

Article

The Making of Nordic Monasticism, c. 1076–c. 1350

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Abstract: The introduction of regular religious life in the Nordic region is less well-documented than in the neighbouring kingdoms of northern Europe. In the absence of well-preserved manuscript and material remains, unfounded and sometimes distorting suppositions have been made about the timeline of monastic settlement and the character of the conventual life it brought. Recent archival and archaeological research can offer fresh insights into these questions. The arrival of authentic regular life may have been as early as the second quarter of the eleventh century in Denmark and Iceland, but there was no secure or stable community in any part of Scandinavia until the turn of the next century. A settled monastic network arose from a compact between the leadership of the secular church and the ruling elite, a partnership motivated as much by the shared pursuit of political, social and economic power as by any personal piety. Yet, the force of this patronal programme did not inhibit the development of monastic cultures reflected in books, original writings, church and conventual buildings, which bear comparison with the European mainstream.

Keywords: monasteries; medieval scandinavia; Augustinians; Benedictines; Cistercians; Premonstratensians; manuscript fragments



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1. Introduction

Monasticism was an expression of Nordic Christianity in the Middle Ages, but it was not its original fount, its foundation nor, at least in its formative centuries, its driving force. The early inspiration and evangelical energy that moved the region to embrace the faith was not clerical at all: it was the leadership of its own lay society, the ‘nail-shower nourishers’ (naddskúrar nœrir) of saga legend, and their kinship networks, that urged on their territories conversion and then the first footings of an institutional church (Finlay and Faulkes 2016, pp. 164, 188). Their Christian convictions were as much part of their spoil from the harrying of north-western Europe for three hundred years as they were the result of missionary contact from Germany and the British-Irish Isles. Monks themselves reach no further than the margins of this story. Ansgar and Witmar of Corvey failed even to make a dry landfall and although their names and reputations were garnered by later generations, their Christian customs were not (Winroth 2012, pp. 103, 106, 110–11). It may have been a monastic, named Abbot Bernard in the account attributed to Theodoricus Monachus (*fl.* 1177x1188), who baptised Óláfr Tryggvason (*d.* 1000 CE) but it was the king’s own uncompromising conversions that gave momentum to the new religion (McDougall and Foote 1998, p. 10). For the possibility of a monastic context for Óláfr’s baptism see (Ellis 2019, pp. 65–67). The nascent church which arose from his and neighbouring rulers’ new creed was configured around the *stadr* (centres of population) that were the anchorhold of their authority, and the *bóndi* (freemen), *boer* (farmstead) and *veiðr* (hunting and fishing) which fuelled their campaigns. Its leading clergy were, as with so much of their power, acquired overseas, or fashioned from their own *fólk* (people).

Yet, in the span of a century, from the deaths of the Danish rulers Sveinn Astridarson (1076) to that of Valdemar (1182) a network of monasteries grew across the four territories of Denmark, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden that was larger and more diverse in its representation of European congregations than was present at this time either in the island of Ireland or in Scotland. Its physical profile may have marked the landscape of Nordic

society almost at once according to the Romanesque design apparent in the traces of the first churches at Dalby, Naestved (Skovkloster) and, perhaps, Niðarholm. Excavations have indicated that the effects of its enterprise on life and livelihood would have been visible even to the generation that saw them arrive (Borgehammar and Wienberg 2012; Riddell et al. 2018). In fact, the true scale of the monastic presence is still coming into focus as both manuscript and material remains are subject to fresh analysis (Borgehammar and Wienberg 2012; Kristjánsdóttir 2014a, 2015a, 2015b, 2017; Riddell et al. 2018; Ommundsen 2008; Gullick 2013; Jensson 2021).

The uncertainty of the record has left historians conflicted in its interpretation. Perhaps the prevailing view is that in its early history, at least this first Nordic monasticism was essentially an extension of the ruling elites' early conversion impulse, to adopt the infrastructure of Latin Christianity to enhance their dynastic position and extend their own territorial authority. Their commitment to monasticism was much like their conversion; as the expatriate Englishman Ælnoth (*fl.* 1100–1122) assessed it in his *Vita et Passio Canuti*, they took it up just so long as it suited their plans (Gertz 1908, vol. 12, p. 83). From this perspective, their long history is best approached from their 'relationship to power groups in [Scandinavian] society' (McGuire 1982, p. 113).

When considered on its own terms this monastic culture has been represented for the most part as an echo of the traditions already dominant in northern Europe. The corporate voice of the original congregational narratives has continued to colour contemporary surveys. (McGuire 1982; France 1992). Such work has not been uncritical, of course, and has offered a close reading of some of the record books for the first time; but it has struggled to cast off the institutional blinkers of its sources leaving an impression of a monastic network which if not quite a colonial construct was at least a loyal imitation or recreation. The persuasive force of this point of view has caused foundations with few surviving records of their own to be claimed for the Cistercians without decisive proof, such as the Norwegian community of women at Nonneseter (Ommundsen 2010, 2016).

A new generation of Nordic scholars, who have counter-balanced the outlook of clerical Latinists with the surviving vernacular texts and landscapes, have challenged the notion of a monasticism whose centre of gravity remained outside the region. They question the conviction that Nordic convents, their customs and culture came from an Anglo-French, or Franco-German pattern-book as 'dubious and unnecessary' (Vésteinsson 2000, p. 140). Their research has brought into view manuscript and material evidence which has not been examined before (Gullick and Ommundsen 2012; Harðarson 2016; Kristjánsdóttir 2014a, 2015a, 2015b, 2017; Riddell et al. 2018; Jensson 2021).

