



**Female
Monasticism in the
Early and High
Middle Ages: nuns
and society (up to
c. 1200)**

Christianity and Womanhood

Women in the Bible

- The **ancient Near East** was an **essentially patriarchal society**.
 - The primary expectation for women was **childrearing**.
- The Bible reflects this: **women are usually in the background**, and usually firmly under the authority of men.
 - Women represent **less than 10 percent of all characters in the Bible**.
- The first woman mentioned is **Eve**, the wife of Adam.
 - She is presented as having been **made for Adam (from his rib)** rather than an equal.
 - Moreover, it was **Eve who tempted Adam** into sin.
 - In response, **God firmly subjugated women**: “To the woman he said, “I will **make your pains in childbearing very severe**; with painful labour you will give birth to children. Your desire will be for your husband, and **he will rule over you.**” [Gen 3:16]



Christianity and Womanhood

Women in the Bible

- Certain biblical women do have **socially valuable, if still limiting roles**:
 - **Ruth** – the Old Testament’s most prominent symbol of selfless kindness (shown to Naomi and Boaz)
 - **Mary** – mother of Jesus: a symbol of kindness, tenderness, and particular moral purity, as symbolised by her virginity
- Only **a few women break the mould to take on greater authority**, however:
 - Some notable prophetesses (e.g. **Deborah**)
 - A few women who exceed the expectations of their positions to significantly influence their husbands (e.g. **Esther**)
- BUT - **Jesus** is seen as showing **greater respect for women**, commonly treating women as **equals in potential for both virtue and sin**:
 - E.g. **intervening in the stoning of a woman** accused of adultery (“Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her”, [John 8:7])
 - **Women prominent and respected within his early circle**: not only **Mary**, but also **Mary Magdalene**.



Christianity and Womanhood

Women in Early Christianity

Some scholars have argued that Early Christianity offered some latitude for female involvement/leadership.

- The **Romanised society** in which the early Church evolved offered – in legal terms at least – gave **greater latitude to women in some areas** than they had known in Old Testament Judea.
 - E.g. **property rights**
- **Christianity was still in its counter-cultural, dissident phase** and provided a space where social norms and distinctions could be challenged.
 - Some **female clergy** (albeit as deacons, a lower rank, rather than priests), even if they are less common than men
- New Testament offers **some theological grounding** for this:
 - E.g. **Saint Paul emphasises the equality of souls**: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” [Gal 3:28]



Christianity and Womanhood

Women in Early Christianity

Nevertheless we can see that some of its most influential leaders were keen to place **more traditional limits on female leadership from an early stage:**

- **Saint Paul:** “I permit no woman to teach or have authority over men; she is to keep silent” [1 Tim 2:12]
- The **Church father Tertullian** (155-240) argues against a woman’s right to baptise or assist in baptisms (suggesting it was previously common)
- After the time of the **legalisation of Christianity** by the emperor Constantine I in 313, we find **less and less evidence of women holding roles of authority** within the non-monastic church (albeit it is not entirely absent)



The Earliest Nuns

Monasticism re-enlivened the counter-cultural aspect of Christianity (see lecture 1):

- **Apparent rejection of “worldly society”** allows for some **norms to be pushed aside**, including those affecting women.
- **Virtue could be defined by ascetic renunciation rather than social position**: some notable early hermitesses: e.g. the “desert mothers” **Sarah** and **Syncletica** – see lecture 1.

But the rise of female monasticism **also caused concern**:

- See the example of **Sarah** being insulted by male monks in the *Sayings of the Fathers* (lecture 1 sources).
- Unrestrained female monasticism is also a **challenge to women’s traditional societal role as child-bearers in marriage**. Not all women could be allowed to follow this unmarried path.
- Conversely, those who renounced marriage and became **nuns could become potential objects of Christian sexual suspicion**. The fear of women as particular conduits of the sin of “lust” placed a different spiritual framing on female monasticism.
- **“Chastity”**, while a virtue for monks as well, thus became the **principle goal for these unmarried religious women**. Nuns are often simply called **“virgins”**, connecting also with the biblical example of **Mary**.
- Female monasticism is thus **always framed by rather misogynistic perceptions of the sexual role and characteristics of women**.





The Earliest Nuns

Eventually, **female monasticism finds a more restrictive niche** within a male-dominated late Roman society:

- It provides a environment in which to **ensure the care of daughters for whom a marriage option is not available** and of **widows**.
- It is **not common for women to be able to choose religion over marriage** – at least without significant resistance from male relatives.
- Nuns are **still under male care**, in the sense that a **male priest must visit to say mass / administer sacraments**.
- Female monasticism becomes **less of a break from the norms of the outside world in these senses**.



