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Tracing Monastic Culture

Monasticism is a widespread social phenomenon, evident in many religious traditions. Characteristic of all forms of monasticism, regardless of the religious ideology inspiring them, is the effort to refashion intellectual, ethical, and aesthetic perceptions and behaviors. Christian monasticism, like its counterparts in other religions, has employed a broad range of media and practices intended to reorient its adherents according to an overarching religious worldview and then to maintain their engagement over a lifetime. A carefully constructed environment would provide continual reinforcement of the values prized by the monastic tradition or community.

This range of media and practices, this carefully constructed environment, can reasonably be described as “monastic culture.” Among the most famous efforts to articulate what that means, at least in a western Christian context, is Jean Leclercq’s *L’Amour des lettres et le désir de Dieu: initiation aux auteurs monastiques du moyen âge* (1957; ET: *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture*, 1961). Leclercq depicts a specific moment in Benedictine monastic history, just before the classical and patristic approach to theology and piety began to yield to Scholasticism and the introduction of new religious practices associated with the *Devotio Moderna*, the “Modern Devotion.” Leclercq’s beautiful evocation of a cultivated Benedictine monasticism, immersed in Latin texts, attuned to philosophy and grammar, devoted to the liturgy, was presented as the attractively traditional alternative to the nascent intellectualism of the universities and their “Schools.” (And, not coincidentally, to the deadening approach to Catholic theology often characteristic of the 1950s, when Leclercq wrote the lectures for young monks on which the book is based.) His work has been a tremendously influential interpretation of medieval monasticism. The subtitle of the English translation, “A Study of Monastic Culture,” highlights the central theme of the book. Leclercq understands the constitutive elements of that monastic culture principally in terms of *texts*, both Classical and Christian. Leclercq’s emphasis on texts as formative of monastic culture is paralleled in Pierre Courcelle’s masterpiece, *Les Lettres grecques en Occident de Macrobe à Cassiodore* (1943; rev. ed. 1948; E.T. *Late Latin Writers and their Greek Sources*, 1969). Courcelle tracks the import into the Latin world of the classical and theological literature that Leclercq identifies as fundamental for later monastic culture. Courcelle’s own emphasis on texts was then grounded by Walter Berschin in the actual manuscripts created within an array of interpretive and scribal practices (*Griechisch-lateinisches Mittelalter. Von Hieronymus zu Nikolaus von Kues*, 1980; rev. and tr. as *Greek Letters and the Latin Middle Ages*, 1988).

As fascinating as these tracings of monastic “culture” are, they are incomplete. I have often, and admirably, described Leclercq’s *Love of Learning* as one of the great works of monastic fiction. This is partly because it is an idealization, and partly because any culture, “monastic” or other, consists of an array of formative elements. Among them texts may indeed be privileged, but would constitute only part of a larger, more intricate weaving of practical and aesthetic threads that, together, create the environment in which texts are appropriated and interpreted. A more comprehensive view of monastic culture might be:

- *privileged texts and related literature*: practices of reading and interpretation; memorization; libraries and their holdings; scribal practices; inscriptions; lectionaries (=books with selections)

from the Bible, lives of the saints, and commentators assigned to be read at the liturgy on specific seasons and feasts)

- *devotional and ascetic practices*: common and individual prayer; fasting; deprivation of sleep; sexual renunciation; manual labor
- *forms of bodily expression*: vesture, tonsure/veiling, gestures
- *differentiation of time and space*: the daily *horarium* (timetable), festal and seasonal rhythms, cloister and enclosure, arrangement of ritual spaces, regulation of speech and silence
- *social rituals*: rank and title; etiquettes of greeting and conversation; sleeping and dining arrangements; methods of punishment, exclusion and reintegration; incorporation of new members; care of the sick and burial of the dead
- *music and the visual arts*: architecture, melody and text, iconography, manuscript illumination, painting, mosaic, sculpture

Over the past several years I have explored this terrain, moving beyond my earlier, very text-oriented, work to consider devotional practices and their physical environment, the monastic use of books and reading techniques, the relationship between Late Antique philosophy and emerging Christian monasticism, the differentiation of monastic time and space, the development of western monastic liturgical practices, and the factors that shaped monastic libraries. I have also deepened my earlier interest in the transmission of ascetic ideas and terminology to consider the implications and efficacy of such translation and transposition. I have spent several years as Executive Director of a research library for western and eastern manuscripts, and developed a major initiative to digitize and catalogue Christian manuscripts in the Middle East. The geographical range of these investigations and projects has been as extensive as the early Christian monastic world itself, moving from the Greek/Syriac/Coptic east to the Latin west, crossing cultural and linguistic frontiers from Mesopotamia to Palestine, Egypt, the Balkans, Italy, Gaul and the later Frankish kingdoms, the British Isles. The chronological scope of my written work has typically been the third to the early ninth centuries, concentrating on the fourth to the seventh.

