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# MEDIEVAL MONASTIC EDUCATION



Edited by  
GEORGE FERZOCO AND CAROLYN MUESSIG

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George Ferzoco and Carolyn Muessig



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# Contributors

**Dom Aidan Bellenger** is a monk of Downside Abbey, where he was Head Master for five years. He teaches medieval history at Bath Spa College. He studied at the University of Cambridge, where he received his PhD in 1978, and at the Angelicum University, Rome. He has written five books and numerous articles mainly on the history of religious orders and Anglo-French relations. He is a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society.

**Susan Boynton** is Assistant Professor of Historical Musicology at Columbia University. Her research interests include liturgical poetry, liturgical drama, monastic customaries, monastic education and women in medieval music. Recent publications include an article on the Orpheus myth in Carolingian music theory: 'The Sources and Significance of the Orpheus Myth in "Musica Enchiriadis" and Regino of Prüm's "Epistola de harmonica institutione"', *Early Music History* 18 (1999), 47–74; and articles on liturgical drama, including 'Performative Exegesis in the Fleury "Interfectio Puerorum"', *Viator* 29 (1998), 1–25, and 'The Liturgical Role of Children in Monastic Customaries from the Central Middle Ages', *Studia Liturgica* 28 (1998), 194–209.

**James G. Clark** is British Academy Postdoctoral Fellow and Junior Research Fellow in History at Brasenose College, Oxford. His research interests are focused on later medieval monastic learning. He has published several articles on this theme and is currently completing a study of Thomas Walsingham and St Albans Abbey for Oxford University Press.

**Isabelle Cochelin** is Assistant Professor in History and at the Centre for Medieval Studies, University of Toronto. Her research interests include monastic history and social history, more specifically Cluny, monastic customaries and the life cycle, and among her recent publications are two articles in *Revue Mabillon* on novitiate and hierarchy (1998 and 2000).

**W. G. East** holds degrees from Oxford and Yale, and has taught in Cork, Sunderland and York universities. A Catholic priest, he continues to teach and publish on various medieval topics. Recent

publications include 'Abelard's Allusive Style', in *Mittelateinisches Jahrbuch* (1999) and 'This Body of Death: Abelard, Heloise and the Religious Life', in *Medieval Theology and the Natural Body* (York: Boydell and Brewer, 1997).

**George Ferzoco** is Lecturer in Italian Studies, University of Leicester. His research interests include sermons, hagiography and religious literature in Italy, and recent publications include an English translation of Peter of the Morrone's 'Autobiography' in T. Head (ed.) *Medieval Hagiography* (New York: Garland, 2000) and 'An Italian Archbishop's Sermon to the Pope', *Medieval Sermon Studies* 43 (1999), 67-74.

**Penelope Galloway** is Lecturer in Medieval History, University of Bristol. Her research interests include beguine communities, medieval women's work and urban history. Recent publications include 'Neither Miraculous nor Astonishing: The Devotional Practice of Beguine Communities in French Flanders', in J. Dor, L. Johnson and J. Wogan-Browne (eds) *New Trends in Feminine Spirituality: The Holy Women of Liège and Their Impact* (Turnhout: Brepols, 1999), 107-27.

**Miriam Gill** is a PhD candidate at the Courtauld Institute. Her thesis discusses late medieval wall painting in England. She has recently undertaken a database project on catechismal murals for the University of Leicester. She is interested in the relationship between visual, oral and written culture, with particular regard to didactic wall paintings, the articulation of sacred space and local saints.

**Joan Greatrex** was Associate Professor of Medieval History, Carleton University, Ottawa, until her retirement, and was recently Bye Fellow at Robinson College, Cambridge. Her research interests include English monastic history with special reference to the cathedral priories and their Benedictine chapters, and also to the monks' intellectual pursuits. She is the author of *Biographical Register of the English Cathedral Priories of the Province of Canterbury, c.1066-1540* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997).

**Graham Jones** is an Honorary Fellow at the University of Leicester's Department of English Local History and Stott Fellow in the University of Wales, Centre for Advanced Welsh and Celtic Studies. He was awarded a Leverhulme Fellowship at Leicester, 1997-99, to begin work on a Trans-national Database and Atlas of Saints' Cults.