The Earliest Nuns

But, although nuns were restricted within a monastery, the monastic life does offer women a path to:

- **have authority** over others (e.g. as an abbess, leading a monastery)
- **express themselves (religiously at least)** outside of the immediate grip of men
- **reach public prominence and respect** (albeit usually less than male monks) for their religious lives: e.g. **Macrina the Younger (d. 379)**, a near eastern nun, becomes a celebrated saint alongside her two brothers, **Gregory of Nyssa** and **Basil the Great** (see lecture 3 on Basil's rule)



Caesarius of Arles and Enclosure

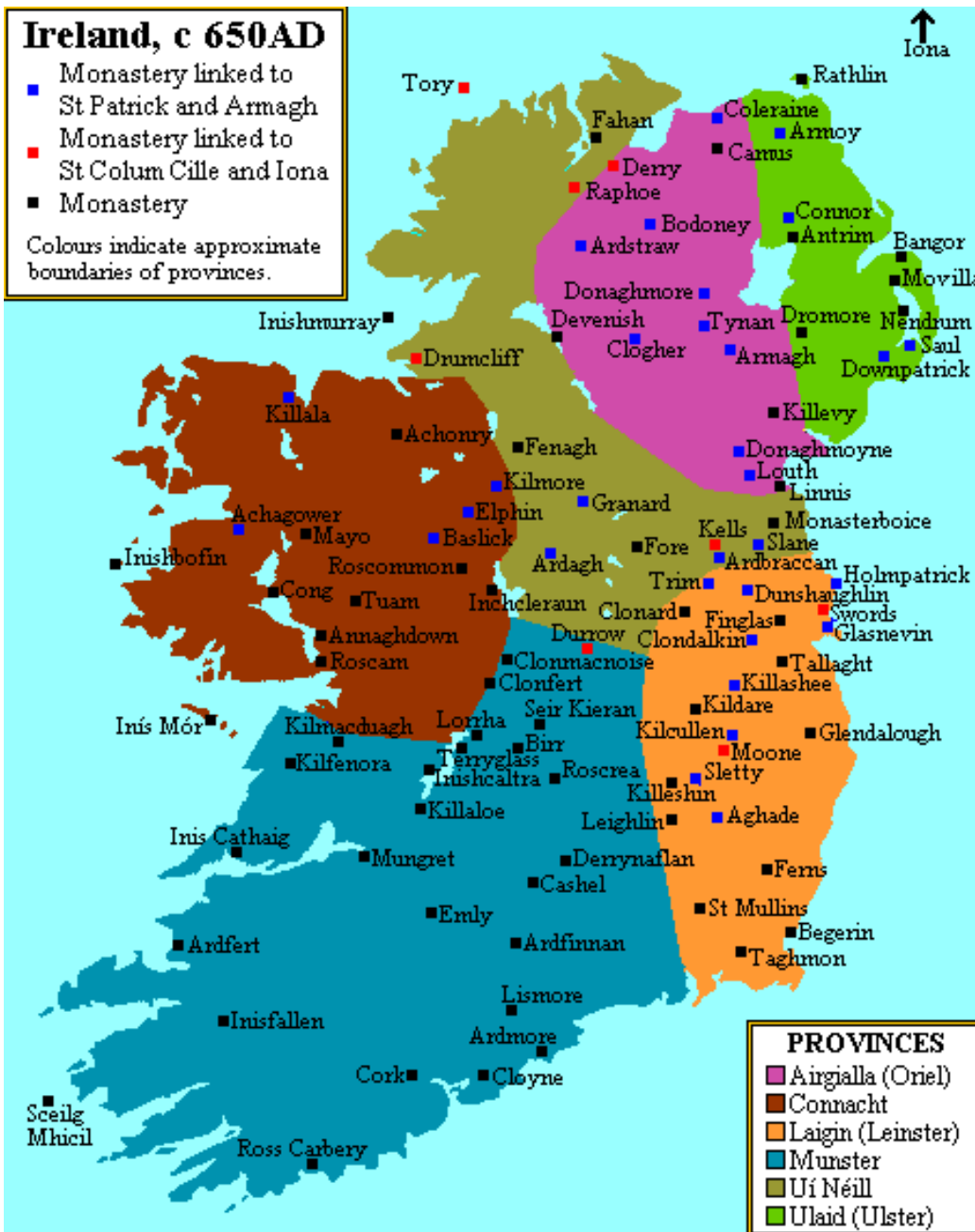
Caesarius, bishop of Arles (468/470 – 27 August 542 AD) was one of the most important Church leaders in post-Roman Gaul.

- While he **left the monastery of Lérins early in his career to become a secular cleric**, he was always a **strong supporter of asceticism** and ascetic values.
- He was also – as a bishop – someone who **sought to integrate and order ascetic life fully with in the Church and society** of the region.
- Wrote his ***Rule for Virgins*** for a female monastery he founded. **Key aims:**
 - to **encourage women** of diverse backgrounds and different ages to enter religion
 - to **ensure that they caused no social scandal**
- This latter aspect (avoiding scandal) is very marked in the Caesarius's Rule in comparison to other medieval rules for men.
 - It emphasises **virginity** as the **key goal for these unmarried women** – even in the title of the rule.
 - **Enclosure is the second most important concern.** Once they enter the monastery they can never, ever leave its boundaries.

Ireland, c 650AD

- Monastery linked to St Patrick and Armagh
- Monastery linked to St Colum Cille and Iona
- Monastery

Colours indicate approximate boundaries of provinces.



Nuns in Irish society

The Irish monastic tradition was arguably somewhat less restrictive of women.

