

Kristina Krüger

MONASTERIES  
AND  
MONASTIC ORDERS

2000 Years of Christian Art and Culture

Edited by Rolf Toman

With a contribution from Rainer Warland

Photographs by Achim Bednorz

Production by Thomas Paffen

*h.f.*fullmann

# Early Monasticism

## The Significance of Monasticism in the Christian Religion



**Chi-Rho**—the Greek letters XR forming a monogram of Christ—on the façade of the Kisan Gate in Damascus, Syria.

### Judaism, the Bible, and the Promise of the Messiah

Judaism is the oldest of the three monotheistic religions. It is based on the covenant that God made with the Israelites on Mount Sinai, after he had led them out of slavery in Egypt. This covenant's laws—including the Ten Commandments—are recorded in the Torah (Hebrew for doctrine, i.e. the Five Books of Moses in the Old Testament). Together with the books of history and the prophets, the psalms and the remaining scriptures, they make up the Hebrew Bible, which tells the story of Israel from the days of the patriarch Abraham to the centuries before the Common Era.

The canon of books comprising the Hebrew Bible was adopted by the Christians with few deviations. It was termed the Old Testament, which essentially means "testimony of the ancient covenant." As testimony of the new covenant mediated by Jesus this was supplemented with the New Testament, which comprised the Gospels, the history of the Apostles, the Letters from the Apostles, and the Book of Revelation. The psalms and the prophets had initially predicted a Messiah who would resurrect the Kingdom of Israel, and with whose coming a New Age would begin. At first this belief referred explicitly to kingship whose consecration ritual was anointing with oil (Messiah from the Hebrew *maschiach*, the Anointed), but changed over the course of time to take on the notion of a spiritual leader. The side issue of liberation from political oppression remained alive, however, especially under Roman occupation. Consequently, in addition to Jesus of Nazareth, Simon Bar Kokhba, leader of the Jewish insurrection of 132–135/36, was also sometimes seen as the Messiah.

Monasticism and the ascetic way of life have always played a special role in Christianity, more so than in other religions. The example of individuals or whole groups of believers living a life detached from the world and consecrated to God has always been an important element in the shaping and transmission of Christian religiosity. The history of the Christian Church has been influenced to a considerable extent by monks, monasteries, and monastic orders. The significance of such movements, defined by pious withdrawal from the world, in some epochs such the Middle Ages remains plainly visible today—in the churches and monasteries that still characterize our cities and landscapes. However, in the years following the Reformation, which led to the dissolution of many monasteries, Catholic revival movements continually aroused new interest in the monastic way of life, reformed existing monasteries, and founded new ones. Even today, a monastery might sometimes be accorded special significance in the communication of Christian beliefs in a largely secular world—for example the ecumenical community of Taizé in Burgundy.

The prominent position of monasticism itself and of individual monasteries in particular is a feature distinguishing Christianity from the other two great monotheistic religions. Neither ascetic movements, monasteries, nor monastic orders have ever played a similar role in either Judaism or Islam. Neither did the ancient world of the Romans and the Greeks know such monastic lifestyles. So where does the close link between Christianity and movements of ascetic withdrawal from the world come from? Before examining the historical development of monasticism, we should once again take a look back at the beginnings of the Christian religion in the context of this fundamental question.

## The Beginnings of Christianity

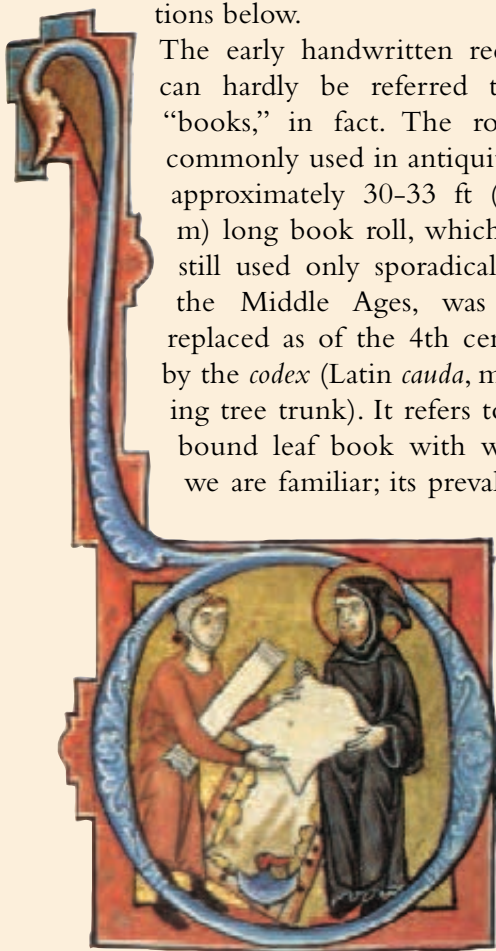
In Jerusalem, the capital of the Roman protectorate of Palestine, the time around AD 30 saw the execution of the Jewish religious teacher, Jesus of Nazareth, which led to the emergence of a new Jewish sect. Its followers saw Jesus as the Messiah promised by the prophets (Greek *Christos*, the anointed, i.e. the messenger of God) and testified to his resurrection from the dead. They very soon began to propagate this conviction, not only among their Jewish co-religionists but also among the Greek-speaking, non-Jewish population of Palestine and the neighboring Mediterranean region, as far as Rome. The gentile followers of Jesus were absolved from adherence to the laws of the Jewish faith, such as those relating to diet and to circumcision. This saw the sect develop into an independent religious community.