This current research is uncovering a monastic environment more diverse and dynamic than can be adequately represented by either of the familiar archetypes: the manor-house *monasterium* of a chieftain *abbas* or the colonial posting of an international order. It is also revealing a monastic culture with a wider social, economic and intellectual reach within the Nordic polities, one which had lost little of its force in the late Middle Ages, when elsewhere in Europe it had already begun to recede. The purpose of this paper is to respond to these perspectives in a fresh survey of Nordic monasticism in its formative centuries.

2. The Records of Nordic Monasticism

These different readings have arisen principally because the historical record of Nordic monasteries is the poorest by far of all of those in the northern Europe, from Ireland to the Baltic. What must have been substantial archives for foundations that were four centuries old, and libraries stocked well enough to train scholars for leading universities, were laid waste at the Reformation and in subsequent generations (Karlsen 2013a; Jensson 2021, p. 3). Ninety per cent of Norway's medieval books have been 'lost without a trace' (Ommundsen 2008, p. 34). Fragments from as many as 450 manuscripts from Iceland's pre-Reformation libraries have been preserved, but what fraction of the whole they represent can only be guessed (Jensson 2021, p. 3). The monasteries' parchment manuscripts were commandeered to provide (literal) reinforcement for the paper-based administrations of

the new Protestant monarchies of Denmark, Norway and Sweden (Niblaeus 2010, pp. 54–55). Unlike other regions subject to state reformation—England, Wales and Scotland—the losses have extended to all categories of the regular written word, not only books for worship, education and study but also charters, cartularies, financial accounts and estate records. The few fragments which have been saved and studied show, above all, that the written culture of these regular communities covered the same ground as their British and European counterparts, in liturgy, learning, literature and administration (Gullick 2005; Ommundsen 2008; Gullick and Ommundsen 2012; Niblaeus 2010). As is so often the case, the significance of the loss is set in sharp relief by a handful of survivors: the so-called Naestved necrology (Copenhagen, Royal Library, E don. var. 52 2°), a book of memory for the Benedictine monastery of St Peter whose brief record of dates and names describes the historical and liturgical identity of a house; and the Øm chronicle (Copenhagen, Royal Library, E don. var. 135 4°), another statement of the identity of a house, this one told in the idiom of the Cistercians, beginning with the legend of the early pioneers, and building to a climax with a battery of privileges granted by almost a hundred years of popes (Gertz 1917–1920, ii. 158–206; McGuire 1982, pp. 16–17).

These books stand in the way of any assumption that the historical imagination of Nordic monasteries was quite unlike that of other regions of Europe. It is true that the medieval narratives that are best preserved, the annals and chronicles of a few principal churches, and the sagas of the kings, pay scarcely any attention to monastic affairs. The histories best known, to contemporaries as much as now, such as those of Adam of Bremen (*d.* 1081×1085), Saxo Grammaticus (*d. c.* 1220) and Snorri Sturluson (*d.* 1241), were self-consciously secular in outlook, reflecting a clerical education in service to lay power. Even those compiled (if not created) in monastic centres record the passage of time through *gesta regum* and from their own point-of-view give greater notice to the vocation of the monarch—the *ad succurrendum* (i.e., for redemption) profession of Erik Lam (*d.* 1146)—and the legend of their order—the election of Pope Eugenius III (1145), the death of Bernard of Clairvaux (1153)—than to that of their own house (Waitz 1892, p. 224).

In fact, annals in this form, bald, derivative, unreflective, were found in houses of the same congregations in every region of northern Europe. They were not intended to be domestic histories and in a typical conventual book collection they were distinct from them. Naturally, they attracted a non-monastic readership before and after the dissolution of monasteries and everywhere they have been better preserved. The existence of one or two historical collections from the last half-century of the monasteries' history (e.g., the Sorø donation book, now Copenhagen, Royal Library, GKS 2485, 4°. See also McGuire 1982, pp. 24–25) is itself an indication of the likelihood of earlier iterations of domestic records that have since disappeared. These were the 'schedulis et vilibus cartis sparsim conscripta' (scattered, scribbled charters and other documents) which were still to hand when the historian of Guldholt began his account of the abbey in 1289 (Waitz 1892, p. 238). Their loss to posterity may have been apparent as early as the 1550s, giving place to the myth making of Johannes Magnus (1488–1544) and others steeped in the saga tradition, that have only obscured the monastic past (Skovgaard-Petersen 2012, pp. 453, 456–57, 460).

The limitations of the written sources are compounded by the condition of many monastic sites. Some, such as Iceland's Þykkvibær have been erased entirely and can now be interpreted only as and when the support for excavation can be found; more have been profoundly changed by subsequent use and the successive phases of development of the surrounding environment. Typically, the conventual complex has been removed, restricting a reading of the monastic occupation of a site which in many cases cannot be assumed to have been coterminous with the timeline of the church itself. Those that remain as cathedral or parochial churches, such as Denmark's Roskilde St Mary, or Sweden's Dalby, retain few visible traces of their monastery past. The further footprints of monastic lordship in population centres and in the wider landscape are now as difficult to recover as in any other European region given the changing patterns of settlement and land-use over the past five centuries.

It is from these same forbidding sources, manuscripts and landscapes much changed since the medieval period, that new perspectives are now being drawn. It may be that Nordic monasticism was not made exactly in the image of other regions of the European North West, but it is argued here that this difference should not diminish its role in the development of the church in the region nor, more especially, the imprint on its society and culture of the defining features—conventual, observant, subsistent—of the monastic life.

