



Chapter Three

How the Monks Saved Civilization

The monks played a critical role in the development of Western civilization. But judging from Catholic monasticism's earliest practice, one would hardly have guessed the enormous impact on the outside world that it would come to exercise. This historical fact comes as less of a surprise when we recall Christ's words: "Seek ye first the kingdom of heaven, and all these things shall be added unto you." That, stated simply, is the history of the monks.

Early forms of monastic life are evident by the third century. By then, individual Catholic women committed themselves as consecrated virgins to lives of prayer and sacrifice, looking after the poor and the sick.¹ Nuns come from these early traditions.

Another source of Christian monasticism is found in Saint Paul of Thebes and more famously in Saint Anthony of Egypt (also known as Saint Anthony of the Desert), whose life spanned the mid-third century through the mid-fourth century. Saint Anthony's sister lived in a house of consecrated virgins. He became a hermit, retreating to the deserts of Egypt for the sake of

his own spiritual perfection, though his great example led thousands to flock to him.

The hermit's characteristic feature was his retreat into remote solitude, so that he might renounce worldly things and concentrate intensely on his spiritual life. Hermits typically lived alone or in groups of two or three, finding shelter in caves or simple huts and supporting themselves on what they could produce in their small fields or through such tasks as basket-making. The lack of an authority to oversee their spiritual regimen led some of them to pursue unusual spiritual and penitential practices. According to Monsignor Philip Hughes, an accomplished historian of the Catholic Church, "There were hermits who hardly ever ate, or slept, others who stood without movement whole weeks together, or who had themselves sealed up in tombs and remained there for years, receiving only the least of poor nourishment through crevices in the masonry."²

Cenobitic monasticism (monks living together in monasteries), the kind with which most people are familiar, developed in part as a reaction against the life of the hermits and in recognition that men ought to live in community. This was the position of Saint Basil the Great, who played an important role in the development of Eastern monasticism. Still, the hermit life never entirely died out; a thousand years after Saint Paul of Thebes, a hermit was elected pope, taking the name Celestine V.

Eastern monasticism influenced the West in a number of ways: through the travels of Saint Athanasius, for example, and the writings of Saint John Cassian—a man of the West who possessed a wide knowledge of Eastern practice. But Western monasticism is most deeply indebted to one of its own: Saint Benedict of Nursia. Saint Benedict established twelve small communities of monks at Subiaco, thirty-eight miles from Rome, before heading fifty miles south to found Monte Cassino, the great monastery for

which he is remembered. It was here, around 529, that he composed the famous Rule of Saint Benedict, the excellence of which was reflected in its all but universal adoption throughout Western Europe in the centuries that followed.

The moderation of Saint Benedict's Rule, as well as the structure and order it provided, facilitated its spread throughout Europe. Unlike the Irish monasteries, which were known for their extremes of self-denial (but which nevertheless attracted men in considerable numbers), Benedictine monasteries took for granted that the monk was to receive adequate food and sleep, even if during penitential seasons his regimen might grow more austere. The Benedictine monk typically lived at a material level comparable to that of a contemporary Italian peasant.

Each Benedictine house was independent of every other, and each had an abbot to oversee its affairs and good order. Monks had previously been free to wander from one place to another, but Saint Benedict envisioned a monastic lifestyle in which each remained attached to his own monastery.³

Saint Benedict also negated the worldly status of the prospective monk, whether his life had been one of great wealth or miserable servitude, for all were equal in Christ. The Benedictine abbot "shall make no distinction of persons in the monastery.... A freeborn man shall not be preferred to one coming from servitude, unless there be some other and reasonable cause. For whether we are bond or free, we are all one in Christ.... God is no respecter of persons."

A monk's purpose in retiring to a monastery was to cultivate a more disciplined spiritual life and, more specifically, to work out his salvation in an environment and under a regimen suitable to that purpose. His role in Western civilization would prove substantial. The monks' intention had not been to perform great tasks for European civilization, yet as time went on, they came to appreciate the task for which the times seemed to have called them.