**Beverly Mayne Kienzle** is Professor of the Practice in Latin and Romance Languages at Harvard Divinity School and is the current President of the International Medieval Sermon Studies Society. Recent publications include *Cistercians, Heresy and Crusade (1145-1229): Preaching in the Lord's Vineyard* (York: Boydell and Brewer, 2000) and *The Sermon: Typologie des sources du moyen âge occidental, fasc. 81-83* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2000).

**Constant J. Mews** is Senior Lecturer in the School of Historical Studies and Director of the Centre for Studies in Religion and Theology, Monash University, and specializes in the thought and religious culture of the twelfth century. He is the author of *The Lost Love Letters of Heloise and Abelard: Perceptions of Dialogue in Twelfth-Century France* (New York: St Martin's, 1999), as well as many papers relating to Hildegard of Bingen.

**Carolyn Muessig** is Lecturer in Medieval Theology, University of Bristol. Her research interests include the sermons of Jacques de Vitry and James of Voragine, monastic history and medieval women's education. Recent publications include *The Faces of Women in the Sermons of Jacques de Vitry* (Toronto: Peregrina, 1999) and *Medieval Monastic Preaching* (Leiden: Brill, 1998). She is co-editor of the journal *Medieval Sermon Studies*.

**Bert Roest** is Fellow of The Netherlands Royal Academy assigned to Groningen University. His research focuses on medieval intellectual history and (Franciscan) religious thought. His writings include *Reading the Book of History: Intellectual Contexts and Educational Functions of Franciscan Historiography (1226-ca. 1350)* (Groningen: Regenboog Press, 1996) and *A History of Franciscan Education (c. 1217-1500)* (Leiden: Brill, 2000).

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# Preface

The contents of this book are based on the international conference, 'Medieval Monastic Education and Formation', held at Downside Abbey from 22 to 25 June 1999. This was the second conference hosted by the Congregation of St Gregory the Great, Downside Abbey, which addressed monastic life in the Middle Ages. The conference was attended by scholars from Australia, Canada, Finland, Germany, Italy, The Netherlands, the United Kingdom and the United States. Over the four-day conference, fourteen speakers and three respondents investigated education and formation in male and female religious houses from the eighth to the sixteenth centuries. The geographical areas under examination included England, France, Germany and the Low Countries.

Of the fourteen papers delivered at the conference, this volume contains twelve with the addition of an article on twelfth-century female education and a discussion of the main themes raised in the papers. The proceedings offer further insight into both male and female monastic approaches to learning. Moreover, aspects of medieval monastic education which have not been explored in great detail up until now, such as the use of music and liturgy in education, are addressed. Two papers dealing with beguinal and Franciscan education respectively are also included as they at once share in the tradition of monastic learning and shed light on monastic approaches to education.

George Ferzoco, University of Leicester  
Carolyn Muessig, University of Bristol  
17 April 2000

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*The editors wish to dedicate this book to  
Jacques M nard  
and to all who teach by word and example*



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# 1 The changing face of tradition: monastic education in the Middle Ages

*George Ferzoco*

The *Rule* of Benedict begins with the call: 'Listen carefully, my son, to the master's instructions, and attend to them with the ear of your heart' (*RB*: Prologue). How one should listen and how one should instruct are, however, never clearly laid out in the *Rule*; and the methods that were developed and employed to fill this lacuna have been the subject of several landmark books addressing education in the Middle Ages. Presently, a handful of these books will be addressed to outline the main trends in this area of study.

## **Formative studies of medieval education**

One of the most influential books in the study of monastic culture and education is Jean Leclercq's *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God* (1974). Analysing monastic education from Benedict of Nursia (†c.540) to Bernard of Clairvaux (†1153), the book underlines that monastic houses were places where monks developed their theological sensibilities in order to find God. Leclercq's study is a thematic *tour de force*, addressing aspects of monastic pedagogy such as poetry, liturgy, classical studies, methods of reading, biblical imagination, humanism, scholasticism, hagiography and liturgy, to name only a few.