My aim now is to bring these various avenues of research together into a synthetic/thematic study of the elements of monastic culture and their interrelationship, while at the same time stepping back from the immediacy of the particular elements to consider the viability of the concept of “monastic culture” itself as a way of understanding the particular environments created in various Christian monastic traditions and communities. The goal is a book-length study that would consider the value and limits of the idea of “monastic culture,” and then draw out its various strands. My focus will be on the development of Christian monasticism, but I will benefit from my experience as presenter and participant in several monastic interreligious dialogues and from the availability of rich scholarly analysis of the sociology and ritual practice of Buddhist and Hindu asceticism. I would work from an array of sources representative of the various languages and traditions of early monasticism. While most of these would necessarily be textual, I will also use archeological and art historical materials. I am least qualified to deal with the role of music, though in the period on which I focus, the surviving data for the understanding and performance of music is more textual than properly musical. I will generally keep my focus on the period I know best, the third to ninth centuries, but will cast an eye toward later developments in both monastic east and west. My scope will be inclusive of both male and female monasticism wherever sources permit.

The result would be to some extent synthetic and impressionistic, though I always ground my work in detailed study of the available sources. Prominent in the study as both sources and case studies would be: the major traditions and places of Egyptian and Palestinian monasticism (Scetis, Nitria/Kellia, Phbow, the Red Sea Monasteries, Mar Saba and the Judean desert), the pathways of transmission of eastern monastic culture to the west (e.g., Jerome, Rufinus, John Cassian, et al.), the creation of distinctive environments through the development of comprehensive monastic rules (e.g., those of the Master, Benedict, Caesarius), the enduring power of certain monastic cultures to inspire later monks and nuns (e.g., Scetis in Egypt and Cassiodorus' Vivarium in Italy), and the unique mix of asceticism and devotion to texts found in Celtic monasticism.

A possible outline of chapters covering the elements of monastic culture listed above would be:

1. Monastic Culture?: distinctiveness/separateness, as well as embeddedness in surrounding culture
2. Privileged Narrative and Sacred Texts: the role of the Bible and related literature in forming intellectual and spiritual sensibilities, and techniques of biblical formation
3. Asceticism and Devotion: practices constitutive of the monastic way of life and their contribution to monastic identity.
4. Time and Space: monastic configurations of the temporal and physical environment.
5. Beauty and Desire: the aesthetics of monastic life.

The project would be of obvious interest to scholars and students of monasticism, but would also serve anyone interested in the broader issue of the formation of cultural identity, which is certainly topical in a world torn between tradition and modernity, and too often lapsing into unreflective fundamentalism.

I feel qualified to undertake this project because I have spent the last 25 years exploring its many aspects. I can work in the relevant languages, know the primary and secondary literature, and have published major studies of Syriac, Greek, and Latin ascetic/monastic traditions. I have extensive experience of monastic archeological sites and have spent considerable periods of time in a variety of monastic environments both east and west. My interest in the topic is both academic and personal; as someone who has lived as a (quite modern) Benedictine monk for a quarter-century, I am intrigued by the notion of a deliberately constructed monastic environment and also cautious about its possibility in the 21st century western world. While the main outcome of this project will be an academic publication, I expect that it will also generate reflections on the state of, and challenges to, monastic culture today. The scope of the project is vast, and finding a way through the vastness will require focus and discipline. My background, record of publication, and personal interest provide strong indication that I can maintain such focus and discipline, and that this project will be completed. I believe that this is a book I am meant to write, not least as a debt of gratitude to Jean Leclercq, whom I was privileged to know in my formative monastic years.

This project coincides with a sabbatical leave that will follow the completion of six years as Executive Director of the Hill Museum & Manuscript Library. I will spend the term of the project in a major city with good research libraries and stimulating conversation partners; Washington, DC and Boston are the most likely sites.