During a period of great turmoil, the Benedictine tradition endured, and its houses remained oases of order and peace. It has been said of Monte Cassino, the motherhouse of the Benedictines, that her own history reflected that permanence. Sacked by the barbarian Lombards in 589, destroyed by the Saracens in 884, razed by an earthquake in 1349, pillaged by French troops in 1799, and wrecked by the bombs of World War II in 1944—Monte Cassino refused to disappear, as each time her monks returned to rebuild.⁴

Mere statistics can hardly do justice to the Benedictine achievement, but by the beginning of the fourteenth century, the order had supplied the Church with 24 popes, 200 cardinals, 7,000 archbishops, 15,000 bishops, and 1,500 canonized saints. At its height, the Benedictine order could boast 37,000 monasteries. And it was not merely their influence within the Church to which the statistics point; so exalted had the monastic ideal become throughout society that by the fourteenth century the order had already enrolled some twenty emperors, ten empresses, forty-seven kings, and fifty queens.⁵ Thus a great many of Europe's most powerful would come to pursue the humble life and spiritual regimen of the Benedictine order. Even the various barbarian groups were attracted to the monastic life, and such figures as Carloman of the Franks and Rochis of the Lombards eventually pursued it themselves.⁶

THE PRACTICAL ARTS

Although most educated people think of the medieval monasteries' scholarly and cultural pursuits as their contribution to Western civilization, we should not overlook the monks' important cultivation of what might be called the practical arts. Agriculture

is a particularly significant example. In the early twentieth century, Henry Goodell, president of what was then the Massachusetts Agricultural College, celebrated “the work of these grand old monks during a period of fifteen hundred years. They saved agriculture when nobody else could save it. They practiced it under a new life and new conditions when no one else dared undertake it.”⁷ Testimony on this point is considerable. “We owe the agricultural restoration of a great part of Europe to the monks,” observes another expert. “Wherever they came,” adds still another, “they converted the wilderness into a cultivated country; they pursued the breeding of cattle and agriculture, labored with their own hands, drained morasses, and cleared away forests. By them Germany was rendered a fruitful country.” Another historian records that “every Benedictine monastery was an agricultural college for the whole region in which it was located.”⁸ Even the nineteenth-century French statesman and historian François Guizot, who was not especially sympathetic to the Catholic Church, observed: “The Benedictine monks were the agriculturists of Europe; they cleared it on a large scale, associating agriculture with preaching.”⁹

Manual labor, expressly called for in the Rule of Saint Benedict, played a central role in the monastic life. Although the Rule was known for its moderation and its aversion to exaggerated penances, we often find the monks freely embracing work that was difficult and unattractive, since for them such tasks were channels of grace and opportunities for mortification of the flesh. This was certainly true in the clearing and reclaiming of land. The prevailing view of swamps was that they were sources of pestilence utterly without value. But the monks thrived in such locations and embraced the challenges that came with them. Before long, they managed to dike and drain the swamp and turn what had once been a source of disease and filth into fertile agricultural land.¹⁰

Montalembert, the great nineteenth-century historian of the monks, paid tribute to their great agricultural work. “It is impossible to forget,” he wrote, “the use they made of so many vast districts (holding as they did one-fifth of all the land in England), uncultivated and uninhabited, covered with forests or surrounded by marshes.” That was indeed the character of much of the land that the monks occupied, partly because they chose the most secluded and inaccessible sites to reinforce the communal solitude of their life and partly because this was land that lay donors could more easily give the monks.¹¹ Although they cleared forests that stood in the way of human habitation and use, they were also careful to plant trees and conserve forests when possible.¹²

A particularly vivid example of the monks’ salutary influence on their physical surroundings comes from the fen district of Southampton, England. An expert describes what the area would have looked like in the seventh century, before the founding of Thorney Abbey:

It was nothing but a vast morass. The fens in the seventh century were probably like the forests at the mouth of the Mississippi or the swamp shores of the Carolinas. It was a labyrinth of black, wandering streams; broad lagoons, morasses submerged every spring-tide; vast beds of reed and sedge and fern; vast copses of willow, alder and gray poplar, rooted in the floating peat, which was swallowing up slowly, all-devouring, yet all-preserving, the forests of fir and oak, ash and poplar, hazel and yew, which had once grown in that low, rank soil. Trees torn down by flood and storm floated and lodged in rafts, damming the waters back upon the land. Streams bewildered in the forests changed their channels, mingling silt and sand with the black soil of the peat. Nature left to herself ran into wild riot and chaos more and more, till the whole fen became one dismal swamp.¹³

Five centuries later, this is how William of Malmesbury (c. 1096–1143) described the area:

It is a counterfeit of Paradise, where the gentleness and purity of heaven appear already to be reflected. In the midst of the fens rise groves of trees which seem to touch the stars with their tall and slender tops; the charmed eye wanders over a sea of verdant herbage, the foot which treads the wide meadows meets with no obstacle in its path. Not an inch of land as far as the eye can reach lies uncultivated. Here the soil is hidden by fruit trees; there by vines stretched upon the ground or trailed on trellises. Nature and art rival each other, the one supplying all that the other forgets to produce. O deep and pleasant solitude! Thou hast been given by God to the monks, so that their mortal life may daily bring them nearer to heaven.¹⁴

Wherever they went, the monks introduced crops, industries, or production methods with which the people had not been previously familiar. Here they would introduce the rearing of cattle and horses, there the brewing of beer or the raising of bees or fruit. In Sweden, the corn trade owed its existence to the monks; in Parma, it was cheese making; in Ireland, salmon fisheries—and, in a great many places, the finest vineyards. Monks stored up the waters from springs in order to distribute them in times of drought. In fact, it was the monks of the monasteries of Saint Laurent and Saint Martin who, spying the waters of springs that were distributing themselves uselessly over the meadows of Saint Gervais and Belleville, directed them to Paris. In Lombardy, the peasants learned irrigation from the monks, which contributed mightily to making that area so well known throughout Europe for its fertility and riches. The monks were also the first to work toward improving cattle breeds, rather than leaving the process to chance.¹⁵

In many cases, the monks' good example inspired others, particularly the great respect and honor they showed toward manual labor in general and agriculture in particular. "Agriculture had sunk to a low ebb," according to one scholar. "Marshes covered once fertile fields, and the men who should have tilled the land spurned the plow as degrading." But when the monks emerged from their cells to dig ditches and to plow fields, "the effort was magical. Men once more turned back to a noble but despised industry."¹⁶ Pope Saint Gregory the Great (590–604) tells us a revealing story about the abbot Equitius, a sixth-century missionary of noted eloquence. When a papal envoy came to his monastery looking for him, the envoy went immediately to the scriptorium, expecting to find him among the copyists. But he was not there. The calligraphers explained simply, "He is down there in the valley, cutting hay."¹⁷

The monks also pioneered in the production of wine, which they used both for the celebration of Holy Mass and for ordinary consumption, which the Rule of Saint Benedict expressly permitted. In addition, the discovery of champagne can be traced to Dom Perignon of Saint Peter's Abbey, Hautvilliers-on-the-Marne. He was appointed cellarer of the abbey in 1688, and developed champagne through experimentation with blending wines. The fundamental principles he established continue to govern the manufacture of champagne even today.¹⁸

Although perhaps not as glamorous as some of the monks' intellectual contributions, these crucial tasks were very nearly as important to building and preserving the civilization of the West. It would be difficult to find any group anywhere in the world whose contributions were as varied, as significant, and as indispensable as those of the Catholic monks of the West during a time of general turmoil and despair.