While Leclercq's book offers depth and breadth to the understanding of monastic culture which all students should examine, he tends to synthesize various monastic approaches to education into a monolithic characterization of the learned monk:

To combine a patiently acquired culture with a simplicity won through the power of fervent love, to keep simplicity of soul in the midst of the diverse attractions of the intellectual life and, in order to accomplish this, to place oneself and remain firmly on the place of the conscience, to raise knowledge to its level and never let it fall below: that is what the cultivated monk succeeds in doing. He is a scholar, he is versed in letters but he is not

merely a man of science nor a man of letters nor an intellectual, he is a spiritual man. (Leclercq, 1974: 317)

Leclercq's study offers insight into early monasticism by dedicating chapters to Benedict of Nursia and Gregory the Great (†604). Nevertheless, the central points of his book are related to the twelfth century, and in particular to the thought of Bernard of Clairvaux. One book which focuses entirely on the early period of monastic education in the West is Pierre Riché's *Education and Culture in the Barbarian West* (1976). This work provides a detailed study of monastic trends of learning from the sixth to the eighth centuries. Riché traces how the ancient education of Rome slowly yielded to the developing centres of monastic education throughout Western Europe (Riché, 1976: 365). In addition to looking at the thematic evidence of pedagogical tendencies, Riché studies the changing social context in which learning developed. He examines aspects of education that until the publication of his book had received little attention, such as: monastic attitudes toward the education of children; the role of women as educators in double monasteries; the self-perceptions of monastic educators *qua* educators; and the use of song in education. Many of these subjects raised in *Education and Culture in the Barbarian West* have inspired further research among younger scholars.

What is also significant about Riché's study is the vast geographical range he covers. By looking at Africa, Ireland, England, France, Germany, Italy and Spain, as well as a variety of monastic rules, numerous approaches to learning and teaching are highlighted. Unlike the apparent uniformity which looms large in Leclercq's study, a seeming cacophony of teaching voices are heard: Bede wrote, 'While observing the discipline of the rule and the daily chanting of the offices in the church, my chief pleasure has been to learn, to teach, and to write' (Riché, 1976: 380–1); Columban believed that study allowed students of monasticism to overcome carnal desires (Riché, 1976: 325); and Isidore of Seville believed that 'The monk should refrain from reading the books of pagans and heretics' (Riché, 1976: 294).

Recently a number of books have been published in France that deal with medieval education (e.g. Laurioux and Moulinier, 1998; Verger, 1999).<sup>1</sup> Both studies offer an excellent introduction to educational trends in the central and later Middle Ages. However, in these studies an analysis of attitudes towards learning and teaching found in the cathedral schools and universities receives greater attention than that of monastic experiences. The perception of pedagogy is at the heart of Caroline Walker Bynum's *Docere Verbo et Exemplo* (1979), which often dwells on how canons and monks saw themselves as teachers. In this study Bynum seeks to investigate if and how canons regular and monks distinguished their approaches to edification. Using treatises of spiritual advice that monks and canons wrote for their brethren, she studied these two groups' views of speech and conduct.

Written fifteen years after Bynum's book, Stephen Jaeger's *The Envy of Angels* (1994) presents a variety of learning attitudes found in

cathedral schools. Sections of the book study the subject of the teacher and identify a progression of attitudes toward learning and teaching in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Although Jaeger focuses more on cathedral schools, he does address monastic learning in his chapter on Bernard of Clairvaux.<sup>2</sup> He sees a continuity between different centres of learning: 'Monasticism gave Europe new ways of studying; humanism gave it new ways of behaving; scholasticism gave it new ways of thinking' (Jaeger, 1994: 325–6). This is a move away from the common tendency to separate learning techniques sharply among monastic and scholastic thinkers.<sup>3</sup> Jaeger's development of a scholarly terminology regarding pedagogy and attitudes toward teaching and learning is a welcome tool in the study of medieval monastic education.

Behind the activity of learning in monastic milieus are a variety of factors that do not technically fall under the category of learning, but are integral to an understanding of monastic education. Brian Patrick McGuire's book *Friendship and Community: The Monastic Experience 350–1250* (1988) demonstrates how bonds of community were intimately connected to bonds of learning. McGuire defined medieval monastic friendship as a relationship where one monk was a *custos animi*, guardian of the soul, for his fellow monk (McGuire, 1988: xv). Such nuances of monastic culture must be closely studied in order to grasp the various levels of learning and formation which existed in the cloister.

### **The themes of medieval monastic education**

Several of the subjects raised in these books are further developed in the chapters of this collection. Other issues are introduced and examined and, in the process, invitations to further research are numerous indeed.