- In the first generation of Irish monasticism, we find a **number of respected female leaders**:
 - **Saint Brigid of Kildare** (late 5th to early 6th centuries) – apparent founder of the monastery of Kildare and one of the patron saints of Ireland (see lecture 2, possibly semi-mythical)
 - **Saint Ita** ('the Brigid of Munster', d. c. 570) – founds a monastery in Munster for women; this also apparently contained a school for boys, and she is remembered as having educated Saint Brendan the Navigator (see lecture 2)
- **“Double monasteries”** – separate male and female enclosures as on the same site, a concept first established by the Egyptian abbot **Pachomius** (see lecture 1) – proved successful in Ireland
 - Irish double monasteries, however, are the **first that we know where women might be overall leaders**.
 - **Saint Brigid’s** monastery of Kildare is said, by her first biographer, **Cogitosus**, to have been for both men and women, under her leadership.

The impact of Columbanus

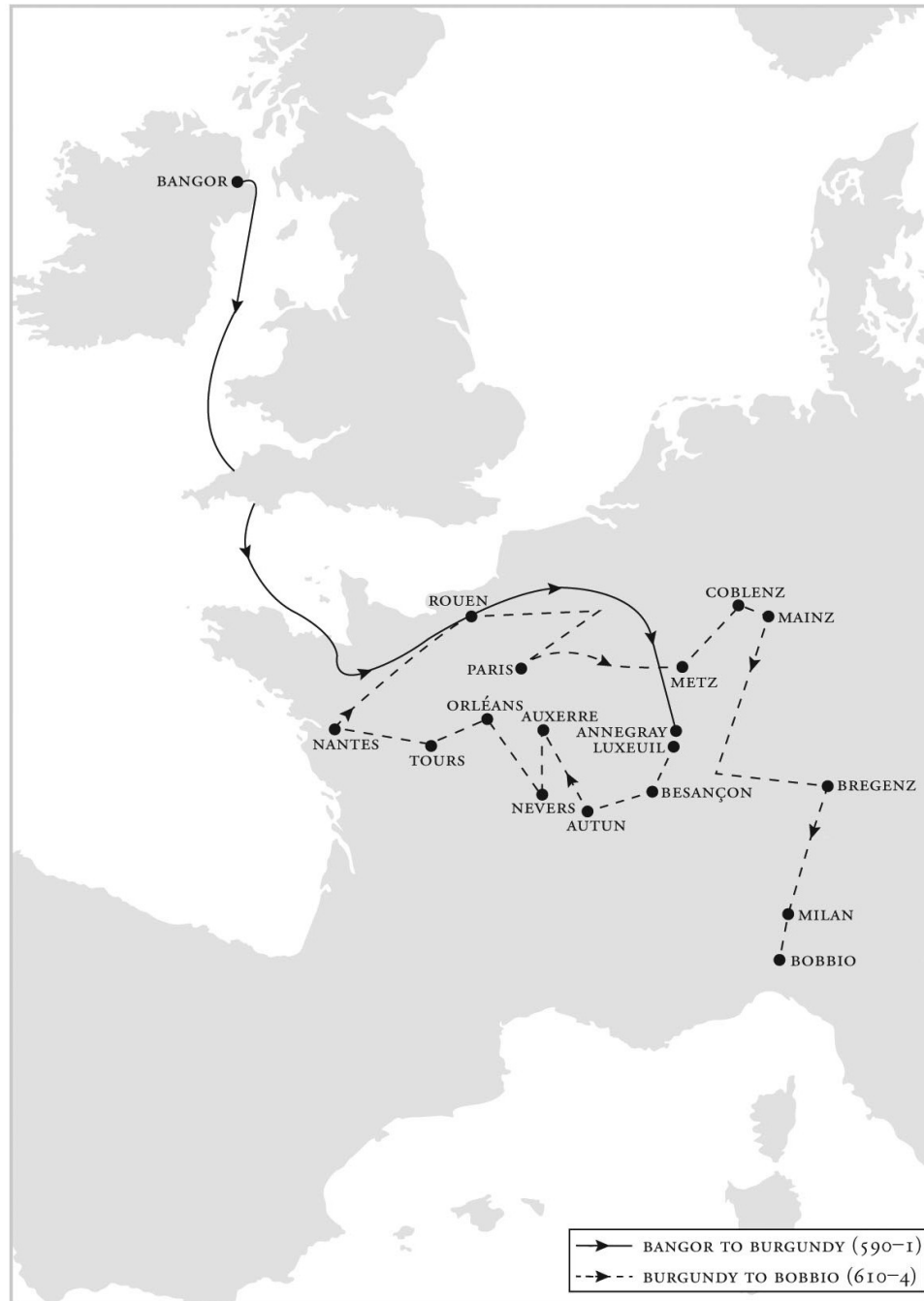
The extra latitude offered to some women in Early Irish monasticism proved exportable within Frankish Gaul. In fact it was arguably expanded there.

The Germanic ancestral culture here – while still essentially patriarchal – did allow room for powerful women, at least within the aristocracy.

- Importantly, married aristocratic women **owned their own dowry land and had greater inheritance rights** – they could thus **distribute patronage** themselves.
- Gregory of Tours' *History of the Franks* (late 6th century) provides **many examples of powerful queens** being very forthright with their husbands!

When the Irish **Columbanus** and his followers (see lecture 2) arrived in Gaul in c. 590, the **idea of double monasteries becomes particularly successful** (even if Columbanus did not himself found female or double houses).

