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CHAPTER 1

Introduction: situating the problem

At the heart of the monastic life lies the quest for spiritual perfection, the individual journey of the soul towards the love of God and the promise of eternal life. First of all things, the seventh-century Irish monk Columbanus reminded the members of his own communities in Gaul at the opening of his Rule for monks, 'we are taught to love God with the whole heart and the whole mind and all our strength, and our neighbour as ourselves, next our works'.[1] Only by renouncing the will and arming the soul with the 'strong and noble weapons of obedience', could the monk 'do battle for the true King, Christ the Lord' argued St Benedict of Nursia.[2] He wrote his 'little rule for beginners' in sixth-century Italy for the monks of his abbey at Monte Cassino, south of Rome, but copies circulated in northern Frankia and in England in the seventh century.[3] 'Nothing must be refused in their obedience by Christ's true disciples, however hard and difficult it

[1] Columbanus, *Regula monachorum*, prologue (ed. Walker, *Sancti Columbani Opera*, pp. 122–3); the quotation of Christ's injunction is from Matthew 22: 37 and 39. Columbanus wrote his two rules, the *Regula monachorum* and the *Regula coenobialis*, for the guidance of the members of the communities he had established at Annegray, Luxeuil and Fontaine in Frankia and Bobbio in northern Italy: see Donald Bullough, 'The career of Columbanus', in Michael Lapidge (ed.), *Columbanus: Studies on the Latin Writings* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1997), pp. 1–28, at pp. 11–13; and Jane Barbara Stevenson, 'The monastic rules of Columbanus', *ibid*., pp. 203–16, at p. 206.

[2] *RSB*, prologue, 3; ch. 73, 8 (pp. 156–7 and 296–7).

[3] See plate I: Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS, Hatton 48, fo. 93. This eighth-century manuscript is the earliest surviving copy of Benedict's Rule and has a south-western provenance; it may have been copied in a minster in the south-west with which Bishop Wilfrid had connections: Patrick Sims-Williams, *Religion and Literature in Western England, 600–800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 117–18; for the early circulation of the Rule see Marilyn Dunn, *The Emergence of Monasticism: From the Desert Fathers to the Early Middle Ages* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), pp. 192–4.

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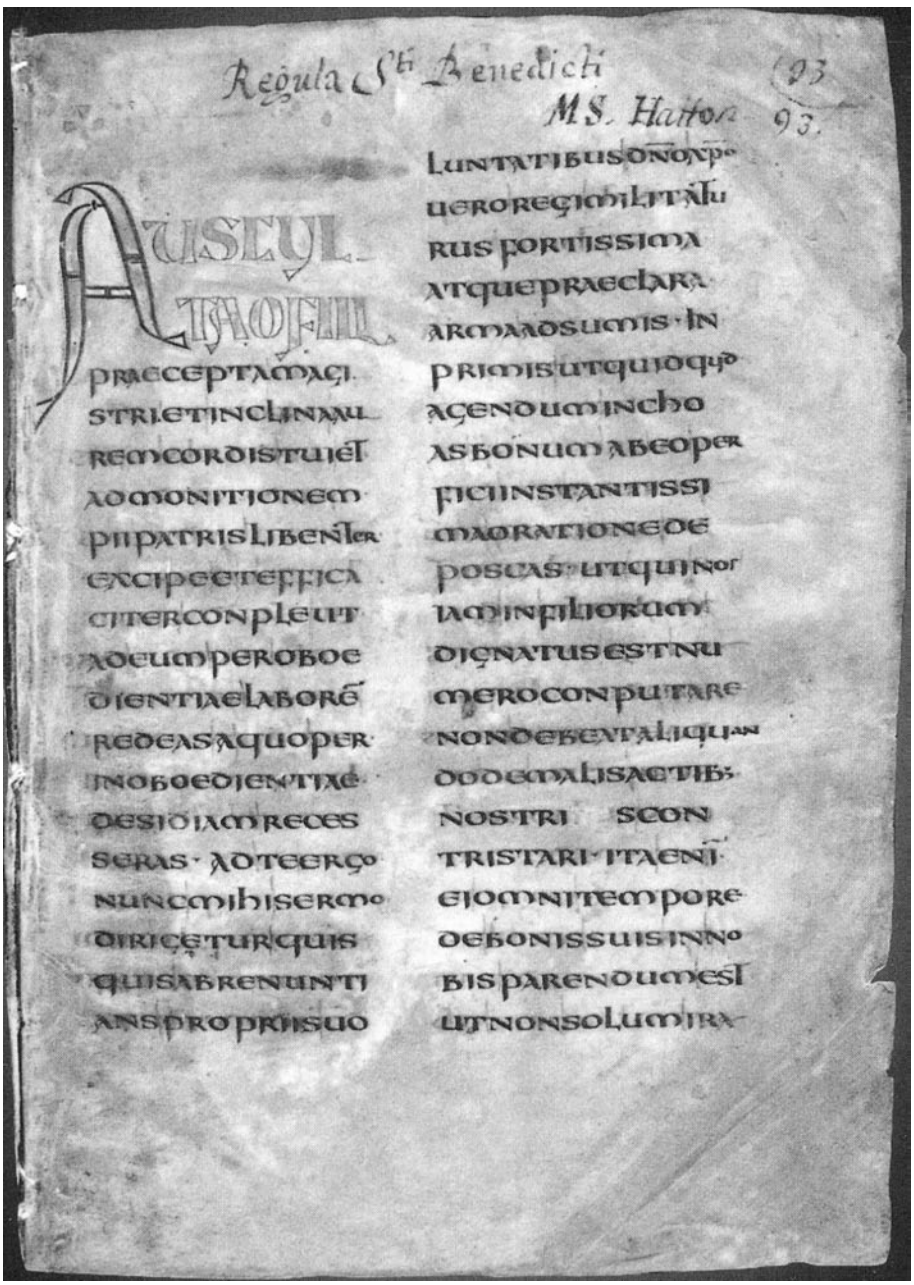