As early as the 2nd century there were Christians in many, sometimes remote, areas of the Roman Empire. The State treated the Christians with suspicion—not because they were followers of a man sentenced by Rome to a dishonorable death by crucifixion as an insurrectionist guilty of high treason, but because, in the name of their God, they rejected the Roman imperial cult and the deification of the Emperor.

## Monastic Book Illumination in the Middle Ages

From the Early Middle Ages through to the 12th century, the reproduction of texts largely took place in monasteries. It was a collective endeavor, although it can be assumed that, among the monks, some were especially talented at writing while others proved to be more skilled at painting decorative letters and pages, and others still tended towards the more technical tasks of book production. Little is known about these aspects of the division of labor in the monasteries, even though we have ample details of the individual work processes involved in the production of books, as is shown by the illustrations below.

The early handwritten records can hardly be referred to as “books,” in fact. The rotulus commonly used in antiquity, an approximately 30–33 ft (9–10 m) long book roll, which was still used only sporadically in the Middle Ages, was first replaced as of the 4th century by the *codex* (Latin *cauda*, meaning tree trunk). It refers to the bound leaf book with which we are familiar; its prevalence

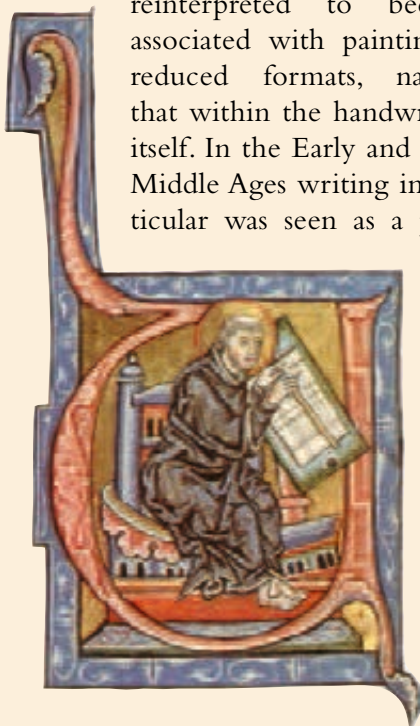


Three initials with illustrations of the process of book production in a manuscript text from Hamburg dating from 1255: buying parchment (above), scraping the writing block (below left), ruling lines (below right) (Copenhagen, Kongelige Bibliothek, Ms. 4, 2°).



was related to the change in writing material from papyrus to parchment. The great boom in Christian book culture came—literally—on the backs of animals, i.e. it was based on processed animal hide as a writing material. The production of a large book cost numerous calves their lives: “the hides of 250 calves were required for the Winchester Bible, and for a full monumental Bible some 500 animals are required.” This alone explains the extraordinary value of medieval books. Then there was also the work of the scribes and bookbinders, as well as the cost of the valuable binding itself. Paper, invented in China in the 2nd century, came to be used in the West only much later. Even after printing was invented by Gutenberg in the middle of the 15th century, parchment was often still used for high quality books.