3. Early Monastic Encounters

Recent research has in fact renewed the old conviction that at the beginning of Nordic Christianity there was contact with established monastic circles in Britain and the European mainland. It came early, and then frequently and in time was sustained. Corvey's missionaries saw a church raised at Birka (now Sweden). However, it was served, there was enough continuity for another monk of Corvey, Unni, the first bishop of Hamburg-Bremen, to be called there some four decades later (Winroth 2012, pp. 106, 110–11). Writing from Bremen in the second half of the eleventh century, the annalist Adam saw a monastic influence already established in the archdiocese. He understood it to be the legacy of Unwan, archbishop from 1013–1029, whom he believed to be the first to turn the clergy of his cathedral from their 'mixed' life, midway between monk and secular, instead to live 'regulariter' (i.e., according to a rule) under the customs of Augustine (Schmeidler 1917, p. 108). It was under the jurisdiction of Unwan or his successor (r. 1032–1035) that an itinerant Norwegian clerk, Rúðólfur, appears to have begun a monastic colony in southern Iceland at Bæjarklaustur (Kristjánsdóttir 2014a, p. 7). He may have been there for as much as twenty years, as he is next documented as abbot of the English Benedictine monastery at Abingdon (Berkshire) in 1051x1052, succeeding another Norseman, Spearhafoc (Knowles et al. 2004, p. 24). Rúðólfur himself may have been the only trace of active monasticism associated with Norway in this period as the legend that Knut the Great settled a community at Niðarholm has been challenged by the archaeological evidence of the church construction there no earlier than the end of the eleventh century (Nyberg 2000, pp. 74–75 at 74). In his own career Adam of Bremen watched the rising star of monastic status, recording that his own archbishop, Adalbert (r. 1043x1045–1072) aspired to a claustral profession at the end of his reign (*ut multotiens fieri monachus desideravit*: Schmeidler 1917, p. 218). There may have been equally early traffic to and from English cloisters. In his life of the legendary Cornish saint, Ivo of Ramsey, Goscelin of Saint-Bertin (*d.* 1099) recalled the journey of a monk from Ramsey to Norway and back at the turning-point of the tenth century (Abrams 1995, pp. 221–22). This might suggest that the memory that Matthew Paris (*d.* 1259) recovered from thirteenth-century St Albans, of a journey to Odense in the distant past, if muddled, was not wholly without foundation (Riley 1867, i. 14, 17).

These trace elements signal not the beginnings of Nordic monasticism in the first half of the eleventh century but a new frequency of encounters with churchmen familiar with it, and favouring it, even if they did not all of them practice it themselves. They did not carry with them a decided agenda for monastic colonisation. In fact, some of the most substantial manuscript survivals from this early period are redolent of alternative vision of evangelism, of a mission led by charismatic bishops (British Library, MS Add. 34386; Helsinki, University Library, Fr. Bi 2; Niblaeus 2010, p. 67).

When Sveinn Astriðarsson took power in Denmark in 1047, the secular rulers of the Nordic region, as well as the leaders of its developing institutional church, were familiar with the Latin monasticism of northwest Europe in principle and in the practice embodied by a number of itinerant devotees. Yet, there is little to suggest there was a sustained or widespread impulse to settle a monastic network of their own.

4. The Beginnings of Monastic Life in the Nordic Lands

A church served by clergy set under a rule was not seen in anywhere in the Nordic region any earlier than the last years of the eleventh century. The annalists at work a century (and more later) associated the creation of monastic churches with the celebrated,

campaigning rulers of the previous half century. The anonymous hagiographer of David, evangelist of Sweden (*d. c.* 1080) attributed to him the foundation of a monastic colony at Munkthorp as early as the reign of Anund Jacob (*d. c.* 1050) (Fant et al. 1818–1876: II.i. 4). The tradition at thirteenth-century Niðarholm, absorbed by Matthew Paris, was that their monastery owed its origin to Knut the Great (*d.* 1035) (Luard 1872–1883, iv. 42–45). At Ryd, the Cistercians believed it was Olaf Haraldsson (*d.* 1028) whom ‘*primus religiosus in Daciam induxit*’ (Lappenberg 1859, p. 399). There are no text or material remains to lend any substance to these claims made at a distance of so many years, although the possibility that some clusters of regular religious were to be found in either Denmark, Norway or Sweden before 1075 should still not be discounted. The arrival of the monk, Wythman, who was either a Norseman or a German, at the English monastery at Ramsey (Cambridgeshire) in 1016 cannot be overlooked (Abrams 1995, p. 223; Knowles et al. 2004, p. 61). His candidacy for abbacy is more suggestive of early developments in his homeland than the dedication of the church at Selja to Alban, England’s protomartyr. His cult was curated by a chain of monastery churches in the eleventh century, extending from England and the Rhineland, but its transmission did not depend on the adoption of monastic customs.

The later medieval annals and chronicles agreed that the tangible roots of their own conventual tradition could be traced to the last quarter of the century. At the climax of his career Adam of Bremen considered his province was now distinguished for its Christianity and its churches populated with those that are vested as monks (*qui etiam vestitu monachico induti sunt*: Schmeidler 1917, pp. 243–44 at 244. He remembered Eilbert, bishop of Odense (r. 1048–1072) as himself a monk (*monachus*: Schmeidler 1917, p. 231); Egino, his fellow suffragan at Lund (r. *c.* 1066–1072) Adam understood to have established clergy living under a rule (*regulariter*) at Dalby (Schmeidler 1917, p. 237); a claim which now appears reinforced by the archaeological record (Kockum 2012).