Susan Boynton and Isabelle Cochelin have contributed studies dealing with fundamental yet hitherto neglected aspects of the pedagogy practised in the greatest Benedictine congregation of the central Middle Ages, Cluny. Boynton shows that through liturgical education children at Cluny learned far more than the liturgy: through the time spent in liturgical training, youths became acquainted with the hierarchy, discipline and ritual patterns of the monastery. Boynton accomplishes this by moving away from the traditional focus on music theory treatises as pedagogical sources towards customaries from the tenth to the twelfth centuries. Cochelin makes similar use of customaries, noting their interest not simply for their explicit instructions and descriptions but also for their implicit agendas. In using these sources as well as hagiographical texts dealing with Cluniac saints, Cochelin not only shows the importance of physical and verbal imitation in education across the spectrum of medieval society, but she also adduces convincing evidence to argue that physical discipline was an essential parallel to the intellectual instruction afforded by monastic teachers.

Aidan Bellenger's analysis of a medieval manuscript is neatly apt for this collection. Not only is this *medulla* (or essential grammar book) conserved in the Library of Downside Abbey (site of the conference that gave rise to much of the material in this book), but Bellenger also provides us with a direct and detailed study of the contents and context of this manuscript. The author treats it as a part of the intellectual education of medieval English monks in the later Middle Ages. The same period and geographical area provide the material for broader studies by Joan Greatrex and James Clark. Greatrex examines the education provided within English monastic cathedral priories. She brings together information from disparate sources in order to provide a first look at the pre-priesthood education of monks who were not selected to study at Oxford or Cambridge. Moreover, Greatrex notes that much further work can be accomplished with the publication of editions of medieval library catalogues (especially those of cathedral priories). Clark continues the 'narrative' provided by these three chapters dealing with the late medieval English context of monastic education, in his turn examining the education of monks at Oxford. Stressing how previous studies have centred exclusively upon exceptional scholars, Clark goes on to show that, at Oxford at least, the norm – as revealed by examining the registers of Congregation – could present an educational context that was in several ways not only different but even pioneering.

A comprehensive history of women's monastic education comparable to the detailed study of Riché has yet to be written. An innovative personage among medieval educators of women was surely Hildegard of Bingen, and the chapters by Beverly Mayne Kienzle and Carolyn Muessig provide new insights to this figure and her cultural world; and William East looks at another great twelfth-century educator, Abelard. Kienzle, in examining Hildegard's *Expositiones evangeliorum* in the light of the theatrical *Ordo virtutum*, emphasizes how the teaching and exegesis of the abbess occurred within a homiletic context. With her focus on the struggle of the soul, the teaching and approach of Hildegard is argued as being unique. This point is convincingly argued, but it is interesting to see in Muessig's contribution that while Hildegard's lessons are tied to her personality and actions, her approach to selecting the women who would be her students and fellow nuns is typical of Benedictine spirituality to that time. Herrad of Landsberg, a fellow abbess and contemporary of the more celebrated Hildegard, is a compiler and mediator of textual tradition. In contrasting the two educators, Muessig shows the vital diversity of pedagogical and spiritual approaches to be found in twelfth-century German convents. The French convent of the Paraclete had as its abbess another extraordinary figure, Heloise, and East presents her as the pupil of an extraordinary teacher, Abelard. In concentrating on the final letters from Abelard to his beloved, East eloquently demonstrates the necessity of ignoring previous judgements of these letters as being unworthy of study. Through these letters and the hymns written by

Abelard for Heloise's nuns, one sees how the world of the cloisters was not an isolated one, but rather one in which real and instructive dialogue could take place through teaching and learning.

One could teach and learn in the monastic milieu through a variety of source materials, and the chapters of Graham Jones and Miriam Gill concentrate largely on this matter. Jones presents a case study of Guthlac and his cult, and how one can only come to understand the ties drawn between the English hermit and the figure of the apostle Bartholomew by entering into very close readings of hagiographical texts. Jones shows how the lives of saints were not simply spiritually uplifting, but also served to inform the mission of a monastery and to reinforce the sense of identity and community that needed to be instilled in all members. Gill's contribution provides a careful overview of how the visual arts were used in monastic education. Focusing on wall paintings, Gill not only shows how they were used to educate monks, but she also demonstrates the role played by monastic art in teaching lay visitors to the monastery.