From the 13th century, when the number of literate individuals grew, the demand for books became greater, and the circle of people commissioning books expanded, book production was increasingly transferred from the monasteries to more and more specialized “workshops” in the towns. The medieval universities made a significant contribution to the growing demand for books, their requirements of course focusing more on scholarly books than on artistic masterpieces. Greater numbers of luxury products for bibliophiles, on the other hand, were ordered in court circles and made by privileged court artists. Book illustrations, the art of miniatures, was a well-paid business in the Late Middle Ages. The occupation of “miniator” derives from the Latin *minium*, the name of the vermilion pigment that was initially used for pen drawings or for the contours of initials. In the Late Middle Ages, the term “miniature” was expanded and reinterpreted to become associated with painting in reduced formats, namely that within the handwriting itself. In the Early and High Middle Ages writing in particular was seen as a pious



The monk Eadwine writing, from the Eadwine Psalter, c. 1170 (Cambridge, Trinity College Library, Ms. R.17.1, folio 283 verso).

service to God and numerous texts and images testify to its esteem. It was believed that the scribe would be absolved of as many sins in purgatory as there were letters and lines in a book. Of course, the promise of reward in the afterlife no longer applied to the later professional writers; they received payment for their work during their lifetime.

### *The Contents of the Books*

The majority of the books produced in the monasteries were of religious content. These included liturgical books, which were used in the religious service, and devotional books, which served the purposes of personal piety. Elaborately decorated devotional and prayer books for laymen, so-called Books of Hours, were a specialty of the Late Middle Ages, and their production was no longer the task of the monasteries. The Bible took a special place among religious books in so far as it served as the basis for both the liturgical works and the devotional books. The liturgical books included the psalter, the gospels, and the evangelistary, which are based on specific excerpts from the Bible (the Psalms of the Old Testament, gospels), as well as the sacramentary, missal, and temporal, which contain the readings and prayers used in the Mass, and finally the breviary and the gradual, with the anthems for the religious service and the Liturgy of the Hours.

The most important secular books deriving from the monastery scriptoria include antique works on natural history as well as richly illustrated encyclopedic works,



## Pilgrimage and the Cult of Relics

“We are but guests here on earth, roaming restlessly with our sorrows in search of our eternal home,” to quote the lines of an old hymn. This could well have been the motto for the pious wanderings of medieval pilgrims, although their journeys were sometimes also undertaken out of a thirst for adventure and for other motives, and their goal was not the eternal homeland but Christian holy places here on Earth. These “interim” destinations were very much linked to the eternal one because a pilgrim also aspired to be on the righteous path of a good Christian. According to the Apostle Paul (2 Cor 5,6), the life of a Christian is itself a pilgrimage and hence pilgrims were encouraged by the Church from early times.

### Great Pilgrimage Destinations

At the top of the list of pilgrimage destinations were the holy sites in Palestine where Christ once lived and preached. In Late Antiquity, pilgrims were already setting off, following Helena’s discovery of the Cross (326) and the erection of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem and the Nativity Church in Bethlehem by Emperor Constantine.



Pilgrims’ roads to Santiago de Compostela: the four main routes through France.

Eight hundred years later crowds again surged in the same direction, this time during the Crusades, albeit mostly with warlike intentions. These “primary” pilgrimage destinations were followed by Rome (the Apostle Peter) and Santiago de Compostela in Galicia, further key places of pilgrimage that also enjoyed preferen-

tial status in the eyes of the Church. When, in the year 813, the tomb of the Apostle James was “discovered” near Santiago—an angel is said to have shown the hermit Pelagius the location—it took more than a century before the “epochal event” attracted a pilgrimage. It was only in the 11th century, following the suc-



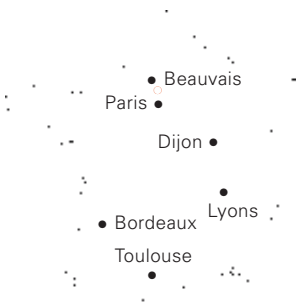
▲ Depiction of a pilgrim from St. Juan de Ortega.

cesses of the Reconquista, that the situation changed: the pilgrimage to Santiago underwent a major revival that attained its first peak in the 12th century.

◀ Conques-en-Rouergue: former abbey church of Ste. Foy between the town and the countryside.



## Royaumont, France



▲ **Baroque park.** View of the abbey's east wing.

►► **Monks' refectory,** mid-13th C., a two-aisled Gothic hall design supported by narrow, round pillars.

