



Carolingian Culture at Reichenau & St. Gall

The Carolingian Libraries of St. Gall and Reichenau

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Tours of the Libraries of Reichenau and St. Gall

Monastic Life Virtual Tour Julian Hendrix

Reichenau and St. Gall were important cultural, political and social centers during the eighth and ninth centuries, but they were all these things because they were first and foremost monasteries. While monks and monasteries were important parts of life in medieval Europe, today few people have met a monk or set foot in a working monastery. In this tour of the libraries of Reichenau and St. Gall, you will learn about what it meant to be a monk in the Carolingian period and the ways that the library furthered the practice of monasticism.

What is a monk?

A monk is a person who has dedicated him or herself to a spiritual life by renouncing many conventional elements of his or her culture. Monasticism is not unique to Christianity; Buddhism also has a long and rich history of monastic practice. Christian monasticism had multiple origins, including the communal life of Jesus's followers described in the Acts of the Apostles and the aristocratic Roman tradition of retirement from civic life to live at one's country estate. It first gained significant popularity in the fourth century, when a story of the monk Antony's life (c.360) in the Egyptian desert inspired many people throughout the Roman empire to abandon their families and careers and adopt a monastic lifestyle. Antony was famous for his asceticism: he ate and slept very little, wore thin, tattered clothing, and spent long periods alone in the desert. The purpose of such renunciations for a monk was to enable them to focus on prayer and spiritual matters rather than the routine demands of the body. While subsequent generations of monks often interpreted the specific details of ascetic practice differently, the early monks of Antony's time, known as the desert fathers, remained an important touchstone and texts by and/or about them were routinely read for inspiration and encouragement. The St. Gall library included a copy of the famous **life of Antony**.

Living as a monk

Accounts of famous monks were one way that monks learned about monasticism. Other texts were specifically written to guide monks in their spiritual development and instruct them on how to be more holy. One important source to guide a monk's life were monastic rules. These were guidelines written by (or attributed to) prominent monks, who were typically the leaders of monastic communities (even the authors of rules for hermits - monks who lived alone - were rarely themselves exclusively solitary). A rule discussed how a community handled various aspects of monastic life, ranging from practical issues such as sleeping and meal arrangements to spiritual issues such as times of prayer or how to be humble. Other important issues such as how new monks were admitted and bad monks expelled were also routinely addressed.

In the Carolingian period, monastic rules typically traveled in packs, with multiple rules and other texts on monastic life collected into a single volume that monks consulted regularly. Known as chapter books, two such manuscripts are available in the virtual library and demonstrate the range of material monks drew upon for guidance in how to be a good monk. One of the chapter books, Csg 914, is well known for the important texts it contains. The first half of the book contains the **Rule of Benedict**, one of the most popular monastic rules of the medieval period. In the ninth century, it was promoted in the Carolingian empire as the main rule for monastic life and this particular copy of the Rule of Benedict is important for its association with this effort to have all monks living according to a single rule. A linguistic analysis of the Latin in this Rule of Benedict reveals it to be the purist form of the text, that is, the one closest to the original copy made in sixth century Italy. How did a monastery in north-eastern Switzerland come to possess so pure a copy? The answer is suggested in a letter that immediately follows this copy of the Rule of Benedict. The letter is from Abbot Theodomar of Monte Cassino, the monastery where the Rule of Benedict originated. The letter is addressed to the Carolingian emperor, Charlemagne, and announces that Theodomar is sending him a copy of the Rule of Benedict per his request. The copy in Csg 914 was probably not made directly from Charlemagne's copy, but from one made by Reichenau monks. Later in the book are two letters from a pair of traveling Reichenau monks, Grimald and Tatto. In one, **they report that they are sending a copy of the Rule of Benedict** to Reichenau, a copy which they claim was made from one written by Benedict's own hand! This is probably the copy sent by Theodomar to Charlemagne and Benedict himself probably did not write it out, it was very likely written in Beneventan minuscule, a regional Italian script which looked very different than the Caroline

and Alemmanic minuscules with which Grimald and Tatto would have been most familiar (compare the chapter book's script with **this one from central Italy** to get a sense of how different the scripts from different regions could look). The **other letter** reports on the monasticism that the pair observed at the monastery of Inde, which suggests that Grimald and Tatto were traveling to learn about the form of monasticism promoted by Benedict of Aniane, who had very close ties with Charlemagne's son Louis the Pious. Other texts in the manuscript appear can be linked to such interests, including a **record of a council on monasticism** lead by Benedict of Aniane and a **short treatise on penance** written that he wrote.

