fingers to one's eyes and holding up the little finger) reminds us that the monasteries were educational establishments — the only schools in the England of 1000 A.D. — and also suggests how the learned and humorous Aelfric of Cerne Abbas would have been referred to by his colleagues. Signs 47 and 48, however, also provide a reminder of how Aelfric would have kept discipline in the classroom, since these two instructions explain how to call for the cane or the scourge — the cat o' nine tails — in accordance with St. Benedict's instruction: "Let the abbot restrain the badly behaved, and the inflexible and proud, or the disobedient, with blows or chastisement of the body."

More than half a dozen gestures for different types of candle, taper, wick, lantern, and lamp bear witness to a world lit only by fire. Signs for a bedcover and a pillow ("Stroke the sign of a feather inside your left hand") suggest that the monks slept quite comfortably between prayer times, while signs 91 and 92 make clear that the brethren put on both slippers and socks when they rose in the night to go down to the chapel. Sign 102 ("Stroke with your two hands up your thigh") tells us that the brothers wore underpants under their black Benedictine habits.

In the scriptorium, or writing studio, of every monastery the brethren dipped their sharpened goose quills into their phials of coloured acid and bent over their transcriptions of ancient manuscripts. The writing stand of each monk held two books, the manuscript on which the scribe was working and the volume from which he was copying, for to be learned in the year 1000 was to copy. You did not innovate. You learned by absorbing and reproducing the wisdom of earlier authorities.

It does not seem creative by modern standards, this relentless consigning of old authorities to the deep-freeze cabinet, but the monasteries of the first millennium were creating the cultural Noah's Ark on which our own understanding of the past is based. It is thanks to their copying — and to the documents preserved by the Arabs who controlled the Mediterranean — that we can today read the words of Plato and Aristotle or Julius Caesar. And from copying came, slowly, what we would nowadays describe as creativity.

The novelty of the sketches in the Utrecht Psalter was clearly the inspiration of the dramatic line drawings that bring such life to the Julius Work Calendar. We can imagine the Canterbury scribe with the old rhyming catalogue of saints from Winchester on his copying stand. What could he do to enhance the list and make it particular to Canterbury, the headquarters of the English church? Somewhere in the writing studio were lying the parchment leaves of the Utrecht Psalter, quite possibly unbound at that date, so their catchy, challenging, and very modern style of sketching could also be propped up in front of him. Outside in the southern English countryside, where he was expected to work regularly as part of his monastic duties, were the haymakers swinging their scythes. So the scribe set to work sketching, catching the fatigue and sweat on the brow of the bald-headed reaper pausing for breath on the right hand side of his July drawing, while, on the other side, another of the reapers stood back to sharpen his scythe with his honing stone. Today we admire the drawings of this talented but unknown artist for what they tell us about life in early eleventh-century England, but his fellow scribes and monks probably praised his illustrations for their rootedness in the tradition of the Utrecht original, with all its classical precedents.

The glory of medieval manuscripts lies in the drawings which are aptly described as illumination. Their sense of colour and sinuous inventiveness bring light to what would otherwise seem dark and routine — and that is certainly the case with the sketches of the Julius Work Calendar, which have no added colour at all. Their life derives from the vigour of their line and from their sharpness of observation. Look at the drawing for the month of May, with the

baby lamb suckling its mother. On the hillside beside the sheep the two shepherds lean together chatting, deep in gossip and conversation, while one of them scratches the back of his head. This is reportage based on firsthand observation. The drawing for the month of February shows the pruner tackling the tree on the left by cutting upwards from below, which was the correct way to lop off a heavy branch.

To the modern eye these drawings are secular. There are no halos or crosses. There is absolutely nothing otherworldly about them, for while the words of the calendar are looking heavenwards, these drawings focus on man in a profoundly humanist fashion — and on that group of men who, for the most part, occupied the humblest and least privileged ranks of society.

It must be assumed that the monk who illustrated the Julius Work Calendar with such lively interest and compassion was a believer. *Everybody* believed in the year 1000 — especially the pagans and those whom the church condemned as heretics. The sin of the heretic was to believe the wrong thing. But the modern viewer can sense a change of emphasis in these very human monthly labours. There is something of the agnostic detachment which was to alter the unquestioning nature of medieval thought in the next five hundred years. In this old and very traditional document we can sense the beginning of the probing and sceptical spirit that would bring the Middle Ages to the triumphant climax of the Renaissance and also inspire the ages of exploration and science.