PLATE I: The Rule of St Benedict: Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Hatton 48, fo. 93.

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be, but it must be seized with zeal, with gladness, since if obedience is not of this nature, it will not be pleasing to the Lord.'[4] Benedict acknowledged that the path to salvation was bound to be narrow at the outset, but 'as we progress in this way of life and in faith, we shall run on the path of God's commandments, our hearts overflowing with the inexpressible delight of love. Never swerving from his instructions, then, but faithfully observing his teaching in the monastery until death we shall through patience share in the sufferings of Christ that we may deserve also to share in his kingdom.'[5]

Monastic rules reveal with particular clarity the ideals that shaped the evolution of the communal religious life in the Christian Latin West and would outwardly seem to offer a valuable route into a study of the nature of the conventual monastic life in the same period. The words of St Benedict's rule were so familiar to the eighth-century Northumbrian Bede that his writings, particularly his homilies, were frequently coloured with allusions to a text that he must have known well by heart.[6] In the autobiographical statement with which he concluded his *Ecclesiastical History*, Bede defined himself as a servant of Christ, *famulus Christi*. He explained how he had spent his entire life from the age of seven at the *monasterium* of Saints Peter and Paul at Wearmouth and Jarrow 'amid the observance of the discipline of the rule and the daily task of singing in the church', devoting himself with joy to learning, teaching or writing.[7] Ceolfrith, Bede's abbot, had similarly 'for many years carried out the discipline of observance of the rule, a discipline which its father and provider had handed down on authority of traditional practice for the benefit both of his followers and himself' before he elected in old age to visit once more the shrines of the holy apostles in Rome.[8] Adherence to a rule, or to a clearly articulated set of organising principles, was one of the defining characteristics of monasticism and the key to its differentiation from secular life-styles. Caesarius of Arles admonished the nuns in sixth-century Arles for whom he wrote his rule, 'with your whole heart and with your whole soul you should strive earnestly to fulfil the

[4] Columbanus, *Regula monachorum*, ch. 1 (pp. 124–5). [5] *RSB*, prologue, 49–50 (pp. 164–7).
[6] A. G. P. van der Walt, 'Reflections of the Benedictine Rule in Bede's homiliary', *JEH* 37 (1986), 367–86. See also Patrick Wormald, 'Bede and Benedict Biscop', in Gerald Bonner (ed.), *Famulus Christi: Essays in Commemoration of the Thirteenth Centenary of the Birth of the Venerable Bede* (London: SPCK, 1976), pp. 141–69, at pp. 142–4; and Henry M. R. E. Mayr-Harting, *The Venerable Bede, the Rule of St Benedict and Social Class*, Jarrow Lecture 1976 (Jarrow, 1977), pp. 8–9.
[7] *HE* V. 24 (pp. 566–7). [8] *HA*, ch. 16 (p. 380).