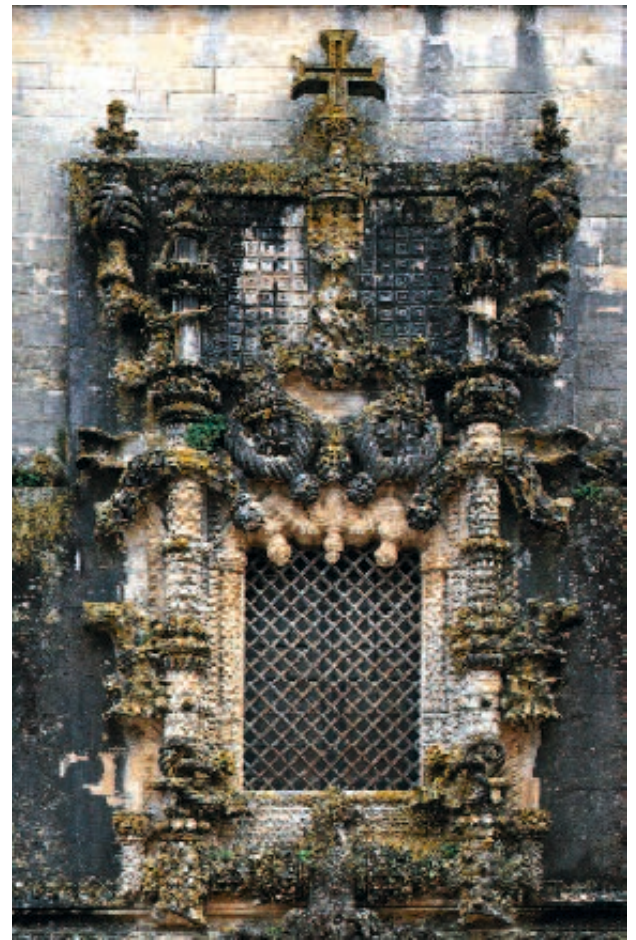
► **Pulpit in the monks' refectory.**

Louis IX, later *St. Louis*, founded the abbey of Royaumont in 1228 near the royal castle at Asnières-sur-Oise under a provision in the will of his father Louis VIII; the monks came from Clairvaux. The abbey's generous endowments enabled rapid building progress such that the church could be consecrated as early as 1235. Several members of the royal family were buried there. In 1258 the number of monks was increased from 60 to 114 due to a further endowment from the King. The abbey was sold during the Revolution and the church torn down. Only the southern side aisle and the southern transept walls remained standing, adjoining the almost completely preserved but heavily restored 13th-century monastic buildings, as well as the northeast corner of the northern transept. The church, known through excavations within the ground plan, had a three-aisled nave with a west atrium, a three-aisled transept and an ambulatory with seven radiating chapels. The elevation had three zones with a triforium and was executed in the contemporary rayonnant design. This unusually elaborate arrangement for a Cistercian church corresponded to the layout and construction of the somewhat older abbey church at Longpont and three related buildings in northern France, and was therefore obviously not the result of royal intervention.





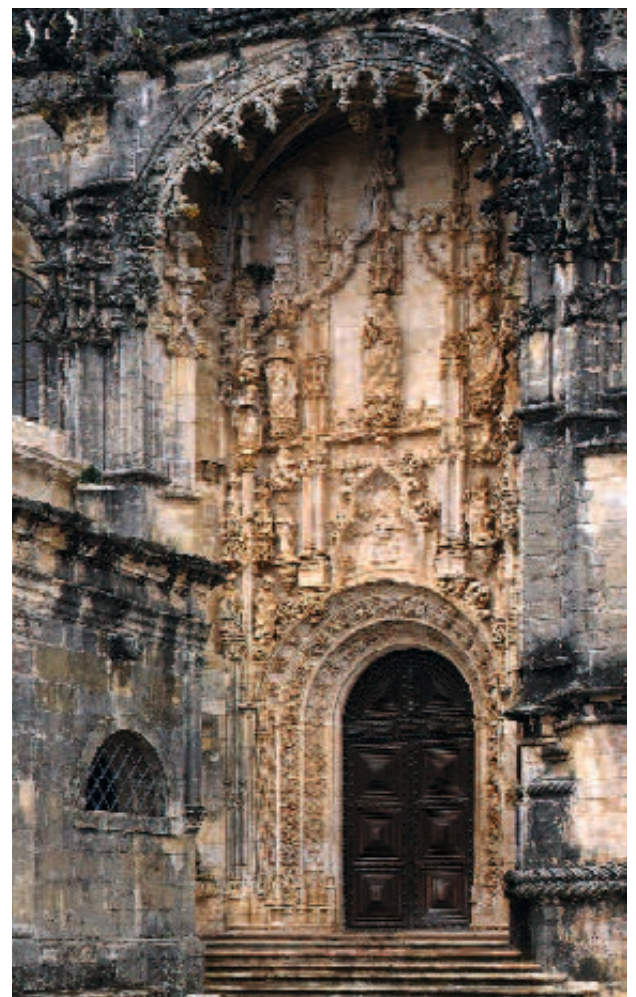
◀▶ **Templar church**, 2nd half of the 12th C. The exterior of this Romanesque church comprises a sixteen sided centrally oriented building crowned with battlements, in the center of which is a freestanding octagonal chapel. It once stood at the protective walls, where it served as a fortified tower. In contrast to the solid walls of the exterior construction, the central chapel has narrow arcades underneath and an upper story with tall, narrow windows.