In the Danish sources, the turn from contact to the creation of communities occurred first in Zealand, during the reign of Sveinn Astriðarson (Sveinn II, *d.* 1076). Roskilde’s cathedral chapter recalled, around 1140, that Sveinn provided a new bishop, his chaplain, Svend Nordmand (*d.* 1088), to the see, who proved to be ‘the best of all his predecessors’ (Gertz 1917–1920, i. 23). Bishop Svend gave stone for the *claustrum* (cloister) of the cathedral chapter, creating a conventual context if not in itself a prompt for the adoption of a regular life. He was also remembered for the settlement of communities of monks (*monasteria*) at Ringsted and Slagelse. At a distance of almost a century, but probably drawing on a Roskildan tradition, Saxo Grammaticus recorded the same bishop as the founder of three churches (*sacraria*) dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary, in Roskilde, Ringsted and Slagelse (Friis-Jensen 2014, ii. 867–69 at 868). Saxo’s terminology, ‘*in extruendis Marie sacrariis operam gessit*’ (he carried forward the construction of chapels dedicated to Mary) might challenge the annalist’s conviction that these were *monastic* churches although his account was made when these acts of patronage were almost within living memory. At any rate, the annal later recorded that Svend’s successor, Arnold, set a new wall around Roskilde’s monastery (using the term, *monasterium*) and restored its paintings (*picturam*), a particular measure which might suggest that the original foundation had occurred early in Svenno’s prelate, which must have begun before Sveinn’s death in 1076 (Gertz 1917–1920, i. 25). The next incumbent at Roskilde, Bishop Peter, appointed by Sveinn’s son, King Niels (*d.* 1134), sought to extend the network of communities, enabling monks to be supported at the church of St Clement, to the south of the cathedral, giving them buildings (*domos*) and lands (*terras*). Niels himself also lent his patronage to the project (Gertz 1917–1920, i. 26).

There is a far fainter tradition of parallel developments in Jutland. There may have been monastic communities settled at Randers and Veng to the north and west of the see at Aarhus. The case for both of them is retrospective: the later monasteries of Essenbaeck and Øm claimed descent from them, and the prompt for the foundation of the latter (1172) was the reform of a Benedictine community at Veng which was, by that date, long established (Gertz 1917–1920, ii. 163). There is no substantive evidence to suggest that these colonies

were the result of an episcopal enterprise comparable to Roskilde. In fact, neither names nor the acts of the incumbents of Aarhus have been remembered between c. 1060 and 1102.

It was between these two Danish territories, on the island of Funen, that the arrival of a conventual, observant monastic life can be most clearly documented, almost a generation later than the initiative of King Sveinn's Bishop Svend. Perhaps at the outset of the reign of Sveinn's son, Erik I (1095), a delegation of monks from the English Benedictine abbey at Evesham (Worcestershire) was invited to form a monastic community around the church at Odense, dedicated to St Alban, which held the remains of Erik's elder sibling, Knut IV (*d.* 1086). Although a precise date is not recorded, there can be little doubt that a community was settled by the end of the century when the canonisation of Knut was carried out in situ at Odense. It was well enough established for the Canterbury monk, Ælnoth, Knut's hagiographer, to come and to stay there soon after 1100. It was recognised as a community to be a credible confraternity partner for the abbey of St Mary at York (Macray 1863, p. 325).

Dynastic prestige may have been the first aim of parallel acts of church patronage at the turn of the century in the Norwegian and Swedish territories. Eysteinn Magnússon (r. 1103–1123), second son and successor of Magnus Barefoot (Magnus Berfoettr, r. 1093–1103), was later celebrated by Theodoricus as 'fosterer of the Christian religion' and it is possible that he saw the placement of regulars at the church of St Michael, Munkeliv, near Bergen, where, according to Snorri Sturluson, he 'spent a lot of money' (Finlay and Faulkes 2015, iii. 154; McDougall and Foote 1998, p. 51). His client chieftain at Bratsberg, Dag Eilivsson and his spouse, Ragnhild Skoftesdotter, have been assumed to be founders of the community of women on the north-west coast at Gimsøy, not least because their daughter Baugeid was recorded as its first superior (Nyberg 2000, p. 151).

It may have been under Magnus Barefoot or his sons Eysteinn (r. 1103–1123) and Siugurd (r. 1103–1130) that forms of monastic life were established at Munkeliv, near Bergen, Niðarholm, near Trondheim, and Selja on the west coast. Material fragments both at the Trondheim site and at Selja do signal new—perhaps conventual—building activity not much later than 1130, the year of Sigurd's death (Abrams 1995, p. 223; Nyberg 2000, pp. 73–75).

A seventeenth-century transcript of land grants registered for the Benedictine monastery at Vreta, near Uppsala in south-east Sweden, recorded a substantial domain provided by Inge Stenkilsson, who held power in the first part of the first decade after 1100 (Nyberg 2000, pp. 81–86 at 82). There is no other substantive evidence, documentary or material, of a monastic presence before the site was occupied by a Cistercian community six decades later.

These pioneering communities arose from acts of royal and ecclesiastical patronage that carried priorities other than the promotion of the monastic ideal. The presence of monks of Evesham at Odense was to underpin the emergent cult of Knut the martyr (i.e., Knut IV of Denmark, r. 1080–1086). At Ringsted and Slagelse, and (if they were there) at Randers and Veng, the first object may have been nothing other than to strengthen the diocesan centre at Aarhus with satellite churches and clergy. Nonetheless, the evidence of the extant manuscript fragments would suggest exchanges with monasteries overseas that were more than instrumental—prompted by their patrons—and generated by the communities, collectively and individually, acting for themselves. The trace of a calendar whose content suggests an origin at the Benedictine abbey of Crowland (Lincolnshire) hints at relationships forged with a wider circle in England (NRA, lat. Fragmenter 145, 1–6; Gullick 2013, p. 105).