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precepts included above, through which you may happily attain your eternal reward'.[9]

Monasticism was the predominant form of religious expression in England in the period between the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons to Christianity in the late sixth and seventh centuries and the end of the First Viking Age *c.* 900. Most of the religious men and women whose pious and charitable deeds we find reported in contemporary narratives were, for at least a part of their careers, associated with a communal religious establishment. Even those whose ascetic fervour found fulfilment in the eremitic life often had formal connections with a conventual house and had frequently spent some time sharing in a life of communal devotion before they adopted a solitary existence.[10] The *monasterium* was the focus of all Anglo-Saxon piety: it satisfied the devotional aspirations of pious men and women, served the spiritual and often the charitable needs of its lay neighbours and fulfilled a valuable social function as a focal point in its own locality. Although the words might refer to diverse sorts of establishment, the Latin noun *monasterium* and its Old English derivative, *mynster*, were used synonymously in early English sources to denote communal religious establishments. Contemporaries made no distinction between different sorts of congregation on the basis of the identity (or gender) of their occupants, or the types of task in which they were most regularly engaged.[11] It is thus important to clarify at the start of this study the terms that will be used to describe both

[9] Caesarius, *Regula ad uirgines*, ch. 63 (ed. de Vogüé and Courreau, pp. 248–9). Caesarius, who had trained at the monastery of Lérins, was archbishop of Arles from 502 until 542; taking a particular interest in the Christian community in Arles, he reorganised the life of his own cathedral congregation and established a female community, headed by his sister and after her his niece, writing a rule specifically for the women's use: Dunn, *The Emergence of Monasticism*, pp. 98–107.

[10] Not all of those known to have lived as solitaries (for example the anchorites named in Durham's *Liber vitae*) can be associated with specific minsters and it is not possible to comment on any preparation or training they might have received before entering a hermitage. In his poem about the church of York, Alcuin described the spiritual prowess of two anchorites, Balthere and Echa (*Versus*, lines 1319–87 and 1388–1407), neither of whom appears to have lived at York; that Alcuin was seemingly so well-informed about their deeds and that both their deaths were recorded in the York Annals (*s.a.* 756 and 767) implies that neither man was totally cut off from the organised Church of his own day. See Donald Bullough, 'Hagiography as patriotism: Alcuin's "York poem" and the early Northumbrian "vitae sanctorum"', in Pierre Riché and Evelyne Patlagean (eds.), *Hagiographie, Cultures et Societés iv^e–xii^e siècles: Actes du Colloque organisé à Nanterre et à Paris (2–5 mai, 1979)* (Paris: Etudes augustiniennes, 1981), pp. 339–59, at pp. 349–52.

[11] Compare Christopher Brooke, 'Rural ecclesiastical institutions in England: the search for their origins', *Settimane* 28 (1982), 685–711, at 697–8: 'there is no kind of religious community, or church bereft of a religious community, that was not at one time or another called a *monasterium*. The confusion is compounded by our ignorance of the nature of the communities or groups of clergy who served the majority of the minster churches for most of the period 600–1100.'

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communal religious establishments in early Anglo-Saxon England and those who dwelt within them.

Definition of terms

As I have argued elsewhere, the Latin noun employed most consistently in early medieval England (and indeed the rest of western Europe) to denote a congregation of people living together, apart from the world under religious vows, was *monasterium*.[12] Cathedral communities, groups of religious mostly in clerical orders, who lived in a household led by a bishop were generally described either as *sedes episcopales* (the seats of bishops) or sometimes simply as *ecclesiae*.[13] We shall look further at the relationship between episcopal and monastic communities in the next chapter,[14] yet apart from bishops' households, all other religious congregations were consistently called *monasteria*. This blanket term could conceal a variety of types of institution ranging from a small community of a handful of men, living at a distance from secular settlement on a small portion of land with perhaps a wooden oratory or church, to a large, well-endowed congregation of men and women, living in a planned enclosure organised around one or more stone-built churches. The household of a widow living in quiet seclusion with her unmarried daughters might be thought of as a *monasterium*, just as was a new community created by the royal grant of a portion of land to an aspiring abbot and a group of like-minded men. What differentiated a *monasterium* from a secular household was that its inmates had determined to devote their collective lives to religion, yet beyond this it is difficult to define the word.[15]

The modern noun 'monastery' is not an ideal choice as a translation either for the Latin *monasterium* or its old English equivalent, the Latin loan word, *mynster*. In current usage 'monastery' carries with it connotations of contemplative regularity, particularly perhaps Benedictine or Cistercian regular observance, which do not apply to English circumstances before the tenth

[12] This argument is articulated at length in my 'Anglo-Saxon minsters: a review of terminology', in John Blair and Richard Sharpe (eds.), *Pastoral Care before the Parish* (Leicester, London and New York: Leicester University Press, 1992), pp. 212–25.