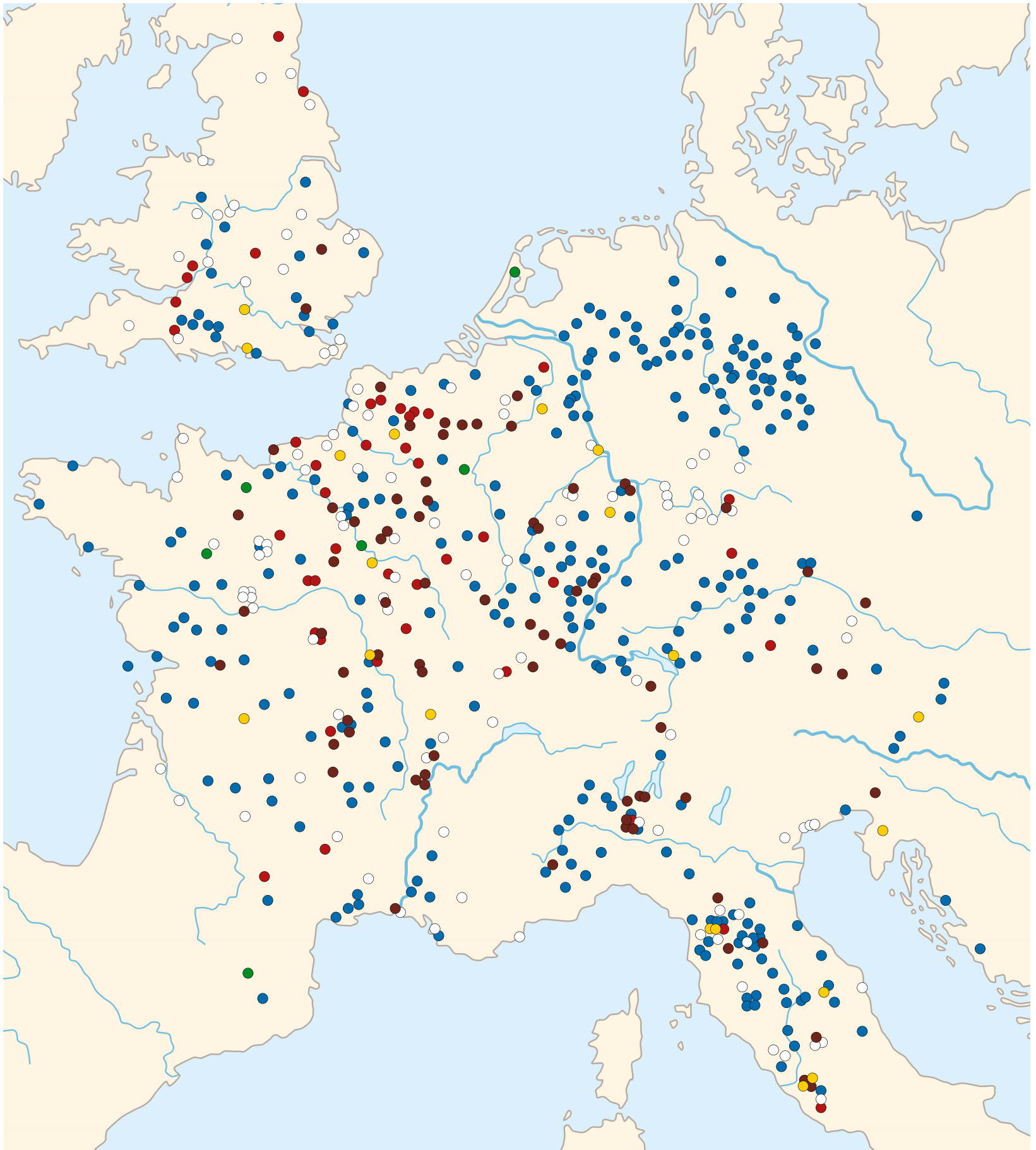


## Tomar, Portugal

During the height of their power in the 13th century the Templar Order owned a large number of commanderies in various European countries. With every new member having to make a donation to the order, the Templars consequently acquired significant properties as well as the associated social influence. The allegation that the commanderies were usually castles is a romantic myth; most of them were in fact farmsteads or administrative centers. Those that were true fortresses, however, included Tomar. This Templar castle was built after 1160 under the order's Master in Portugal, Gualdim Pais, who had fought with the Templars in the Second Crusade to the Holy Land. Its multiple ringed enclosures made possible the successful defense of Tomar against attacks by the Almohads in 1190. Besides the remains of the fortified towers, the church, called the Charola (rotunda), is all that has survived of the former fortified monastery. Following the abolition of the Templar Order in 1312, their possessions passed to the Knights of Christ, newly founded in 1318. The fact that, after 1350, the latter order was led by members of the royal family ensured the expansion of Tomar into a magnificent monastic residence in the 15th and 17th centuries.

▶ **The Knights of Christ monastery**, early 16th–17th C., window of the chapter house (above) and main porch (below). The imaginative, naturalistic, and emblematic decorations are characteristic of Portuguese art on the threshold of the modern age: the imagery of the era of Manuel I was influenced by the experiences of the voyages of discovery.





Map showing the distribution of nunneries founded prior to 1100 (Western Europe excluding Spain and Ireland), after K. Bodarwé and N. M. Barner

- Founded before 800, still in existence in 1100
  - Founded before 800, monastery prior to 1100
  - Founded before 800, dissolved prior to 1100
- Founded between 800 and 1100, still in existence in 1100
  - Founded between 800 and 1100, monastery prior to 1100
  - Founded between 800 and 1100, dissolved prior to 1100

## The New Orders

It was only c. 1100 that the founding of nunneries for primarily religious reasons came to the fore. The increased proactivity on the part of women committed to a religious lifestyle and who were within the newly founded orders of that era was indicative of this development. Nevertheless, the establishment of female branches was frowned upon in the majority of orders and could be