The monks were also important architects of medieval technology. The Cistercians, a reform-minded Benedictine order established at Cîteaux in 1098, are especially well known for their technological sophistication. Thanks to the great network of communication that existed between the various monasteries, technological information was able to spread rapidly. Thus we find very similar water-powered systems at monasteries that were at great distances from each other, even thousands of miles away.¹⁹ “These monasteries,” a scholar writes, “were the most economically effective units that had ever existed in Europe, and perhaps in the world, before that time.”²⁰

The Cistercian monastery of Clairvaux in France leaves us a twelfth-century report about its use of waterpower that reveals the surprising extent to which machinery had become central to European life. The Cistercian monastic community generally ran its own factory. The monks used waterpower for crushing wheat, sieving flour, fulling cloth, and tanning.²¹ And as Jean Gimpel points out in his book *The Medieval Machine*, this twelfth-century report could have been written 742 times, since that was the number of Cistercian monasteries in Europe in the twelfth century. The same level of technological achievement could have been observed in practically all of them.²²

Although the world of classical antiquity had not adopted mechanization for industrial use on any considerable scale, the medieval world did so on an enormous scale, a fact symbolized and reflected in the Cistercians’ use of waterpower:

Entering the Abbey under the boundary wall [writes a twelfth-century source], which like a janitor allows it to pass, the stream first hurls itself impetuously at the mill where in a welter of movement it strains itself, first to crush the wheat beneath the weight

of the millstones, then to shake the fine sieve which separates flour from bran. Already it has reached the next building; it replenishes the vats and surrenders itself to the flames which heat it up to prepare beer for the monks, their liquor when the vines reward the wine-growers' toil with a barren crop. The stream does not yet consider itself discharged. The fullers established near the mill beckon to it. In the mill it had been occupied in preparing food for the brethren; it is therefore only right that it should now look to their clothing. It never shrinks back or refuses to do anything that is asked for. One by one it lifts and drops the heavy pestles, the fullers' great wooden hammers...and spares, thus, the monks' great fatigues.... How many horses would be worn out, how many men would have weary arms if this graceful river, to whom we owe our clothes and food, did not labor for us.

When it has spun the shaft as fast as any wheel can move, it disappears in a foaming frenzy; one might say it had itself been ground in the mill. Leaving it here it enters the tannery, where in preparing the leather for the shoes of the monks it exercises as much exertion as diligence; then it dissolves in a host of streamlets and proceeds along its appointed course to the duties laid down for it, looking out all the time for affairs requiring its attention whatever they might be, such as cooking, sieving, turning, grinding, watering, or washing, never refusing its assistance in any task. At last, in case it receives any reward for work which it has not done, it carries away the waste and leaves everywhere spotless.²³

THE MONKS AS TECHNICAL ADVISERS

The Cistercians were also known for their skill in metallurgy. "In their rapid expansion throughout Europe," writes Jean Gimpel,

the Cistercians must have “played a role in the diffusion of new techniques, for the high level of their agricultural technology was matched by their industrial technology. Every monastery had a model factory, often as large as the church and only several feet away, and waterpower drove the machinery of the various industries located on its floor.”²⁴ At times iron ore deposits were donated to the monks, nearly always along with the forges used to extract the iron, and at other times they purchased the deposits and forges. Although they needed iron for their own use, Cistercian monasteries would come in time to offer their surplus for sale; in fact, from the mid-thirteenth through the seventeenth century, the Cistercians were the leading iron producers in the Champagne region of France. Ever eager to increase the efficiency of their monasteries, the Cistercians used the slag from their furnaces as fertilizer, as its concentration of phosphates made it particularly useful for this purpose.²⁵

Such achievements were part of a broader phenomenon of technological achievement on the part of the monks. As Gimpel observes, “The Middle Ages introduced machinery into Europe on a scale no civilization had previously known.”²⁶ And the monks, according to another study, were “the skillful and unpaid technical advisers of the third world of their times—that is to say, Europe after the invasion of the barbarians.”²⁷ It goes on:

In effect, whether it be the mining of salt, lead, iron, alum, or gypsum, or metallurgy, quarrying marble, running cutler’s shops and glassworks, or forging metal plates, also known as firebacks, there was no activity at all in which the monks did not display creativity and a fertile spirit of research. Utilizing their labor force, they instructed and trained it to perfection. Monastic know-how [would] spread throughout Europe.²⁸

Monastic accomplishments ranged from interesting curiosities to the intensely practical. In the early eleventh century, for instance, a monk named Eilmer flew more than 600 feet with a glider; people remembered this feat for the next three centuries.²⁹ Centuries later, Father Francesco Lana-Terzi, not a monk but a Jesuit priest, pursued the subject of flight more systematically, earning the honor of being called the father of aviation. His 1670 book *Prodromo alla Arte Maestra* was the first to describe the geometry and physics of a flying vessel.³⁰

The monks also counted skillful clock-makers among them. The first clock of which we have any record was built by the future Pope Sylvester II for the German town of Magdeburg, around the year 996. Much more sophisticated clocks were built by later monks. Peter Lightfoot, a fourteenth-century monk of Glastonbury, built one of the oldest clocks still in existence, which now sits, in excellent condition, in London's Science Museum.

Richard of Wallingford, a fourteenth-century abbot of the Benedictine abbey of Saint Albans (and one of the initiators of Western trigonometry), is well known for the large astronomical clock he designed for that monastery. It has been said that a clock that equaled it in technological sophistication did not appear for at least two centuries. The magnificent clock, a marvel for its time, no longer survives, perhaps having perished amid Henry VIII's sixteenth-century monastic confiscations. However, Richard's notes on the clock's design have permitted scholars to build a model and even a full-scale reconstruction. In addition to timekeeping, the clock could accurately predict lunar eclipses.

Archaeologists are still discovering the extent of monastic skills and technological cleverness. In the late 1990s, University of Bradford archeometallurgist Gerry McDonnell found evidence

near Rievaulx Abbey in North Yorkshire, England, of a degree of technological sophistication that pointed ahead to the great machines of the eighteenth-century Industrial Revolution. (Rievaulx Abbey was one of the monasteries that King Henry VIII ordered closed in the 1530s as part of his confiscation of Church properties.) In exploring the debris of Rievaulx and Laskill (an outstation about four miles from the monastery), McDonnell found that the monks had built a furnace to extract iron from ore.

The typical such furnace of the sixteenth century had advanced relatively little over its ancient counterpart and was noticeably inefficient by modern standards. The slag, or byproduct, of these primitive furnaces contained a substantial concentration of iron, since the furnaces could not reach temperatures high enough to extract all the iron from the ore. The slag that McDonnell discovered at Laskill, however, was low in iron content, similar to slag produced by a modern blast furnace.

McDonnell believes that the monks were on the verge of building dedicated furnaces for the large-scale production of cast iron—perhaps the key ingredient that ushered in the industrial age—and that the furnace at Laskill had been a prototype of such a furnace. “One of the key things is that the Cistercians had a regular meeting of abbots every year and they had the means of sharing technological advances across Europe,” he said. “The break-up of the monasteries broke up this network of technology transfer.” The monks “had the potential to move to blast furnaces that produced nothing but cast iron. They were poised to do it on a large scale, but by breaking up the virtual monopoly, Henry VIII effectively broke up that potential.”³¹

Had it not been for a greedy king’s suppression of the English monasteries, therefore, the monks appear to have been on the verge of ushering in the industrial era and its related explosion in

wealth, population, and life expectancy figures. That development would instead have to wait two and a half more centuries.

CHARITABLE WORKS

We shall look at the Church's charitable works in more detail in a separate chapter. For now we may simply note that Benedict's Rule called for the monks to dispense alms and hospitality. According to the Rule, "All guests who come shall be received as though they were Christ." Monasteries served as gratuitous inns, providing a safe and peaceful resting place for foreign travelers, pilgrims, and the poor. An old historian of the Norman abbey of Bec wrote: "Let them ask Spaniards or Burgundians, or any foreigners whatever, how they have been received at Bec. They will answer that the door of the monastery is always open to all, and that its bread is free to the whole world."³² Here was the spirit of Christ at work, giving shelter and comfort to strangers of all kinds.