[13] James Campbell, 'The church in Anglo-Saxon towns', in his *Essays in Anglo-Saxon History* (London: Hambledon Press, 1986), pp. 139–54, at p. 140.

[14] Below, pp. 61–9.

[15] Richard Morris has argued that the word 'is not susceptible to exact or exclusive definition': 'Alcuin, York and the *alma sophia*', in L. A. S. Butler and R. K. Morris (eds.), *The Anglo-Saxon Church* (London: Council for British Archaeology, 1986), pp. 80–9, at p. 80.

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century. At a period in which, as we shall see, distinctions were not drawn between contemplative 'monks' and secular clergy engaged actively in pastoral ministry, it is not wise to use a noun for their households that is generally taken to imply regularity of observance or strict enclosure.[16] My own preference here has been to use the noun 'minster'. Some scholars have in recent years chosen to use this word in a specialised sense to refer to those Anglo-Saxon institutions that lay behind the mother churches of Domesday Book, collegiate churches that were distinguishable from other religious houses because of the primarily pastoral function they exercised in serving the spiritual needs of the villages and other settlements within their *parochiae*.[17] Yet to restrict the use of 'minster' to represent only those houses which in the later Anglo-Saxon period took pastoral responsibility for wide geographical areas is to lose much of the diversity of meaning which the nouns *mynster* and *monasterium* conveyed in the earlier period. There were wide differences in the composition, status and function of religious houses active in England between 600 and 900, yet that diversity was encompassed within the remarkably consistent vocabulary used by contemporaries to define households that stood out from their secular counterparts because of their communal dedication to religion. We, too, should adopt a single term that can embrace this variety and I have thus chosen to use 'minster' consistently in this study.[18]

Distinctions made by later generations of monks between institutions on the basis of adherence to the precepts of the Rule of St Benedict are not appropriate in our period when the monastic life was characterised in England, as elsewhere in Europe, by the observance of no single rule of life. Study of the variety of monastic rules, together with the range of other sorts of advisory or prescriptive literature that sought to regulate the internal organisation of religious communities or define the limits of their inmates' congress with their lay neighbours, would patently answer many questions about how the monastic life was practised in the first Christian centuries in England. In the next chapter we shall explore the available rules in some detail and consider the ways in which they helped to shape English attitudes

[16] Much of the debate around this issue in recent years has focused on the question of the exercise of pastoral care; this is discussed in detail in chapter 7.

[17] Compare, for example, M. J. Franklin, 'The identification of minsters in the Midlands', in R. Allen Brown (ed), *Anglo-Norman Studies VII*, pp. 69–88, at p. 69; Patrick Hase, 'The development of the parish in Hampshire, particularly in the eleventh and twelfth centuries' (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Cambridge, 1975), p. 13.

[18] Patrick Sims-Williams took the opposite decision when addressing the same problem: *Religion and Literature*, p. 117.

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towards the conventual life. Yet there are dangers in over-reliance on such texts. The monastic legislator, whether writing a rule for the guidance of a particular group of avowed men or women, or trying to couch general prescriptions for the organisation of religious institutions and the behaviour of their members within an ecclesiastical province, constructed an idealised picture of a perfect and harmonious institution. As we shall see, the diversity of custom to which non-prescriptive texts bear witness was considerable. Narrative sources from seventh- and eighth-century England describe the behaviour and habits of many holy Englishmen and women in ways that frequently fail to correspond neatly to the templates which the normative rules or canons of church councils provide. Reading these accounts of individuals' actions in the expectation that they could – or should – be made to adhere to the principles that governed an ideal monastery is to deny much of the distinctiveness that characterised the early English minster and thus to misrepresent its nature.

