MEDIEVAL MONKS

Medieval monks were sworn to a life of personal poverty, but this does not mean that they were recruited from among the poor. In fact, they were predominantly drawn from the aristocracy. Recruits were expected to bring a significant donation to their monastery, and it was the upper classes who had land and money to offer. While monks were individually poor since they were not permitted to own personal property, the monastery collectively was a rich institution, and monks enjoyed a standard of living far above that of ordinary medieval people. They had regular and sufficient meals regardless of the state of the harvest; they had wine to drink and occasional fine foods, at least at establishments that took a moderate approach to asceticism; they lived in well-constructed stone facilities with good sanitation; and there was ample provision for them in illness and old age. The monastic way of life was austere, but it offered enough advantages that there was always a demand among the aristocracy for monastic positions. Aristocratic parents with multiple sons needed to find an appropriate career for the younger ones, and sending them to monasteries was a good option, offering an acceptable standard of living, a stable future, and even prospects of prestige and power. Of course, this practice of treating monasticism as a career rather than a vocation meant that many monks were not deeply committed to the monastic ideal, to the detriment of monastic discipline.

Most monasteries recruited their population principally from the surrounding region. This was less true in the case of a major establishment like Cluny, the highly esteemed head of an extensive international order. Cluny attracted a more diverse population than most monasteries, drawn from across Western Europe. Some of its monks came from other Cluniac monasteries, sent by their abbots to live at the mother house. Some came from other monastic orders. A monk was generally expected to remain in his monastery for life, but he was permitted to leave a less strict house for a stricter one, and Cluny had a high reputation for its adherence to the Benedictine rule. Some recruits came to the monastery from a life as secular clergymen, others as laymen. Although the bulk of Cluny’s population were presumably native French speakers, the daily language of the monastery, as of the church in general, was Latin. The monks used Latin among themselves, and any new monk who was ignorant of the language had to learn it. Monks might need the local vernacular to communicate with lay brothers and visitors, but since communication with nonmonks was strictly limited, a monk could spend his lifetime at Cluny without knowing French.

The process of admission to a monastery depended on the situation of the candidate. Some monasteries accepted children, generally from the ages of five to seven or later. These children, called oblates (“offered ones”), were principally a feature of Benedictine monasteries. By the 13th century, the Church had decided that a boy could not be bound permanently to the monastic life by his parents, so that when he came of age he could choose whether to become a monk or not. The later reformed orders generally refused to accept oblates at all, since the presence of children could easily disrupt monastic discipline, and the practice disappeared in the course of the 13th century. The oblates lived according to a moderated version of monastic discipline. They were allowed more food, and very small boys might even have extra

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rations brought to them in the cloister between meals. At mealtimes each boy was sent to eat at one of the tables of the monks, where he took his food standing across from a reliable monk who would report him for discipline if necessary. Instead of the monk's tunic, they wore a linen shirt, with a hooded gown over it; when the abbot judged them ready, the hood was removed, and they were given a cowl. They were taught the skills necessary for a monk: reading, writing, arithmetic, and Latin, as well as singing and reading music so that they could take part in the Divine Office.

Anyone who joined the monastery at the age of 15 years or more became a novice. The novitiate began with a ceremony of initiation followed by a mass, during which the novice was shaved and given the tonsure, the distinctive hairstyle of the clergyman, which involved shaving the crown of the head to leave a circle of hair just above the level of the ears. The novice wore the same clothes as the oblate, with a monk's tunic substituted for the linen shirt. The novitiate lasted one year, during which the novice participated to a limited degree in monastic activities and learned the requirements of monastic life. The novices were separated from the monks at most times, with their own dormitory, refectory, and latrine. At the end of the year, the novice was allowed to take his vows, pledging himself to the monastic life and becoming a full member of the monastic community. During the ceremony of initiation, the novice's hooded gown was removed, and replaced by the monastic cowl. For the next three days, the new monk was required to keep the hood of the cowl over his head, sleep in his full habit, and keep continual silence. On the third day, the priest of the week kissed him and pushed back his hood, at which point he began the customary life of the monk. Most novices were youths, but they also included older men who chose to retire to monastic life.

The monk's vows were considered permanently binding, and the new monk was in principle bound to the monastery for the rest of his life—he was not even permitted to pass the cloister gate without permission, or to talk with any lay person, even the lay brothers who worked within the monastery. Everything the monk needed for the rest of his days was provided within the precincts of the monastery. In this way, the monk could leave behind the outside world. In practice, however, many monks did have contact with the world beyond the cloister. Monastic officers were required by their work to interact with laymen and spend time in the outer areas of the monastery, or even beyond the monastery walls, serving as ambassadors from the monastery or administering its business affairs. In some cases a monk was permitted to transfer to a new monastery, either for his own spiritual benefit, or to provide experience or expertise for an institution in need. During the 13th century, with rising educational standards in the secular world, many monasteries began to send monks to university, and some monasteries established houses at universities to serve as residences for members of their order.

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Further Reading


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