Monastic Life in Anglo-Saxon England, c. 600–900

This major new history of monasticism in early Anglo-Saxon England explores the history of the church between the conversion to Christianity in the sixth century and a monastic revival in the tenth. It represents the first comprehensive revision of accepted views about monastic life in England before the Benedictine reform. Sarah Foot shows how early Anglo-Saxon religious houses were simultaneously active and contemplative, their members withdrawing from the preoccupations of contemporary aristocratic society while in a very real sense remaining part of that world. Focusing on the institution of the ‘minster’ (the communal religious household) and rejecting a simplistic binary division between active ‘minsters’ and enclosed ‘monasteries’, Foot argues that historians have been wrong to see minsters in the light of ideals of Benedictine monasticism. Instead, she demonstrates that Anglo-Saxon minsters reflected more of contemporary social attitudes; despite their aim for solitude, they retained close links to aristocratic secular society.

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Preface

Readers who have also undergone the academic rite of passage that is the successful defence of a doctoral thesis will recall how their euphoria was tempered by the conflicting advice they were given about publishing their research. Few will have proved so unwise as to reject all of it and sit on a wholly-unrevised manuscript for many years. This book now takes a form quite distinct both from the original thesis from which it derives and from the various versions that I might have written earlier. I do not, however, regret the delay. Various projects that have filled the intervening period – particularly my work on female monasticism – have led me to a different understanding both of the nature of the religious life in early Anglo-Saxon England and of the factors that have clouded historical understanding of the early English church. The revisionist interpretation offered here modifies some of my own earlier statements as well as questioning conventional readings of the contemporary literature.

Over the years on which I have worked on this project I have incurred debts to so many individuals that it would be invidious to attempt to list them all here, but some deserve particular thanks. Rosamond McKitterick supervised the original thesis and has continued to offer support and assistance ever since. No less significant in shaping my thinking and understanding of the pre-Conquest period has been Simon Keynes. Nicholas Brooks has been unfailingly supportive. He and Thomas Charles-Edwards read the entire manuscript in draft and offered a number of suggestions for its significant improvement: they bear no responsibility for the errors that remain. I have also learnt a great deal from Lesley Abrams, Julia Crick, David Dumville and
Preface

Susan Kelly. It is a great sadness that Patrick Wormald, to whom I owe so much, did not live to see this finished text. My early thinking about Anglo-Saxon minsters is heavily indebted to John Blair, with whom I have had numerous stimulating exchanges. This manuscript was completed before the appearance of his book, *The Church in Anglo-Saxon Society* (Oxford University Press, 2005), which offers a different reading of early English religion, but I have not thought it right to revise my book to take account of his. All the staff of Cambridge University Library have been unfailingly helpful and I owe particular thanks to Godfrey Waller and his colleagues in the Manuscripts Room. My own colleagues at Sheffield have shown great patience in tolerating the long delay in producing this text. Meanwhile my doctoral students – James Palmer, Morn Capper, Geoff Little and Martha Riddiford – have not only taught me a great deal but also patiently endured many conversations about minsters of only tangential relevance to their own work. In the production of this book Debby Banham’s assistance has been invaluable.

On a personal note, I must acknowledge the significant encouragement given over many years by Geoff Schrecker: without his continuing faith in this project I would have abandoned it many times. My gratitude to Michael and Matthew for their loving support during my immersion in minsters goes beyond words.
Abbreviations

Alfred, Preface Alfred, prose preface to his translation of Gregory the Great, Cura pastoralis, ed. Henry Sweet, King Alfred’s West Saxon Version of Gregory’s Pastoral Care, 2 vols., EETS, o.s. 45 and 50 (London: N. Trübner, 1871–2)
AntJ Antiquaries Journal
ArchJ Archaeological Journal
ASC Anglo-Saxon Chronicle
ASE Anglo-Saxon England
BAR British Archaeological Reports
Bede, Homelia Bedae venerabilis opera, pars III: Opera homiletica, ed. David Hurst, CCSL 122 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1955)
CCSL Corpus Christianorum. Series Latina (Turnhout: Brepols) xiii
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<tr>
<td>DACL</td>
<td><em>Dictionnaire d'archéologie chrétienne et de liturgie</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>EETS</td>
<td><em>Early English Text Society</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>JEH</td>
<td><em>Journal of Ecclesiastical History</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>MA</td>
<td><em>Medieval Archaeology</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MGH</td>
<td><em>Monumenta Germaniae Historica</em> (Hanover)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RCHM</td>
<td>Royal Commission on Historical Monuments (England)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Resting-places</td>
<td><em>Die Heiligen Englands</em>, ed. Felix Liebermann (Hanover: Hahn, 1889)</td>
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List of abbreviations


SC  Sources chrétiennes (Paris)

SEHD  Select English Historical Documents of the Ninth and Tenth Centuries, ed. Florence E. Harmer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1914)

Settimane  Settimane di studio del Centro italiano di studi sull’alto Medioevo (Spoleto)

SSRM  Scriptores rerum Merovingicarum

TRHS  Transactions of the Royal Historical Society (London)


VSCuth.  Vita S. Cuthberti, ed. and trans. B. Colgrave, Two Lives of Saint Cuthbert: A Life by an Anonymous Monk of Lindisfarne and Bede’s Prose Life (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1940)


VSL  Rudolf, Vita Leobae abbatissae Biscofesheimensis, ed. G. Waitz, MGH, Scriptores, XVI (Hanover: Hahn, 1887), 118–31