If we are to come closer to understanding the nature of the monastic life in early Anglo-Saxon England, we need to read the non-prescriptive literature in a different way, neither measuring descriptions of the behaviour of religious men and women against contemporary regulatory norms, nor seeing their actions through the retrospective lens of later generations of monastic reformers. In many instances, it will prove necessary to read between the lines of the narrative sources or to focus on incidental remarks made by hagiographers and historians. It is often in the scene-setting prelude to an account of a saint's performance of a miracle or his uttering of important spiritual truths that a hagiographer will, perhaps unwittingly, shed useful light on the day-to-day routine within a minster. Extremes of a saint's ascetic devotion (whether in fasting, prayer, bodily mortification or sleep-deprivation) were frequently accentuated by being set in the context of the more mundane habits pursued by the rest of the community to which the holy man or woman belonged. Thus for us the most valuable information is to be found not, paradoxically, in a hagiographer's demonstration of the distinctiveness of his subject but in his depiction of what was commonplace about the monastic backdrop against which the saint's holiness was painted.

Questioning the assumptions that underlie the sources may lead us further to think critically about another linguistic problem. If we describe the men and women who lived in early English minsters by the conventional labels monk and nun, do we thereby prejudice our view of the life-styles they led? Was a monk inevitably a brown-cowled figure, to be found bent over the herbs in his garden, reading in the cloister, or standing chanting

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in the candle-lit choir? Must a nun have worn a veil and lived in total exclusion from the secular, especially the male, world around her? These, as will rapidly become apparent, are images that fit uncomfortably with the narratives found in our sources, although they may resonate more readily with some of the recommendations of the admonitory or prescriptive literature. Language relating to male religious in the pre-Viking Age church does appear to offer some insight into the different roles and functions performed by different groups of religious, and suggests that we should not bracket them all together unthinkingly. While male monastics might often be described by the general term brothers (*fratres*), as tonsured men, that mark being the symbol that most obviously marked them out from their lay counterparts, or simply as *clerici*, there was a sharp linguistic distinction drawn in narrative and prescriptive sources between religious generally and those who were ordained to clerical rank. Priests and deacons stood apart from all men, their ecclesiastical rank conferring upon them particular obligations but also a special status, and hence protection under the law. While this readily answers questions about how best to refer to early English clergy it does not tell us whether other men who lived a religious life in minsters but were not ordained to the ranks of the clergy were all called 'monks'. This is a question to which we shall return in the next chapter.[19] Certainly the canons of English church councils drew sharp contrast between *monachi* and *clerici*, between *ecclesiastici* and *monasteriales* and applied higher penalties to the transgressions of both groups than to the sins of other religious.[20] It is difficult to find the same linguistic clarity in the narrative sources and thus hard to make firm decisions about the extent to which one described as a brother in a minster was a professed monk or one who had made a lesser commitment to life under a rule. Where I have quoted from monastic rules, or from other sorts of prescriptive literature, I have retained the language of the texts and referred to the obligations placed upon monks, but in general I have chosen to avoid that noun and to talk more loosely about brethren and religious, without further clarification.

In a previous study of religious women in Anglo-Saxon England, I argued in similar vein that it could be positively misleading to talk about nuns

[19] Below, pp. 66–9.

[20] Council of Hertford, AD 672/3, chs. 4 and 5 (*HE* IV. 5, pp. 348–53); Ecgberht's *Dialogi*, *responsiones* 3, 7, 12 and 14 (H&S III. 405–6, 408–9); Council of *Clofesho*, AD 747, chs. 4–5, 7–8, 8–12, 28–9 (H&S, III. 364–7 and 374); Legatine synods, AD 786, ch. 4 (ed. Dümmler, p. 22). See further my 'Language and method: the *Dictionary of Old English* and the historian', in M. J. Toswell (ed.), *The Dictionary of Old English: Retrospects and Prospects*, *Old English Newsletter*, Subsidia 26 (1998), 73–87, at pp. 76–7, and *Veiled Women*, I: *The Disappearance of Nuns from Anglo-Saxon England* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2000), p. 28.