These were prominent churches and cult centres certainly, but they were also self-conscious representatives of the Benedictine tradition. In reaching out to churchmen of the remote Nordic region so far as to offer them their books it seems likely that they recognised in them a common commitment to a life under a rule. The possibility that manuscripts were made in English monasteries in this same period 'expressly for the purpose' of equipping Scandinavian churches is a powerful signal of a shared identity (Rankin 2013, p. 68). When the century turned these communities of clergy may have already displayed some of

the distinctive characteristics of the prevailing monastic culture, its liturgy in general, its cult focal points in particular and the look of its churches and convent buildings. Their monastic practice, such as it was, may have been only on the smallest scale. It may be telling that most of the early fragments of liturgical books are of missals. These were not yet communities of priests large enough to have any need for discrete volumes of graduals and sacramentaries (Rankin 2013, p. 68). However, their monastic identity was largely self-contained, or at least it was an expression of foundations whose direction and development was independent of one another. Here, there was monastic life but not a monastic movement.

5. The Settlement of Nordic Monasteries, c. 1134–1146

A momentum for monastic settlement is not perceptible in any part of the region for at least another generation, rising in the second quarter of the twelfth century. In Danish territory, it grew from the further development of the secular church, its leadership and its infrastructure in the decades before the Civil War that erupted in the wake of the death of Erik Lam (1146). Perhaps before 1133, the chapter of the cathedral at Viborg (Jutland) adopted the rule of St Augustine, since their brethren of this time were remembered in the Lund necrology as both ‘priests’ and ‘canons’ (Nyberg 2000, pp. 96–97). Svend II, chosen for the see at the turn of 1133/34 had served as prior of the cathedral chapter and his support as bishop for regular communities settlement elsewhere may strengthen the suggestion that from these early years it may have had a monastic character. It is possible that the church of Asmild, across the water from the cathedral, acquired a convent of canonesses at the same time although its monastic identity is documented only from the end of the century (Nyberg 2000, pp. 153–54).

The second incumbent of the new metropolitan see at Lund, Eskil (1133–1177), led the formation of regular communities reaching across his province. The rehearsal for his programme may have been at Roskilde where briefly he held the bishopric before his translation to Lund and where he may have restarted, or at least revived the turn-of-the-century monastery; here, he may also have given his patronage to a conventual church for women at Aalborg to the north east of Jutland, perhaps in collaboration with the incumbent of Børglum, Sylvester or his (unnamed) successor (Heilskov 2015, p. 143). When still at Roskilde Bishop Eskil may also have settled a regular community at Æbelholt also in North Zealand. The pre-existence of the community was acknowledged in the later account of its re-foundation under the Victorine William (Copenhagen, Royal Library, Add 51 2°, fo. 1r). Soon after he took office at Lund, William lent his support to the creation of a colony in the far west of Zealand at Naestved. It may have been under his primacy that the twin communities of Voer and Vissing were first settled in the east of Jutland within his suffragan diocese of Aarhus, although neither their institutional identity nor their fabric can be traced earlier than the century’s end (Nyberg 2000, pp. 78, 194).

If the archbishop’s patronage reflected a programme, it was to expand the human infrastructure of the church with communities made stable and sustainable not only with buildings and income but also by their vowed commitment to a recognised rule. It is surely a measure of his priorities that Eskil’s interest in the regular life was eclectic: while it had been Benedictine custom that he had propagated in Roskilde, in Lund itself it seems he encouraged the introduction of the new, reformed canonical rule of Premontré for a community established at the church of St Saviour before 1150. From there, a second Premonstratensian colony settled at Tommarp (Nyberg 2000, pp. 161–63). Eskil’s impulse also introduced Cistercians to the Nordic region for the first time, a little under fifty years after their first foundation at Citeaux. The engagement of the congregation leadership may have grown from the region’s first synod convened in 1139. The first cohort of monks arrived at Herrevad just thirty miles north of Lund in 1144; a second colony settled at Esrum in 1151 (Lappenberg 1859, p. 404; France 1992, pp. 42–44).

The civil conflict of the 1140s and 1150s may have forced a hiatus, but in the new stability under Valdemar, what had been no more than outposts of Cistercian custom were

leavened into Nordic network. Herrevad set out to establish filiate communities at Tvis, Holm and Løgum. Eskil also looked to cultivate another novel form of observant life, inviting number Carthusians to build a house at Asserbo at the north western edge of Zealand in 1162 (France 1992, p. 7).

The monastic enterprise of the archbishop and his province depended on their increasing integration—personal and institutional—within a network of churches and clergy reaching both outward to the European mainland and further inward across the Nordic region. The deliberate settlement of monks in Danish territory was replicated over the same period in Iceland, Norway and Sweden; perhaps also in Greenland, although the only authority for it is retrospective.

In the case of Iceland, it was a direct consequence of the development of metropolitan authority for the church of Lund. A suffragan diocese of Hólar was designated in 1106 with jurisdiction over the north of the island, and its first incumbent, Jon Ogmundsson (1106–1121) is credited, by his thirteenth-century hagiographer, with encouraging the settlement of monks before his death. A community at Þingeyrar, some 100 miles to the west of the episcopal church, is commonly dated to 1133 his church (Storm 1888, p. 113; Head 2001, pp. 622–23; Vésteinsson 2000, p. 133). Archaeological evidence of the clearance of site for cultivation that appears to pre-date the monastic occupation adds substance to the medieval claims about the bishop's preparations (Riddell et al. 2018).

It is conceivable that it was the creation of an episcopal see for Greenland in 1126 at Garðar on the island's southern tip that initiated the introduction of regular religion. The earliest witness to the presence of churches served by monastic communities occurred more than two centuries later, when the territory was visited by Ívar Bárðarson, appointed as *locum tenens* (temporary custodian) for Garðar diocese in 1347. He recorded a community of Augustinian canons at Ketilsfjord and a counterpart Benedictine community at Ramsnes Fjord, which may be a misidentification for Siglufjord, the contemporary name for which is Uunartoq Fjord (Grayburn 2015, pp. 12–13). The 'complete lack' of corroborating material evidence for the first of these sites, and the absence of monastic characteristics in the assemblage recovered from the second have, for some historians, badly undermined Bárðarson's testimony (Grayburn 2015, pp. 13–15).