In some cases, the monks were even known to make efforts to track down poor souls who, lost or alone after dark, found themselves in need of emergency shelter. At Aubrac, for example, where a monastic hospital had been established amid the mountains of the Rouergue in the late sixteenth century, a special bell rang every night to call to any wandering traveler or to anyone overtaken by the intimidating forest darkness. The people dubbed it "the bell of the wanderers."³³

In a similar vein, it was not unusual for monks living near the sea to establish contrivances for warning sailors of perilous obstacles or for nearby monasteries to make provision for shipwrecked men in need of lodging. It has been said that the city of Copenhagen owes its origin to a monastery established by its founder, Bishop Absalon, which catered to the needs of the shipwrecked.

In Scotland, at Arbroath, the abbots fixed a floating bell on a notoriously treacherous rock on the Forfarshire coast. Depending on the tide, the rock could be scarcely visible, and many a sailor had been frightened at the prospect of striking it. The waves caused the bell to sound, thereby warning sailors of danger ahead. To this day, the rock is known as “Bell Rock.”³⁴ Such examples constituted only a small part of the concern that monks showed for the people who lived in their environs; they also contributed to the building or repair of bridges, roads, and other such features of the medieval infrastructure.

The monastic contribution with which many people are familiar is the copying of manuscripts, both sacred and profane. This task, and those who carried it out, were accorded special honor. A Carthusian prior wrote, “Diligently labor at this work, this ought to be the special work of enclosed Carthusians.... This work in a certain sense is an immortal work, if one may say it, not passing away, but ever remaining; a work, so to speak, that is not a work; a work which above all others is most proper for educated religious men.”³⁵

THE WRITTEN WORD

Honored as it was, the copyist’s task was difficult and demanding. Inscribed on one monastic manuscript are the words, “He who does not know how to write imagines it to be no labor; but though three fingers only hold the pen, the whole body grows weary.” The monks often had to work through the most punishing cold. A monastic copyist, imploring our sympathy upon completing a copy of Saint Jerome’s commentary on the Book of Daniel, wrote: “Good readers who may use this work, do not, I pray you, forget him who copied it: it was a poor brother named

Louis, who, while he transcribed this volume, brought from a foreign country, endured the cold, and was obliged to finish in the night what he was not able to write by daylight. But Thou, Lord, wilt be to him the full recompense of his labors.”³⁶

In the sixth century, a retired Roman senator named Cassiodorus had an early vision of the cultural role that the monastery was to play. Sometime around the middle of the century, he established the monastery of Vivarium in southern Italy, providing it with a very fine library—indeed, the only sixth-century library of which scholars are aware—and emphasizing the importance of copying manuscripts. Some important Christian manuscripts from Vivarium appear to have made their way to the Lateran Library and into the possession of the popes.³⁷

Surprisingly, it is not to Vivarium, but to other monastic libraries and scriptoria (the rooms set aside for the copying of texts) that we owe the great bulk of ancient Latin literature that survives today. When these works weren’t saved and transcribed by the monks, we owe their survival to the libraries and schools associated with the great medieval cathedrals.³⁸ Thus, when the Church was not making original contributions of her own, she was preserving books and documents that were of seminal importance to the civilization she was to save.