The influences that traditional monastic pedagogy had on lay people, as well as on other related religious communities, provide a focus for the final three chapters. Penelope Galloway, in looking at the beguine communities of Douai and Lille, shows not only how they would provide an education for themselves, but also how they would teach local children as well; this education would be at once practical and intellectual. Bert Roest examines the debt owed by Franciscan pedagogy to its monastic antecedents, and shows that this debt was especially profound, owing much to Cistercian and Victorine approaches to education. Constant Mews, finally, reveals the hitherto ignored educational agenda favoured by the Hirsau reform movement. In presenting and analysing the contents and products of the Zwiefalten library and scriptorium, Mews shows (as does Roest with the Franciscans) that there could and did exist a remarkable harmony between monastic and scholastic educational concerns. In accomplishing this, Mews calls for a revision of Leclercq's rather monolithic separation of these two broad Christian communities in the Middle Ages.

Given the riches contained in these chapters, I think it would be folly to attempt a comprehensive list of their inspirations for future research. Although such a list would likely be as long as this present book, I believe it to be worthwhile to point out just a handful of the more obvious paths opened to us. One has to do with geography. Although these essays are very illuminating with regard to England and the northern part of Europe, very little is stated explicitly with regard to the Mediterranean basin. A second would deal with how other sources may be used to provide even more detailed and accurate information on the themes discussed. For example: if Franciscan pedagogical links can be made to monasticism through scholastics like Bonaventure, then what will we find upon analysing Franciscan writings for novices, for Poor Clares, for tertiaries, for lay people

generally? Indeed, how will such approaches compare with works produced by other mendicant orders? Regarding points raised in the essays on English monastic education: do the contents of *medullae*, like the one in the Downside Library, vary? Did monks studying at Cambridge have similar approaches and study patterns to those of their brethren at Oxford? And concerning women: did abbesses in centuries other than the twelfth have such a pivotal role in education in their convents?

The chapters in this book furnish us with a greater insight into the diversity of monastic education. Moreover, they point to pathways for further research in many fields and directions. Listening to them not only with the engaged intellect but also with the heart will move scholars toward ever richer areas of study.

## Notes

1. Both these books are general introductions to the history of medieval education and are aimed at students who are preparing for the 2000 and 2001 French *agrégation* examinations in history.
2. Because of the cross-pollination between cathedral and monastic centres of learning in the eleventh century, it is nearly impossible to present them as separate entities of learning.
3. See Constant Mews, Chapter 14, for a detailed discussion of this matter and its relationship to the influence of Leclercq's view of medieval monasticism versus scholasticism. An example of Leclercq's influence in this regard may be observed in Elder, 1986.

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## 2 Training for the liturgy as a form of monastic education

*Susan Boynton*

In the early eleventh century, Guido of Arezzo fumed that ‘cantors are foolish above all men’ because their lifelong study of singing left no time for other learning. He deplored the fact that singers could not learn even the shortest antiphon by themselves without the help of a teacher, and consequently spent all their time learning chant. Worse, both secular clergy and monks neglected the Psalms, readings and pious works essential to salvation to devote themselves exclusively to the art of singing ‘with assiduous and most foolish labor’.<sup>1</sup> Guido’s invective echoes Agobard of Lyon’s complaint two hundred years earlier that singers spent their entire lives, from childhood to old age, learning and practising the chant repertory instead of pursuing useful and spiritual studies.<sup>2</sup> Learning melodies by rote imitation and repetition, singers were utterly reliant on their teachers; as Regino of Prüm remarked around 900, most musicians knew nothing about their art, but simply performed as they had learned from their teachers.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, although the science of music theory had achieved major advances between the Carolingian period and the early eleventh century, chant pedagogy did not match this progress before Guido, whose innovative systems of notation and sight-singing enabled singers to learn melodies more quickly.<sup>4</sup>

What do the sources tell us about the lengthy process of training young singers to take part in the monastic liturgy during the central Middle Ages? Musical education was part of a broader liturgical formation in which reading, singing and writing were fully integrated. Since music theory treatises rarely make explicit reference to the environment in which liturgical instruction went on, studies of early music education based entirely on them tend to be schematic and abstract (Smits van Waesberghe, 1969; Walter, 1996). The treatises do not provide information on the social context, roles and responsibilities of teachers, or on the times and places of instruction. To understand these aspects of elementary liturgical education we need texts not only about music but also about musicians, and particularly about boys, since in this period child oblates constituted the primary group undergoing elementary liturgical training. The richest sources for studying the process of monastic liturgical training are customaries



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## sample content of Medieval Monastic Education

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