The devolution of episcopal supervision from Lund also stimulated the formation of monastic communities within Norway. Bergen, already a suffragan see, passed from Bremen's authority to that of Lund in 1104 and within a decade its own domain had been subdivided to form a see at Stavanger. The inaugural bishop was an Englishman, Reinald, called to the region in same capacity as the English monks of Odense, as representatives of a mature monastic establishment. Reinald's religious formation was under the influence of the church at Winchester, which claimed the tradition of the observant Benedictine reform movement of the late tenth century. It was also the focus for a cult of the ninth-century Bishop Swithun which had thrived in England. Reinald's legacy at Stavanger was a regular cathedral chapter but there is no certainty that he himself was professed as a monk. What he brought to the Norwegian setting was the form and style of worship at Winchester, but not necessarily a community of priests committed to a specified rule (Lapidge 2003, pp. 56–57 & n; Jorgensen 2011, pp. 133–35). Yet, the contemporary witness of one of the stories collected in the *Libellus Cuthberti* by Reginald, monk of the Benedictine Cathedral priory is worth noting. It tells of the intercession of St Cuthbert to cure a Norwegian youth who had come there after five years' formation in the community at Stavanger (Raine 1835, pp. 248–54; Antonsson et al. 2007). A case for a defined Benedictine identity has recently been made (Haug 2014). Nonneseter, near Oslo, may have been a product of this period between 1150 and 1160. Bishop Elias of Ribe (r. 1142–1162) is said to have turned his chapter into a regular community under the rule of St Augustine (Jorgensen 2011, p. 28; Nyberg 2000, p. 151).

It is possible to see the influence of Lund, and of Eskil's primacy in particular, in the Norwegian bishops' creation of Cistercian colonies in the course of the 1140s. In the same year of the settlement at Herrevad, a delegation of monks from Fountains (North

Yorkshire) were ‘called from the distant ends of England’ (*evocatis de remotis Angliae finibus*: Langebek 1776, pp. 407–9 at 408), according to a later foundation narrative, to Lyse by Bishop Sigurd of Bergen (r. before 1155x1157). Similarly to Eskil himself (who had experienced Citeaux), the link was formed from Sigurd’s first-hand connection with the English house (Nyberg 2000, pp. 140–44). Within three years, a counterpart colony had been settled by Sigurd’s colleague, William, bishop of Oslo, on the nearby island of Hovedøya. This too was formed from an English Cistercian community from Kirkstead (Lincolnshire), itself founded little more than five years before (Nyberg 2000, pp. 144–45).

In fact, the Lund template for Cistercian colonisation was repeated beyond its immediate jurisdiction in Sweden. It has been suggested that the first episcopal church at Uppsala, of the 1130s acquired a monastic chapter (Dählback 1993). Perhaps in support is the story of a Bishop Siward who came to Rastede from Uppsala armed with liturgical and patristic books including a copy of the rule (Lovén 2001, p. 244; Waitz 1892, p. 502). A party of Clairvaux monks were persuaded into the territory in 1143 by Ulfhild, queen of Swaerkir (r. c. 1135–1156), settling at Alvastra and Nydala to the east and south of Lake Vattern (Nyberg 2000, pp. 125–26, 128–29; Line 2007, pp. 83–85). Another colony was settled further to the west at Varnhem in 1150 under the patronage of Sigrid, consort of Erik, called Jedvardsson, who succeeded Swaerkirk in the second half of the decade. Possibly this community had first gathered at Lugnas further to the north (Gertz 1917–1920, ii. 138–39 at 138; France 1992, pp. 35–38).

The diffusion of episcopal authority in the Nordic region prompted papal intervention in 1151, and the restructuring of the metropolitan and diocesan sees. Rome’s representative was the Cardinal Bishop of Albano, Nicholas Breakspear (later Pope Adrian IV, r. 1154–1159). Bishop Nicholas was also a career monastic, a regular canon who had held the abbacy of St Ruf (Avignon) and what he met in Scandinavia was a raft of religious houses hitched to the region’s ruling authorities not so dissimilar from his own network which he had left some 2600 km to the south (Egger 2003).

6. Mid-Twelfth Century Movements

The quarter-century after 1150 saw a renewed impulse for monastic settlement right across the Nordic region. The continuing struggle for power in Denmark and Norway ensured there was no obstacle to the curbing of Lund’s metropolitan authority in 1151 when the Cardinal Bishop Breakspear raised Niðarós to an archbishopric (Bergquist 2003). It opened a phase of monastic foundation much like that of Eskil at the start of his primacy. The second incumbent of the new metropolitan see, Øystein Erlendsson (r. 1161–1188), a member of the royal household of Inge Krokrygg, had encountered the reformed regular life at the abbey of St Victor in Paris, and early into his term established canon communities at Hegelseter, to serve his own cathedral church, Halsnøy and Kastle (Waßenhoven 2006, pp. 105–40; Nyberg 2000, pp. 222–25). His suffragan of Stavanger, Bishop Eirik Ivarson (r. 1170–1188), was also an alumnus of St Victor and may have regulated the chapter of St Olav at this time (Jorgensen 2011, p. 131); it may have been under his watch that a regular community was first settled at Utstein on Mosterøy, the largest of the islands due north of the cathedral city (Haug and Ekroll 2007).