Describing the holdings at his library at York, the great Alcuin—the polyglot theologian who worked closely with Charlemagne to restore study and scholarship in west-central Europe—mentioned works by Aristotle, Cicero, Lucan, Pliny, Statius, Trogus Pompeius, and Virgil. In his correspondence he quotes still other classical authors, including Ovid, Horace, and Terence.³⁹ Alcuin was far from alone in his familiarity with and appreciation for the ancient writers. Lupus (c. 805–862), the abbot of Ferrieres, can be found quoting Cicero, Horace, Martial,

Suetonius, and Virgil. Abbo of Fleury (c. 950–1004), who served as abbot of the monastery of Fleury, demonstrates particular familiarity with Horace, Sallust, Terence, and Virgil. Desiderius, described as the greatest of the abbots of Monte Cassino after Benedict himself and who became Pope (Blessed) Victor III in 1086, specifically oversaw the transcription of Horace and Seneca, as well as Cicero's *De Natura Deorum* and Ovid's *Fasti*.⁴⁰ His friend Archbishop Alfano, who had also been a monk of Monte Cassino, possessed a similar fluency in the works of the ancient writers, frequently quoting from Apuleius, Aristotle, Cicero, Plato, Varro, and Virgil, and imitating Ovid and Horace in his verse. Saint Anselm, while abbot of Bec, commended Virgil and other classical writers to his students, though he wished them to put aside morally objectionable passages.⁴¹

The great Gerbert of Aurillac, who later became Pope Sylvester II, did not confine himself to teaching logic; he also brought to his students an appreciation of Horace, Juvenal, Lucan, Persius, Terence, Statius, and Virgil. We hear of lectures being delivered on the classical authors at places like Saint Alban's and Paderborne. A school exercise composed by Saint Hildebert survives in which he had pieced together excerpts from Cicero, Horace, Juvenal, Persius, Seneca, Terence, and others; John Henry Cardinal Newman, the nineteenth century's great convert from Anglicanism and an accomplished historian in his own right, suggests that Saint Hildebert knew Horace practically by heart.⁴² The fact is, the Church cherished, preserved, studied, and taught the works of the ancients, which would otherwise have been lost.

Certain monasteries might be known for their skill in particular branches of knowledge. Thus, for example, lectures in medicine were given by the monks of Saint Benignus at Dijon, the monastery of Saint Gall had a school of painting and engraving,

and lectures in Greek, Hebrew, and Arabic could be heard at certain German monasteries.⁴³

Monks often supplemented their education by attending one or more of the monastic schools established during the Carolingian Renaissance and beyond. Abbo of Fleury, having mastered the disciplines taught at his own house, went to study philosophy and astronomy at Paris and Rheims. We hear similar stories about Archbishop Raban of Mainz, Saint Wolfgang, and Gerbert (Pope Sylvester II).⁴⁴

In the eleventh century, the mother monastery of the Benedictine tradition, Monte Cassino, enjoyed a cultural revival, called “the most dramatic single event in the history of Latin scholarship in the eleventh century.”⁴⁵ In addition to its outpouring of artistic and intellectual endeavor, Monte Cassino renewed its interest in the texts of classical antiquity:

At one swoop a number of texts were recovered which might otherwise have been lost for ever; to this one monastery in this one period we owe the preservation of the later *Annals* and *Histories* of Tacitus (Plate XIV), the *Golden Ass* of Apuleius, the *Dialogues* of Seneca, Varro’s *De lingua latina*, Frontinus’ *De aquis*, and thirty-odd lines of Juvenal’s sixth satire that are not to be found in any other manuscript.⁴⁶

In addition to their careful preservation of the works of the classical world and of the Church fathers, both of which are central to Western civilization, the monks performed another work of immeasurable importance in their capacity as copyists: their preservation of the Bible.⁴⁷ Without their devotion to this crucial task and the numerous copies they produced, it is not clear how the Bible would have survived the onslaught of the barbarians. The monks often embellished the Gospels with beautiful artistic

decoration, as in the famous Lindau and Lindisfarne Gospels—works of art as well as faith.