- Important examples found at **Faremoutiers-en-Brie, Remiremont, Jouarre, Nivelles, Chelles, Poitiers, Mauberge, and Marchiennes**.
- While double monasteries were certainly not the most numerous type, they were **some of the richest**: supporting both communities of men and women required significant wealth!





The impact of Columbanus

This model of monastery helps to push aside some of the caution around female monasticism prescribed by **Caesarius of Arles**.

- **At Frankish double monasteries, the abbess was usually usually in charge:** almost always from the highest aristocratic background. Double monasteries provided the female element of the ruling class something to rule!
- Aided by the high social status of the women (especially the abbess) **at these double monasteries and Frankish female-only houses, enclosure is much less strict.** Men and women sometimes mixed in the communal parts of the monastery.
- The Rule of **Donatus of Besancon** (a mixture of the rules of Benedict and Columbanus with original material, written for nuns) states: "And though holy Caesarius dedicated his own rule to virgins of Christ, like yourselves, **their enclosure of place is not in the least suitable to your circumstances.**"

Nevertheless, there are still suspicious of female power in Columbanus's monastic circle.

- His biographer, **Jonas of Bobbio**, presents the powerful queen Brunhild, who opposed his foundation at Luxeuil, as the arch-nemesis of his life, and a prime example of a "wicked woman", whose womanly nature had been easily corrupted by greed and lust.

Anglo-Saxon England

The Irish/Frankish model of female monasticism that the followers of Columbanus popularised proved influential in Anglo-Saxon England too, despite this culture not producing as many independently powerful women.

- Double monasteries thus arguably serve **to elevate the power of certain aristocratic women in England to unprecedented levels in their culture.**

Saint Hild (614-680) is a good example of this.

- The second daughter of a nephew of King Edwin of Northumbria. Her elder sister, **Hereswith**, became a nun at the Irish-influenced double monastery of Chelles in Gaul after she was widowed.
- Hild, still unmarried, planned to join, but with the help of **Saint Aidan** (see lecture 2), returns to Northumbria in 647 to become a nun. With Aidan's support she became second abbess of the double monastery of Hartlepool, then the **first abbess of the new double monastery of Whitby** in 657.
- Hild's leadership allows Whitby to flourish: **five men from the house became bishops.**
- The monastery of Whitby is chosen by King Osiwu, the King of Northumbria, to be **the site of the Synod of Whitby, a key moment in English church history.**
- She also acted as a promoter of the important Anglo-Saxon poet **Caedmon**, originally a servant of the house, catapulting him to prominence.



Dark Age Nunneries

From c. 800-1000, it has been **common to speak of woman's monasticism entering a period of particular "decline"**, even beyond the broader "crisis of coenobitism" that has been referenced in this time (see lecture 4). Is this true?

- There are **fewer female houses founded** (see Schulenburg in the bibliography)
- There are **fewer figures like Saint Hild** – i.e. monastic women who had significant influence over powerful men
- Normalisation and standardisation creates **new barriers** for women:
 - Second Council of Nicaea in 787 technically **bans double monasteries** (although in reality they persist for far longer – see lecture 4)
 - Carolingian pressure monasteries to take up the Rule of Benedict (or become a community of simple canons or canonesses) gradually forces **many double monasteries to become single gendered**.
 - The **Carolingian reforms thus reduced the possibility of female nuns having any authority over male monks**; simultaneously, they also led to an **emphasis on tighter enclosure for women than for men** (returning, in a sense, to the recommendations of Caesarius).