▲ ▼ **Athos, Chilandar Monastery.** For centuries the monastic republic of Athos has been a reflection of the different region and peoples of the Byzantine Empire. Chilandar Monastery, which is dominated by the imposing tower of St. Sava dating from 1198, was and continues to be the Serbs' main monastery.



## Byzantine Monastery Architecture, Memorial Foundations, and Cultural Identity

The picturesque Athos monasteries offer a wide spectrum of Byzantine monastery architecture. Each is a unique example, committed only to its written *typikon*. The countless extension buildings, the changing building materials, and saddling of upper floors on existing wall decks obscure the planning and construction processes. The numerous repairs following fires, which were almost unavoidable and which, due to the negligent construction of attics extending over several buildings, had devastating consequences, also contribute to this image.

Despite the irregularities, however, there are also common features that can be determined. The most precise architecture was always used for the freestanding church or *katholikon*, the exterior of which had a decorative character, contrasting all too often with the other buildings. Then there were the solid fortification and refuge towers (*pyrgos*) which introduced their own architectural accents, and which are positioned at the highest point as close as possible to the monastery access. The majestic St. Sava tower dating from 1198 has continued to dominate the exterior view of the monastery of Chilandar up to the present day. Numerous individual finds indicate the functions of the monastery buildings, these being just a few examples: dining rooms (*trapeze*), sometimes freestanding buildings with painted decoration throughout, independent kitchen buildings (*hestia*) with a central chimney stack in Chilandar, bathrooms (*lutra*), sick wards, and sepulchral chapels. Finally, what applies far more than in the West: Byzantine monastery architecture is primarily church architecture.

The churches of the Athos monasteries are the only ones to have developed their own monastic building typology. Based on the outstanding example of the Great Laura, the Athonite cross-dome churches have transepts ending in apses. This modification of the otherwise flat, closed shield walls to the side was not entirely new but was seldom used and therefore significant. In the case of the Athos monasteries this seemed to have had a functional

C., foundations outside Europe, currently about 900 members.—c. mid-13th C., foundation of a female second order: Servite Sisters, originally enclosed and contemplative; in 14th C. foundation of a third order by Juliana Falconieri, similarly Servite Sisters (also called Mantellates); today both female communities work in the social/charitable field.