Other chapter books in the library reveal the various material that monks found useful to consult regularly. Like Csg 914, Csg 915 contains a **necrology**, a **martyrology**, and a **Rule of Benedict**, but also contains seven other monastic rules (including that of **Augustine** and two by **Columbanus**), as well as documents created at St. Gall, such as **confraternity pacts** it formed with other monasteries. The same mix of monastic rules and institutional documents can also be seen in the Reichenau chapter book, **Zurich, ZB, Rh. Hist 28**.

In addition to the chapter books, other manuscripts in the library provided monks with information on monasticism. Csg 926 contains four more monastic rules, including ones from Basil, John Cassian, Eucharius of Lyon, and Evagrius Ponticus. All these rules record the early traditions of the monasticism in the Egyptian desert. John Cassian's writings were particular popular with Carolingian monks because they were specifically recommended in the Rule of Benedict. The virtual library contains two copies of Cassian's Conferences, which record the teachings of a series of Egyptian monks, one from Reichenau (**Aug 92**) and the other from St. Gall (in three volumes, Csg **574**, **575**, and **576**). Portions of Cassian's Institutes, the rule he wrote for his own monastery in southern Gaul, take up most of **Aug. 164** and part of **Csg 926**.

Monks would have read these books individually, but would have also had these kinds of texts read to them at meal times. At the daily chapter meeting, a morning gathering in which community business was discussed, sections of such texts would be read aloud and explained. Hildemar of Corbey's comments on the Rule of Benedict were written down and shared with other monasteries, including Reichenau (**Aug. 179** and **203**).

Liturgy

One of the main ways a monk improved himself spiritually was by engaging in prayer. In the Carolingian period, the most important kind of prayer for monks was the liturgy. Monastic liturgy took the form of two main kinds of religious service. One was the Office, which was divided into eight periods of prayer throughout the day. The other was the Mass, which re-enacted the Last Supper and, by extension, commemorated the special status of Jesus in Christianity. While liturgical books were among the most common kinds of books produced and used in monasteries, there are relatively few in the virtual library because they would have been stored in the church or the sacristy (the room where presiders prepared to lead the liturgy) and not in the monastic library which is represented in the library catalogs.

The Office consisted mostly of the chanting of psalms and the reading of other biblical or patristic texts; as a result, many monasteries did not create books specifically for use in the Office, but rather selected material from the books they had. Hence any bible or patristic manuscripts held in the library may have been used in the liturgy. One clue that a book was intended for reading aloud in the liturgy is if it is copied in a large format (both in terms of size of the script and the size of the page), which would have assisted clear, correct reading. Hence the large Hartmut Bible (Csg **77**, **78**, **79**, **82**, and **83**) or an even larger copy of Gregory the Great's *Moralia* (**Aug. 2**, **3**, and **4**) may have been used in the liturgy. Yet there were also some books that excerpted and organized material for use in the Office. Paul the Deacon's Homiliary (**Aug. 14** and **15**), presents excerpts from patristic authors arranged according to the liturgical year. Other books contained prayers specific to the Office, such as a **section in the chapter book Csg 914**, which contains intercessory prayers for use during the Office. This section is typical of many Office books in that it only provides the first few words of the prayer, known as the incipit (Latin for "it begins"). Only the beginning was provided because the monks would have memorized this material and would only need a few words to prompt their memory.

Unlike the Office, the Mass consisted mostly of prayers distinctive to itself. In the Carolingian period, these were collected and organized in books known as sacramentaries. The **Donaueschingen sacramentary** is typical in that it contains the Mass canon (texts used for every Mass) and then the remaining prayers organized according to their use in the liturgical calendar.

Monks and the World

While a major goal of Carolingian monasticism was withdrawal from the world to a life within the walls of the monastery entirely centered on God, in reality, Carolingian monasteries were integral institutions in the Carolingian empire and monks were influential politically, socially and culturally. This was partially due to the kinds of auxiliary work necessary to enable monastic practice and partially due to the people who were most likely to become monks.

One kind of auxiliary work that monks devoted significant time to was the copying of books. This was a natural extension of the importance of liturgy for monks, because books were necessary not only to perform the liturgy, but also to train monks in Latin sufficiently to perform the liturgy correctly. Due to monasteries being centers of education and book production, they became important transmitters of all kinds of learning during the early medieval period and not just the theological and doctrinal topics that would be most directly relevant to a monastic education. The general tour of the library will tell you more about the relationship between monastic practice and book production. The prominence of monasteries in the Carolingian period was also due to the prominence of the families from which monks were recruited. Carolingian monasticism was distinctive for the high percentage of monks who entered the monastery as children, a process known as child oblation. The typical Carolingian monk was presented to the monastery by his or her family; such donations created social and political bonds between the family and the monastery. Given the aristocratic background of most monks and their extensive education, monks were an obvious source for the imperial bureaucracy and monks routinely served in the courts of the Carolingian nobility.

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