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in either the pre- or the post-Viking-Age church. In the period between the seventh and ninth centuries, contemporaries described religious women by a variety of nouns (for example *ancilla Dei, Deo deuota, famula Christi, femina consecrata, monacha, nonna, nunnona, sanctimonialis, soror*) which appear, so far as one can tell, to have been thought more or less synonymous. Certainly the various terms reveal nothing of the nature or organisation of the congregation in which a religious woman might have lived; the same nouns refer to young girls in the double houses at Whitby and Barking and widows living in seclusion within their own homes. A sharper contrast was drawn between women who entered the cloister as virgins and those who came either with a living husband's consent or in widowhood, suggesting that the extent of a woman's previous sexual experience was a more significant issue to writers about the early English church than was the outward forms by which religious chose to express their devotion.[21] While some of the women whose activities we shall explore might have lived lives that would conform to later medieval (and indeed modern) views of a nun's behaviour, others were far less withdrawn from secular society than later generations might think customary and lived not so much at as across the margins of the temporal and spiritual worlds. As far as is possible, I have avoided the word 'nun' to describe women in the pre-Viking Age church, except in translation of monastic rules and the canons of church councils, where legislators wrote specifically about their expectations of the behaviour of *sanctimoniales*.

In English texts written during and after the monastic revolution of the tenth century, the language used of both female and male religious changed sharply; then institutional arrangements did, at least in vernacular writing, determine the words used to differentiate the cloistered from those who lived in the world. Women dwelling within the walls of institutions ordered by the precepts of Benedict's Rule were called *mynecenas*; their male equivalents were monks, *munecas*. Women who lived a religious life under vows while remaining in the world were, however, called *nunnan*, equivalent to the male *preostas*, secular clergy.[22] As I have argued previously, it is clearer

[21] This is argued at length in my *Veiled Women*, I, 26–30.

[22] This distinction may be seen most clearly in Archbishop Wulfstan's Institutes of Polity: *I Polity*, 84–5, ed. Karl Jost, *Die 'Institutes of Polity, Civil and Ecclesiastical'* (Bern: Francke, 1959), p. 129, trans. Michael Swanton, *Anglo-Saxon Prose* (2nd edn, London: Dent, 1993), pp. 187–201, at p. 199. For full discussion see my *Veiled Women*, I, 96–104; the issue has also been explored by Mary Clayton, '*Ælfric's Judith*: manipulative or manipulated?', *ASE* 23 (1994), 215–27, at pp. 225–7; and Pauline Stafford, 'Queens, nunneries and reforming churchmen: gender, religious status and reform in tenth- and eleventh-century England', *Past and Present* 163 (1999), 3–35, at p. 10.

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in modern English to translate *mynecenas* as 'cloistered' women and to call *nunnan* 'vowesses', than it is to translate either Old English noun as 'nun'. The differentiation of vowesses from their religious sisters who were cloistered paralleled the marking of a similar distinction between clerics active among the secular community and monks who dwelt in enclosed contemplation and reflects the significant changes made to the organisation of the religious life in tenth-century England. The imposition of Benedict's Rule as a single standard for the governance of the conventual life marked a substantial shift, even revolution, in English ecclesiastical life. This study is preoccupied, however, with circumstances before that reform and with a period when boundaries between action and contemplation were much more blurred.

Approach and method

Throughout the rest of this book I shall seek to build a picture of the nature of monasticism before the tenth-century monastic revolution, and to do so cumulatively, by collecting references and allusions from a range of sources in order to illustrate particular elements of religious behaviour or to cast light on specific aspects of the monastic day. There are dangers in such an approach. At one level, one could argue that this technique misses nuances in the evidence and creates a slightly bland picture of the early English church, from which the peaks of spiritual fervour (and troughs of unduly-secular irregularity) have been ironed out. This method may further be over-descriptive and so tend to accentuate similarities between institutions, whereas it is a central thesis of the study that early English minsters were in fact characterised by their dissimilarity. Much of the book's purpose is to refocus scholarly attention away from an unduly polarised view of the pre-reform church that contrasts a Benedictine monastic ideal (as presented by Bede and the reformers of Edgar's reign) with a pastorally-active, but ideologically-imperfect, reality, and to point attention towards a more integrated view of early English monasticism that gives equal weight to all shades in the contemporary spectrum of religious observance. Each of the numerous examples adduced serves to support this central argument about the diversity of early Anglo-Saxon monasticism in a way that local surveys and individual case studies cannot. I have indeed deliberately chosen not to provide any narrative descriptions of particular minsters and their congregations, nor to construct the sort of catalogue of institutions that constitutes the second part of my *Veiled Women*. This is a study of monasticism as a

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