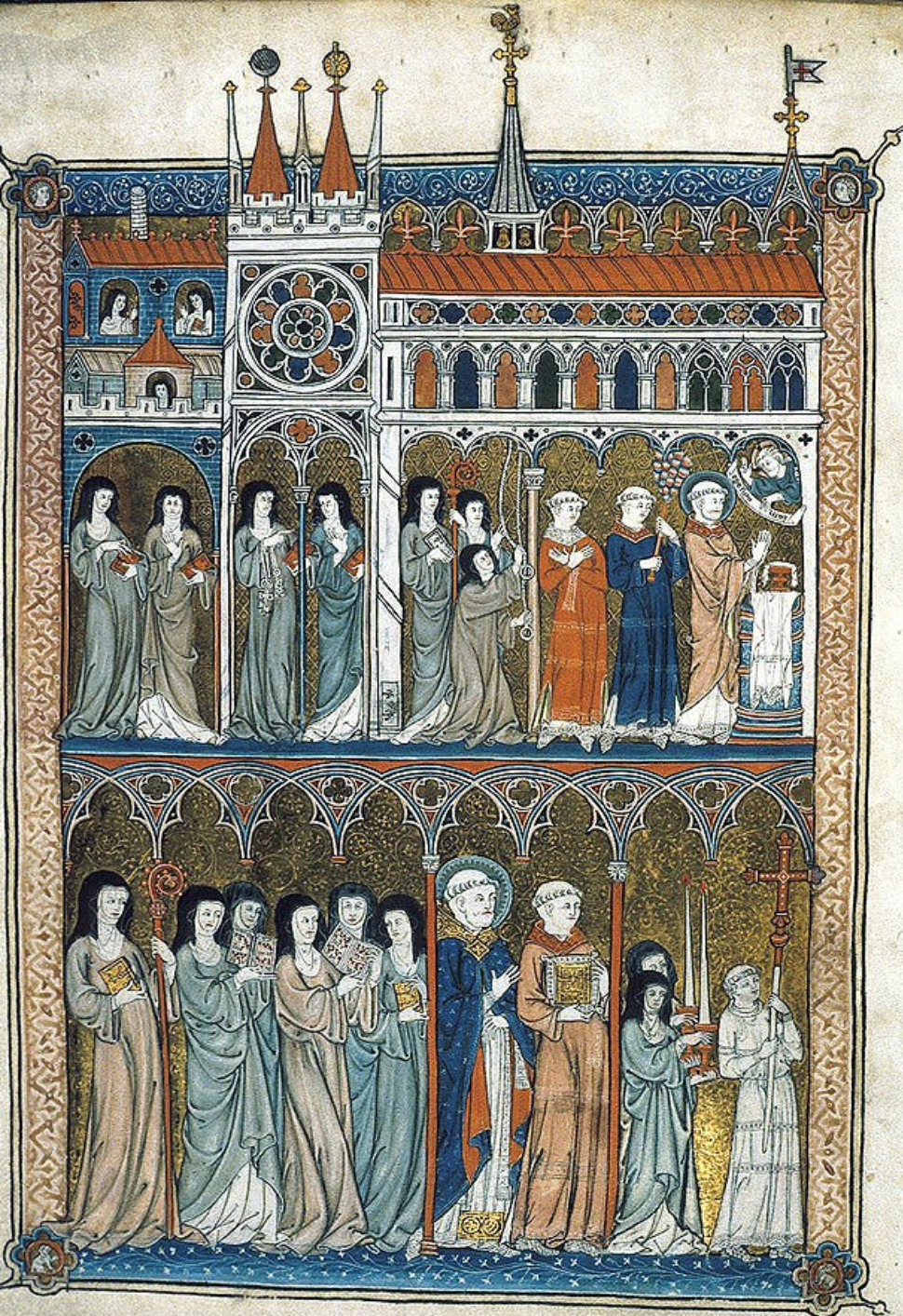
Dark Age Nunneries

From this, it might seem inevitable that female monasteries would simply become **places to house women who could not be more productively used** by their families.

Recently, however, this **impression has been challenged by Steven Vanderputten (see bibliography) and others.**

- In this view, despite the loss of double monasteries, female monasteries (like many male houses) were for some time **able to maintain some flexibility to have something unique their institutional identity.**
- The standardisation of the Carolingian era **did not eliminate variation, individual customs, and the ability to engage in society in a variety of ways:** e.g. through education, healthcare etc.
- Female houses in were also **able to promote the cults of their founding saints successfully** in the ninth and tenth centuries in order to **compete with male monasteries for benefaction.**





High Medieval Monastic Reform and Women

High medieval monastic reform (c. 900-1200): was it a male dominated affair?

- This is the way it has been traditionally been described by many historians.
- The most famous and most discussed figures – **Romuald, Peter Damian, Odo of Cluny, Robert of Molesme, Bernard of Clairvaux, etc.** – are men.
- Cannot be ignored that **Gregorian reform** also only enhances the importance of men as intercessors: emphasis on **defining the role of and promoting the importance of the priesthood.**



High Medieval Monastic Reform and Women

BUT the reality of monastic reformers breaking away from the constraints of existing communities to form new ones does create new scenarios for women.

- The Cistercian order was traditionally viewed as a male movement in its early stages, only formally accepting nunneries in the late twelfth century.
- But Constance Berman has shown this to be misleading: the early sources in fact show a number of women's communities (e.g. Tart and Jully) were associated with the instigators of Cistercian reform.
- The institution of lay brotherhood / sisterhood also opened monastic religion to people of a lower social status, including women as much as men.
- There is also the revival of the double monastery model for the congregation of Fontevraud and the Gilbertines in England (see lecture 4).
- While both models owed their origin to men (Robert of Arbrissel and Gilbert of Sempringham respectively), both felt real fellowship with their female supporters and left their foundations under the rule of abbesses.

Hildegard of Bingen

Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179): perhaps the most remarkable female monastic figure to emerge from the high medieval monastic reform culture

- From a **minor noble family in the service of the counts of Sponheim** (modern day Western Germany) within the Empire. A **younger child**.
- In her teenage years, her parents placed her under the tutelage of **Jutta, a daughter of the Count of Sponheim**, who became a hermit attached to the male Benedictine monastery of Disibodenberg.
- Jutta's semi-eremitic style was **not dissimilar to that of Peter Damian** (see lecture 4): e.g. very harsh ascetic practices, including self-flagellation.
- **Disibodenberg** itself was **influenced by the German Benedictine reformer, William of Hirsau**, himself influenced by the liturgical reform of Cluny (see lecture 4) and the monastic school of Saint Anselm of Bec (see lecture 5).