From the return of settled Danish rule under Valdemar, Eskil and his suffragans resumed their programme of regular foundations. The reinvigoration of their Cistercian colony was a direct consequence of Valdemar I’s capture of the crown. He granted the territory of Vitskøl in the north of Jutland for the creation of a community ‘according to order of Cistercians’ (*secundum Cisterciensem ordinem*) in October 1157 (Nyberg 2000, pp. 176–81 at 177). Under the influence of Vitskøl a further nine communities were formed over the following forty years, at Tvis (1163); Dargun (1171); Øm (1172), a colony which over seven years from 1165 passed through four provisional sites, Sabrø, Silkeborg, Veng and Kalvø; Holme (1172x1174); Kolbacz (1174); Løgum (1175); Oliva (1176); Guldholm (1192); As (1194) (Gertz 1917–1920, ii. 141, 144–46; Nyberg 2000, p. 248). See also (McGuire 1982, pp. 104–7).

The wide extension of the network owed much to the enterprise of Absalon, bishop at Roskilde from 1158, but also Eskil's successor at Lund. As with Eskil, Absalon had first-hand knowledge of the Cistercian model of community from Clairvaux. He had also passed through the reformed canon house of Paris and promoted Victorine observance in his own see. In 1165, he persuaded the Parisian canon William of Sainte-Geneviève to come to reform the community at Eskilso, who had 'taken on the habit of the religious but were no lovers of religious virtue' (*quidam habitum religionis assumentes sed virtutem religionis non amantes*: Copenhagen, Royal Library, Add 51 2°, fo. 1r). These uncanonical canons resisted William's strictures but he succeeded in raising a new regular community at Æbelholt. Building a wide network of correspondence, the influence of William's brand of canonical reform washed over a wide region (Hermanson 2016, pp. 65–68, 71–75, 82–83). It may be that the chapter at Børglum now committed to an Augustinian following his example, although it is possible it had accepted reform even before the period of civil wars at the hands of a delegation from the reformist community of canons at Steinfeld in the Rhineland.

Steinfeld itself had adopted the Premonstratensian reform in the middle years of the century and at whatever date this influence was passed to Børglum, and from there to an affiliate female community at Vrejlev. These joined an axis of the reformed customs which again Eskil had created at Øved, Tommarp and Va in the years after Valdemar's victory (Nyberg 2000, pp. 214–15).

In the neighbouring see of Viborg, Bishop Niels (1153–1191) propagated a canonical rule at Asmild (1165) and Grinderslev (1176). At the same time, in the suffragancies of northern and southern Iceland there was a further expansion of the monastic presence: Bjorn Gilsson of Hólar (1147–1162) that a further monastic community was settled in Iceland at Munkaþverá, not far from the see itself (dated by the earliest annals to 1154: Storm 1888, p. 115; Vésteinsson 2000, p. 135). It may be assumed that it was with the cooperation of the bishop of the southern diocese of Skaholt, Klængur Þorsteinsson, that the Victorine canon, Þorkel, formed a community of regular canons at Þykkvibær in 1168 (Vésteinsson 2000, p. 136). Episcopal patronage was replicated by territorial chieftains. Probably it was the local chief Ogmundur who provided for a canon house at Flatey, later moved to Helgafell, where he took the position of abbot for himself (Storm 1888, p. 117; Vésteinsson 2000, pp. 136–37). Other chieftains now sponsored monastic settlements: at Saurbær, Olafr placed regular canons and at Keldur the Oddaverjar chieftain Jón Loftsson (a grandson of Magnus Barefoot), initiated a colony that later dispersed (Vésteinsson 2000, pp. 138–39).

In the four decades that Eskil served Lund, the colonies of monks and regular canons under the see's metropolitan jurisdiction more than doubled. The pace of this expansion matched that of the region's nearest neighbours in Britain, Ireland and Germany. The number, scale and scope of the communities may have been different—the populations of the Nordic monasteries were undoubtedly far lower at this time—but the motive power, a combination of secular and ecclesiastical lordship, was much the same.

7. The Dynamics of Nordic Monasticism

In outline, these phases of monastic settlement, apparently showing most momentum in the first and third quarters of the twelfth century, seem to align the Nordic region with the experience of the neighbouring nations of the northwest, from where its Christian faith had come. The chronology is closely matched: for England and Wales at least, for each step in the adoption of regular religious life: the introduction of Benedictine customs in cathedral chapters at the turn of the twelfth century; the arrival and internal spread of Cistercian settlements in successive waves rolling from the end of the 1130s as far as the 1170s, and the mid-century movement of canonical reform under the influence of St Victor and Premontre. In fact, for a time between 1135 and 1154, there appears a mirror between the monastic settlements of Anglo-Norman England and the territories of Denmark and Norway given the common challenge of contested crowns and consequent seigniorial disorder. The

growth of the Cistercian network in England and Wales outstripped the Nordic presence, in spite of these obstacles. Their progress in Ireland, by contrast, was a close match for the Scandinavian experience, and the first settlement at Mellifont (Drogheda) was also the project of the presiding metropolitan (1132x1134–1136–1137), Malachy of Armagh (Flanagan 2010, p. 120; Flanagan 2015, p. 297).

The mutability of monastic communities had also been shared by their European neighbours. The Cistercian colonies in the north (e.g., Byland) and the southwest (e.g., Forde) of England, and in Ireland (e.g., Boyle) passed through more than one location before they succeeded in a settled site (Burton 2006; Kalkreuter 2001). Changes of custom were commonplace, from Augustinian to Benedictine in England, Wales, Ireland and France. The women of Kilcreevanty (Co. Galway, Ireland) moved across the spectrum of monastic discipline, from Benedictine to Cistercian, and finally settled on a canonical rule under the Arrouaisian affiliation (Ó'Clabaigh 2005, p. 117). The male community of Eberbach (Baden-Württemberg) passed rapidly down the same route of reform but in the opposite direction, turning from a canon house to an abbey of Cistercians in the space of just twenty years (1116–1131x1135) (Savage 2012, p. 26).