Throughout the history of monasticism we find abundant evidence of the devotion of monks to their books. Saint Benedict Biscop, for example, who established the monastery of Wearmouth in England, searched far and wide for volumes for his monastic library, embarking on five sea voyages for the purpose (and coming back each time with a sizable cargo).⁴⁸ Lupus asked a fellow abbot for an opportunity to copy Suetonius' *Lives of the Caesars*, and implored another friend to bring him Sallust's accounts of the Catilinarian and Jugurthan Wars, the *Verrines* of Cicero, and any other volume that might be of interest. He asked to borrow Cicero's *De Rhetorica* from another friend, and appealed to the pope for a copy of Cicero's *De Oratore*, Quintilian's *Institutions*, and other texts. Gerbert possessed a like enthusiasm for books, offering to assist another abbot in completing incomplete copies of Cicero and the philosopher Demosthenes, and seeking copies of Cicero's *Verrines* and *De Republica*.⁴⁹ We read that Saint Maieul of Cluny always had a book in his hand when he traveled on horseback, so devoted was he to reading. Likewise, Halinard, who served as abbot of Saint Benignus at Dijon before becoming Archbishop of Lyons, followed the same practice, recounting his particular fondness for the philosophers of antiquity.⁵⁰ "Without study and without books," said a monk of Muri, "the life of a monk is nothing." Saint Hugh of Lincoln, while prior at Witham, the first Carthusian house in England, spoke similarly: "Our books are our delight and our wealth in time of peace, our offensive and defensive arms in time of war, our food when we are hungry, and our medicine when we are sick."⁵¹ Western civilization's admiration for the written word and for the classics comes to us from the Catholic Church that preserved both through the barbarian invasions.

Although the extent of the practice varied over the centuries, monks were teachers. Saint John Chrysostom tells us that already in his day (c. 347–407) it was customary for people in Antioch to send their sons to be educated by the monks. Saint Benedict instructed the sons of Roman nobles.⁵² Saint Boniface established a school in every monastery he founded in Germany, and in England Saint Augustine and his monks set up schools wherever they went.⁵³ Saint Patrick is given credit for encouraging Irish scholarship, and the Irish monasteries would develop into important centers of learning, dispensing instruction to monks and laymen alike.⁵⁴

Most education for those who would not profess monastic vows, however, would take place in other settings, and eventually in the cathedral schools established under Charlemagne. But even if the monasteries' contribution to education had been merely to teach their own how to read and write, that would have been no small accomplishment. When the Mycenaean Greeks suffered a catastrophe in the twelfth century B.C.—an invasion by the Dorians, say some scholars—the result was three centuries of complete illiteracy known as the Greek Dark Ages. Writing simply disappeared amid the chaos and disorder. But the monks' commitment to reading, writing, and education ensured that the same terrible fate that had befallen the Mycenaean Greeks would not be visited upon Europeans after the fall of the Roman Empire. This time, thanks to the monks, literacy would survive political and social catastrophe.

Monks did more than simply preserve literacy. Even an unsympathetic scholar could write of monastic education: “They studied the songs of heathen poets and the writings of historians and philosophers. Monasteries and monastic schools blossomed forth, and each settlement became a center of religious life as well as of education.”⁵⁵ Another unsympathetic chronicler wrote of the

monks, "They not only established the schools, and were the schoolmasters in them, but also laid the foundations for the universities. They were the thinkers and philosophers of the day and shaped the political and religious thought. To them, both collectively and individually, was due the continuity of thought and civilization of the ancient world with the later Middle Ages and with the modern period."⁵⁶

This treatment of the monks' contributions barely scratches the surface of an immense subject. In the 1860s and 1870s, when the Comte de Montalembert wrote a six-volume history of the monks of the West, he complained at times of his inability to provide anything more than a cursory overview of great figures and deeds, and could only refer his readers to the references in his footnotes. The monastic contribution to Western civilization, as we have seen, is immense. Among other things, the monks taught metallurgy, introduced new crops, copied ancient texts, preserved literacy, pioneered in technology, invented champagne, improved the European landscape, provided for wanderers of every stripe, and looked after the lost and shipwrecked. Who else in the history of Western civilization can boast such a record? The Church that gave the West its monks also created the university, as we will see in the next chapter.

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