Hildegard of Bingen

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- **Jutta teaches Hildegard to read and write**, but is said not to have been able to provide her with a more advanced education.
- Other women gather around Jutta and Hildegard, forming a **small community**. When Jutta dies, these nuns **pick Hildegard as her successor as *magistra*** (“mistress” / “teacher”).
- As numbers grow larger, Hildegard gains the support of Hermann, dean of Mainz, and Count Bernhard of Hildesheim to **found a female Benedictine monastery at nearby Rupertsberg** (on a crag at the confluence of the Rhine and the Nahe).
- Following the growth of this monastery, she **established another one at nearby Eibingen**; throughout her life she acted as abbess of both, and **attracted significant aristocratic support**.
- She would also become a correspondent of other leading monastic figures, not least the Cistercian **Bernard of Clairvaux** (see **lecture 5**).





Hildegard: visionary power

Hildegard's career thus far looks like that of a **successful monastic reformer of her period**: this she undoubtedly was.

BUT it is not what she is most famous for.

- From a young age **Hildegard experienced visions**; at the age of 41, and still at Disibodenberg, she claimed to receive a vision that **instructed her to record them**.
- Her visions concerned **matters of theology** but also events, including those leading up to the **coming of the antichrist** and the **end of the world**: they were also **heavily concerned with monastic, church and lay reform**.
- She **sought papal approval to write and distribute her visions** which she gained in 1147 at the synod of Trier, with the help of **Saint Bernard**.
- This paved the way for her to break free of the male monastery of Disibodenberg to **found her own female house**.
- Approval of her visions also cemented her as spiritual authority of a different sort to male churchmen. She was **seen as being able to speak with the *vox dei*, the voice of God**.

Illustration of the cosmos as described by Hildegard in vision 3 of the *Scivias* (from the original manuscript)



Hildegard: Legacy and Limits

Hildegard became famous and influential through her visions.

- She was a **sought-after correspondent** for churchmen and women of all types as well as the highest lay authorities.
 - Not only emperors in Germany, but even Henry II, king of England, and his queen, Eleanor of Aquitaine.
- A number of religious women in the **late Middle Ages would follow in her footsteps** as visionaries expressing the *vox dei*.
 - Being seen as an authentic conduit of the *vox dei* via visions opened the possibility of women achieving unusual levels of influence.

Illustration of the cosmos as described by Hildegard in vision 3 of the *Scivias* (from the original manuscript)



Hildegard: Legacy and Limits

Nevertheless, the **visionary role did not mean independence.**

- Dependence on the approval of a male dominated society was constant. Hildegard **carefully sought approval** for her writings from Church authorities.
- Her visions were best known in **abridged compilation – the *Pentachronon* – made by a male monk.**

The **emphasis on her visionary role** arguably limited her **influence in other areas.**

- Hildegard's **departure from Disibodenberg** to found her own house after she made her visions public gave her authority in one way, but also **avoided the risk of her having too much influence over a male monastery.**
- Hildegard **composed music, and wrote treatises on medicine and natural science.** And yet even today these works – as well as her achievements as a monastic reformer – **receive far less attention.**

Illustration of the cosmos as described by Hildegard in vision 3 of the *Scivias* (from the original manuscript)

Nuns and society

A number of themes emerge across these centuries, often repeating in different contexts.

On the one hand:

- **Social pressures** serve, at various points, to **more strictly confine monastic women** and to **place limits on their agency**.
- Above all, **most medieval women do not get to choose whether they become nuns** or not. In this sense, female monasticism might be seen as restricting the overall freedom of medieval women.

On the other:

- Monastic women nevertheless find an **opportunity to carve out positions of authority and influence that they would have struggled to find outside the monastery**: whether as celebrated monastic founders, abbesses or visionaries.
- The counter-cultural, socially levelling aspects of Christianity that monasticism tradition and monastic reform emphasised made the **cloister a fitting environment to forge new paths and find new opportunities**.

Sources – *Rule for Virgins*, by Caesarius of Arles (512)

Caesarius of Arles (468/470 – 27 August 542 AD)

- From a mixed Roman and Burgundian (Germanic) background.
- Begins his career as a young man at the monastery of Lérins founded by Saint Honoratus of Arles. His commitment to asceticism was apparently so great he became ill.
- This forced him to leave the monastery to recover in Arles. He would never return, since the Christian community made him bishop by popular acclaim.
- A learned man, he was very influenced by the writing of Saint Augustine (who also founded a women's monastic community).
- Becomes one of the most influential Church leaders in post-Roman Gaul (Western Roman Empire collapses in 476 AD) and continues to promote asceticism and ascetic values and to integrate these into wider Christian society.

Rule for Virgins (512)

- Caesarius founded a monastery in Arles so that women of all social backgrounds and ages could experience religious life: Arles had no female monasteries at the time. He made his sister, Caesaria, the first abbess.
- He wrote his Rule in 512 in order to guide the life of the nuns there.

Sources – Rule for Virgins, by Caesarius of Arles

Bishop Caesarius to the holy, most venerable sisters in Christ, placed in the monastery which, with God inspiring and assisting we built:

Since the Lord has deemed fit, according to his inspiring mercy, to help us in building a monastery for you, we have composed some spiritual and holy advice for you, which with God's help you can keep, concerning how you should live in this monastery according to the statutes of the ancient Fathers. Continually residing in the cells of the monastery, call for the coming of the Son of God through continuous prayers, so that afterwards, you can say with confidence: "I found the one my heart loves" [Song of Songs, 3:4].