**Silvestrines**, originated 1231 at Montefano Monastery, Marches, founded by Silvestrino Guzzolini (died 1267), originally comprising largely laymen, a community characterized by the contemporary poverty movement, based on the Rule of St. Benedict, papal recognition 1248; increasing clericalization and urban orientation in Late Middle Ages; initially only in Italy, from 18th C. also in other countries on an isolated basis; since 1973 own congregation within the Benedictine order, currently about 200 members.—1233 foundation of female branch: Silvestrine Sisters, 1822 dissolution of last convent.

**Somaschi**, order of clerks regular, founded 1534 by Hieronymus Aemiliani (died 1537), Rule of St. Augustine, papal recognition 1540; main mission: running of orphanages and poorhouses, youth education and parish-based spiritual guidance; currently about 500 members.—Two female branches: first founded 1680 in Genoa, second 1975 in Central America (due to split from Genoa); the latter in 2000: over 160 members.

**Spiritans** (Congregation of the Holy Ghost/Holy Ghost Fathers), founded 1703 in Paris by Claude-

François Poullart-des-Places (died 1709); mission: training of priests and missionary work, refounded 1806 and 1819, papal recognition 1824, 1841 unification with the Congregation of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, active worldwide (2000: over 3000 members).

**Steyler Missionaries and Missionary Sisters**, name in the German speaking world for the members of the "Society of the Divine Word," 1875 opening of the St. Michael mission station in Steyl, Netherlands, by Arnold Janssen; a community of priests and brothers with simple vows developed from the missionary training center, papal recognition 1901 and 1910, from 1928 order managed from Rome; missionary work worldwide, also teaching activities and encouragement of the sciences; currently over 6000 members.—Holy Spirit Missionary Sisters (founded 1887 by Janssen) number about 3700 and are also active worldwide.

**Sulpicians**, international community of priests (no vow), founded 1642 by Jean-Jacques Olier, priest at St. Sulpice in Paris; mission: training and spiritual development of the diocesan clergy; inspired by the Oratorians; widespread in France and in francophone countries; currently 350 priests.

**Theatines**, order of clerks regular, founded 1524 in Rome for religious revival of the clergy by Cajetan of Thiene, Bishop of Chieti (Latin Theatinus), and Giampietro Caraffa, later Pope Paul IV; particularly widespread in Italy, elsewhere isolated (in 17th C. very grand monasteries in Munich, Prague,

Salzburg, Vienna); almost eliminated by secularization, revival from beginning of 20th C.; currently about 200 members in Italy and the USA.—1875 founding of the Theatine Sisters (successor of an order founded in the 17th C.) with branches in Italy, Spain and the USA, education of young women, currently over 200 sisters.

**Trinitarians** (Order of the Holy Trinity for the Ransom of Captives), founded end of the 12th C. by John of Matha (1213) near Soissons; mission: prisoner exchange and ransom between Christians and Muslims during the era of the Crusades, associated with hospice services; particular veneration of the Trinity; papal recognition 1198; 13th C.: foundation of a second (Trinitarian Sisters) and third order (secular, Tertiaries); since 1609 Trinitarians have belonged to the mendicant orders; activities today are missionary work, spiritual guidance among prisoners, parish-based spiritual guidance; currently about 550 male, 220 female members.

**Ursulines** (Order of St. Ursula), founded 1535 in Brescia by Angela Merici (died 1540), female community committed to the evangelical counsels (no vow) with regulated life based on the example of St. Ursula; mission: catechesis for young girls, papal recognition 1544; widespread in many Italian cities, in France at end of 16th C., then also in German-speaking countries; no unified order, association with affiliated convents; revival of order in 19/20th C., active worldwide in the field of education; 2002: around 10 000 members.

## Glossary

**Abbey**, since the 11th C., term for a house of monks, canons regular, nuns, or canonesses under the leadership of an abbot (abbess) with financial and administrative powers.

**Abbot/Abbess**, leader of a community of monks/nuns.

**Anchorite**, see box p. 17.

**Asceticism**, collective term for practices such as fasting, abstinence, silence, celibacy, sleep deprivation, isolation, itineracy, physical castigation, as well as spiritual attitudes such as humility and abasement, among others; key requirement is that the asceticism be voluntary and performed for the sake of a higher cause.

**Canons/Canonesses**, regular or secular members of order committed to communal choral prayer (canons regular, see pp. 159 f.).

**Cellarar** (Latin *cellerarius*, relating to the pantry/cellar, head cook), administrator of the monastery's housekeeping.