Therefore I ask you, holy virgins and souls consecrated to God - ready, with the lamps lit and a secure conscience, for the coming of the Lord - to ask with your holy prayers that I too can accompany you on your journey, since you know the work I did to found your monastery. Thus, when you happily enter the Kingdom alongside other holy and wise virgins, you will ensure via your intercession that I do not remain outside with the foolish.

Since we observe that in women's monasteries many norms are different from those of monks, from among the many we have chosen a few things, by which the common life of both the more senior and the more junior can be regulated, and they may try to achieve spiritually what they consider particularly suitable for their sex. These are the most important things for your holy souls.

I. If any woman, having left her relatives, wants to renounce the world and enter the holy fold – in order to be able to escape the jaws of the spiritual wolves with God's help -, she must not leave the monastery until her death, nor from the church, where one finds the door.

Sources – *Letter to Saint Boniface* (719-22), by Abbess Eangyth

Abbess Eangyth (7th to 8th centuries)

- Eangyth was the abbess of an unknown double monastery, probably in Kent.
- Her correspondence shows that she was well acquainted with the Kentish monarchy and almost certainly from a high aristocratic background. It is likely that her monastery was a royal monastery.

Letter to Saint Boniface (719-22)

- Boniface was an Irish-influenced Anglo-Saxon monk, who conducted missionary work in Frisia and Germany. His life and martyrdom was discussed in lecture 2. He enjoyed close links with both Anglo-Saxon and Frankish aristocratic circles

Sources – Letter of Abbess Eangyth to Saint Boniface (719-22)

To the venerable Winfred, called Boniface, blessed of God in faith and love, endowed with the title of priest, crowned with the blossoms of chastity just like a garland of lilies, and learned in doctrine, Eangyth, unworthy handmaid of the handmaids of God and serving without merit under the name of abbess – along with her only daughter Heaburg, called Bugga – sends her greeting in name of the Holy Trinity.

We have no words to express our thanks for the abundant affection you have shown to us in the letter brought by your messenger from across the sea. [...]

Beloved brother in spirit, not in the flesh, renowned for his abundance of spiritual gifts: to you alone, we want to describe [...] by this tear-stained letter, how we are weighed down by much misery and by a crushing burden of worldly distractions. [...]

And first of all and above all, there are those external worldly affairs, which have kept us in turmoil, as I mentioned above, and the chain of innumerable sins, and the lack of full and perfect confidence that what we do is good. We are worried, not only by the thought of our own souls, but — what is still more difficult and more important — by the thought of the souls of all who are entrusted to us, both male and female, of various ages and characters, whom we have to serve [...] Then there is added the difficulty of our internal administration, the disputes over various sources of discord which the enemy of all good [i.e. the devil] creates, infecting the hearts of all humans with bitter malice but especially monks, knowing, as he does, that "mighty men shall be mightily tormented."

We are further oppressed by poverty and lack of worldly goods, by the meagreness of the produce of our fields and the exactions of the king based upon the accusations of those who envy us; as a certain wise man says: "Witchcraft and envy darken many good things." Similarly, our obligations to the king and queen, to the bishop, the prefect, the barons and the counts. To list all these would make a long story, much easier to imagine than to put into words.

Sources – *The Life of St. Liutberga* (anonymous, late 9th century)

The Life of St. Liutberga (late 9th century)

- **Saint Liutberga** (d.c. 870) was a servant of Gisla, a daughter of a nobleman in Saxony who paid homage to Emperor Charlemagne.
- After Gisla died, Liutberga eventually became an anchoress (a type of hermit who was tied to a small cell for life – see lecture 3) attached to the women's monastery of Windeshausen
- She became respected for her training of young (often aristocratic) women at the monastery as well as her sewing and textile works.
- Her *vita* (saint's life) was written by a male monk from a nearby monastery: her model of sanctity, as he describes it, was one of tireless domestic service at the monastery.
- The section here does not concern her time at Windeshausen, however: rather it concerns her early life and the atmosphere of Carolingian female monasticism.

Sources - *The Life of St. Liutberga* (anonymous, late 9th century)

In his time, the emperor Charles the Great, first to bear the august title of Caesar in German lands, subjugated many nations to the kingdom of the Franks. One of the first and most noble [lords to submit] was named Hesse with whom he [Charlemagne] spent more than others. Charlemagne gave Hesse great honors because he remained faithful to him in everything. Hesse lacked male children, for his only son died in his youth, leaving his rich possessions to his daughters. When he grew very old he distributed the inheritance among his daughters and entered the Lord's service at Fulda and died happily in the monastic habit.

One of his daughters, Gisla, the firstborn, took a husband named Unwan by whom she had a son, Bernhart, and two daughters, one called Bilihild and the other Hruothild. Both daughters founded monastic houses after the death of their husbands and took the habit of sanctity. Each of the girls ruled their own convents [i.e. communities] of virgins respectively (Bilihild at Windenhausen and Hruothild at Karolsbach. Gisla herself in widowhood led a religious life [but not in a monastery], building many churches and giving alms and caring for pilgrims. [...]

When [Gisla] was travelling on business, because she had to care for possessions in many different places, she arrived at a certain place where the hour forced her to request hospitality. The monastery of virgins there had a guesthouse nearby and the proper buildings they had prepared seemed comfortable enough. One of the handmaidens [i.e. servants] serving her caught her eye, a young girl [Liutberga] who seemed to excel above the others of her age in form and intelligence. With a servant's diligence, she directed them all at a nod with a clever mind. [The matron] silently observed her consideration and way of acting and began to make enquiries about who she was and what family she came from, her birth and what she did. She answered all this in a prudent and orderly fashion, saying she came of decent parents from Salzburg, explaining their ancestry and condition and describing her whole way of life. And she would willingly have taken the vow [i.e. joined the monastery] if not for her young age.

Sources: *The First Life of Saint Bernard*, by William of Saint Thierry (1147)

William of Saint Thierry

- William began his career as a normal Benedictine monk, becoming abbot of the monastery of Saint Thierry. He had probably been educated prior to this at the cathedral school of Reims
- He was inspired by the Cistercians, however, and befriended Saint Bernard (see lecture 4) in 1118.
- William wanted to join the Cistercians, but Bernard reminded him of his duties as an abbot. Nevertheless, he would eventually resign his abbacy and join the Cistercian house of Signy in 1135.

The First Life of Saint Bernard

- Begun by William while Bernard was still alive. William in fact died in 1148, a few years before Bernard (d. 1153), leaving others to finish the text.
- A valuable source for understanding early Cistercian culture at a time when the congregation was perhaps still finding its institutional form.

Sources: *The First Life of Saint Bernard*, by William of Saint Thierry (1147)

In the year of the incarnation of the Lord 1113, the fifteenth year since the foundation of Citeaux, that man of God, Bernard, at about age twenty-three, entered Citeaux with more than thirty companions, submitting himself to the yoke of Christ under Abbot Stephen ... Because some of his companions were already married, those wives took vows with their husbands for this sacred transformation. Out of concern for those women, Bernard built a monastery for holy nuns in the diocese of Langres called Jully, which with the aid of the Lord increased to great proportions. Jully has become extremely famous in the opinion of the religious and is now growing in both personnel and possessions: [the community] has thus expanded to other places and has not yet ceased to produce ever greater fruit.

Sources: *Scivias* ('Know thy ways'), by Hildegard of Bingen

Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179)

- Heavily discussed in the lecture.

Scivias

- The *Scivias* was Hildegard's first visionary work, written between 1142 and 1151.
- While she could read and write, she had the help of a more formally trained scribe in writing down her visions and prophecies
- The original version is a finely decorated manuscript, full of drawings of things that Hildegard claimed to have seen
- The *Scivias* was not widely copied: rather Hildegard's visions became much more widely distributed in the *Pentechronon*, a later compilation drawn from her works compiled by the monk Gebeno of Eberbach in c. 1220.

Sources: *Scivias* ('Know thy ways'), by Hildegard of Bingen

And behold! In the forty-third year of my stay on earth, as I was gazing with fear and trembling attention at a heavenly vision, I saw a great splendour in which I heard a voice from Heaven, saying to me:

"O fragile human, the ashes of the ashes, the filth of the filth! Say and write what you see and hear. But since you are timid in speaking, and simple in expounding, and untaught in writing, speak and write these things not [...] by the understanding of human invention, and not by the requirements of human composition, but as you see and hear them on high in the heavenly places, in the wonders of God. [...] Thus, O human, speak these things that you see and hear. And write them not influenced by yourself or by any other human being, but by the will of Him Who knows, sees, and disposes all things in the secrets of His mysteries."

[...]

[The voice of God:] "So too those of female sex should not approach the office of My altar; for they are an infirm and weak kind, appointed to bear children and diligently nurture them. A woman conceives a child not by herself but through a man, just as the ground is ploughed not by itself, but by a farmer. Therefore, just as the earth cannot plough itself, a woman must not be a priest and do the work of consecrating the body and blood of My Son; though she can sing the praise of her Creator, just as the earth can receive rain to water its fruits."

Select Bibliography

Beyond the general reading, the following are very useful and easily available:

Lisa M. Bitel, “Women's monastic enclosures in early Ireland: a study of female spirituality and male monastic mentalities”, *Journal of Medieval History*, 12:1 (1986)

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J. T. Schulenburg, “Women's Monastic Communities, 500-1100: Patterns of Expansion and Decline”, *Signs* 14.2 (1989) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3174551>

Steven Vanderputten, *Dark Age Nunneries: The Ambiguous Identity of Female Monasticism, 800–1050* (Ithaca, 2018), pp.1-10 (introduction) – this part is available as a preview on Google Books: <https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=yFJUDwAAQBAJ&lpg=PP1&dq=Dark%20Age%20Nunneries%3A%20The%20Ambiguous%20Identity%20of%20Female%20Monasticism%2C%20800%E2%80%931050&pg=PP1#v=onepage&q&f=false>

Alison I. Beach, “Living and Working in a Twelfth-Century Women’s Monastic Community” in *The Cambridge Companion to Hildegard of Bingen*, ed. Jennifer Bain (Cambridge, 2021) – in IS filestore

Michael Embach, “The Life of Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179)” in *The Cambridge Companion to Hildegard of Bingen*, ed. Jennifer Bain (Cambridge, 2021) – in IS filestore