**Clerics**, see box p. 20.

**Consuetudines**, (Latin for customs), supplementary, precise or specific conditions relating to an order's statutes.

**Convent** (or nunnery), community of nuns or sisters.

**Dispens** (Latin for repeal, exemption), in the context of an order's statutes means exemption from specific regulations.

**Donati** see Oblates.

**Dormitorium**, communal sleeping area in a monastery/convent.

**Evangelical counsels**, the three vows: chastity (celibacy), poverty, and obedience, the voluntary adoption of which is the prerequisite for life in an order.

**Filiation** (from Latin *filia*, daughter), the relationship of newly founded religious houses (*filiae*) to the founding mother house); monastic network system according to the filiation principle was introduced by the Cistercians.

**Frater** (Latin for brother), originally mutual term of address among monks; following the division of the communities into priests and lay brothers, the term was restricted to the latter.

**Grange**, (medieval Latin *grangia*, granary, large barn), with the Cistercians of the Middle Ages, a monastery/convent's farmstead run by lay brothers. Habit, robes of an order, usually those of monks.

**Hermit**, see box p. 17.

**Horae** (Latin for hours), individual prayer times in the Liturgy of the Hours.

**Icon(oclastic) Controversy**, the dispute regarding the display and veneration of images, which shook the Byzantine Empire in the 8/9th C. (see p. 332–35).

**Imperial monasteries**, see box p. 44.

**Incluse/recluse**, practitioner of specific form of hermitism: man or woman who locked themselves in a cell or who had themselves enclosed within walls (immured) for a lengthy period of time or for life.

**Infirmarius** (Latin *infirmus*, meaning sick) in monasteries the monk in charge of the sick; the separate part of the monastery/convent reserved for the sick is the infirmarium.

**Laura** (or lavra), monastery type in Eastern monasticism: hermits' place of residence in an enclosed area with communal church and other monastic spaces; since the Middle Ages a term for large monasteries (e.g. on Mount Athos).

**Lay brothers/lay sisters**, members of order, not full monks or nuns, who carried out the necessary practical work; monks also called *fratres barbati* (Latin for bearded brothers).

**Laypeople**, see box p. 20.

**Liturgy of the Hours**, see box p. 24 and pp. 198–99.

**Mass**, see box p. 24.

**Monastery** (Greek *monasterion*, hermit's cell), the communal place of residence for a group of religious persons; (secluded) complex of monastic buildings/monastic community.

**Monk**, see boxes pp. 17, 20.

**Novice**, term for a person wanting to enter a monastery, convent, and/or order and therefore undertaking the required period of probation.

**Oblate** (from the Latin *oblatus*, sacrificed), boy or girl presented by parents and/or guardians to a monastery or convent, a practice continuing well into the Middle Ages.

**Officium**, see box p. 24.

**Opus Dei**, key concept in the Rule of St. Benedict: religious service, in traditional terms identical with liturgical service, later also denoting "daily work" itself.

**Oratorium**, prayer room (chapel) in a religious community.

**Parlatorium**, room in monastery/convent where conversation is permitted.

**Peregrinatio** (from the Latin *peregrinare*, travel about), wandering and exile as an ancient monastic ideal (especially predominant in Irish monasticism).

**Priest**, see box p. 20.

**Prior/Prioress**, in Catholic orders: 1. of second rank in abbey and abbot/abbess's deputy, 2. head of an independent monastery/convent that is not an abbey (e.g. priory), 3. head of a monastery/convent or other settlement of orders that do not use the title abbot (e.g. the Carthusians).

**Profession**, in Catholic orders: public taking of the vow.

**Refectory**, dining hall for communal meals in a monastery or convent.

**Religious**, member of an order.

**Scriptorium**, writing room in medieval monasteries.

**Stabilitas** (Latin for resolution, stability), a monk remaining in the community that he entered as a novice and in which he took his vows.

**Tonsure**, monastic shaving of the head in a variety of forms.

**Vesting**, handover and clothing with the order's robes during a liturgical celebration, start of the novitiate.

**Visitation**, visit by the order superior to inspect adherence to rules and customs.

**Vow**, a promise to God in which the vower undertakes a commitment relating to Christian life in an order: obedience, poverty and chastity, sometimes also supplemented with additional practices; celebratory vows are taken in the orders, simple vows in the communities.

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**Certosa di Pavia**, cloister and south aspect of the church with crossing tower, 15th C.

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