In some respects, the press of church and crown politics on the Nordic settlements were also recognisable from the perspective of the European mainland. Notwithstanding the legacy of a network of ancient monastic churches, the advance of observant monastic and canon communities in England and Wales was driven by the fortunes of the new Norman monarchy, peaking when royal authority was assured (1070–1087; 1100–1135; 1154–1180) and there was a compact between the prince and his prelacy (Cownie 1998, pp. 47–48, 142–44; Vincent 2007, p. 332).

It is also possible to see cultural dynamics in the making of monasticism that were shared by the churchmen in each of these regions. Circles of friendship, created through cross-border education, conventual visits as well as letter exchanges were important not only in establishing corporate ties but also a source of monastic education and formation. Citeaux, Clairvaux, St Victor and their leadership trained Nordic regulars, in person and remotely, just as they did those from all regions of the British-Irish Isles and Germany (McGuire 1982, pp. 39–40, 44; France 1992, pp. 118–29 at 122; Nyberg 2000, pp. 174–75, 221–25). There was also a shared investment in values of the Gregorian papacy and its expanding range of legislative instruments. The legatine mission of 1152 lent support to the leadership of the Nordic church and they, and their new foundations were underpinned by the battery of privileges very readily given by a succession of pontiff who were either monastic themselves, or conspicuous supporters of the congregations, Eugenius III, Adrian IV, Alexander III and Lucius III.

Yet, these common features frame a picture of early monasticism in Scandinavia which in important points of detail was quite distinct from its neighbours to the south. Regular communities were not only convened by the secular church but were also configured on its very foundations. As the historian of Gudholm described it, 'the bishop built a monastery in his own domain and provided it with many riches from his own patrimony' (episcopus autem edificari fecerat monasterium in suo fundo proprio . . . contulit . . . de suo patrimonium predia multa et plurimum promisit: Waitz 1892, p. 239). From the cathedrals to the provincial churches, the first and persistent instinct of episcopal patrons was for vowed religion to be planted in churches that were already standing. In this they surely acknowledged the realities of their own ecclesiastical environment: there were fewer churches standing among the scattered settlements of territories whose Christian conversion was little more than a century old.

Yet, it does seem these prelates weighed the value of a monastic constitution differently from their counterparts in the kingdoms to the south. The rules of canons or monks following either Benedict or the constitutions of Citeaux promised them a pattern of worship in churches whose presence and profile was not yet well established: not all of them were of recent construction, tracing their origins perhaps as far back as the beginning of the eleventh century, but few, if any could claim an unbroken history. The commitment

to a rule also held out the prospect of an assured supply of clerical personnel; if not all them were ordained to the priesthood, at least there were the foundations for a form of pastoral care.

These considerations might have resonated with Archbishop Malachy of Armagh but in the neighbouring kingdoms of England and Scotland, in France and in Imperial Germany already the leadership of the secular church was less inclined to look on their regular communities as their natural partners in power. Here, the spiritual benefit of a monastic foundation came to be considered as its very separation from the Church militant. It was an exemplum of the life with Christ, valuable and viable in the overall structure of the institutional church only because it was not part-and-parcel of the social community. In the same period that Bishops Eskil and Absalon invited regulars to take possession of churches and parishes, one of the most powerful diocesans in England, Bishop Robert de Chesney of Lincoln (r. 1148–1166), battled over the spiritual jurisdiction of a Benedictine monastery (St Albans) all the way to the Roman Curia (Riley 1867, i. 128–32, 135–36).

In the Nordic regions, the monastic estate was also shaped by the secular ruling elite—monarchy, magnate lordship and its connecting networks of kinship—in patterns for which in the same period there was no match in the most developed kingdoms of England and France and which in Germany had receded from as early as the mid-tenth century. There monasteries had been ‘nodal points in the social structure’ but for the most part ‘before the emergence of familial castles’. Thereafter, the ruling elite had ‘begun to rely on other strategies’ (Nightingale 2001, pp. 6, 262). It is true, of course, that Scandinavian secular founders employed some of the same tools as their counterparts to build regular churches. Valdemar I’s Vitskøl began with charter that followed a European blueprint that was already more than two hundred years also, describing a domain and prescribing a pattern of (in this instance, Cistercian) observance, an echo of the earliest charters of Cluny itself (Nyberg 2000, p. 177). The first charter of Esum, that opens the cartulary in the Exordium book, affirmed tenure under the terms of free alms that were the main currency of the monastic patronage in the same period in the kingdoms further south (Copenhagen, Royal Library, E don. var. 140 4^o, fo. 3r-v).

Beyond these charters, however, Nordic patrons formed a different relationship with the communities they brought into being. Frequently, the domain of the new monastery was itself the source of their own seigniorial position. Iceland’s Þykkvibær was settled on the estate of founder, Þorkell Geirason; although the creation of the diocesan, the community of Munkaþverá was likewise conjured from the Gilsson family property (Vésteinsson 2000, pp. 138–39). Valdemar himself was explicit in his Vitskøl charter that was drawn from his own *patrimonium* (patrimony) the place known as ‘Vita scola’, on the western coast of the Limfjord in north Jutland (Nyberg 2000, p. 177). In this form of endowment there were parallels with some early monastic settlements at the outer edge of the developed kingdoms further south: Gille Críst (*d. c.* 1206), head of one of two kinship groups that claimed the Mormaer of Mar in north east Scotland, provided for a community of regulars, called Culdees (from the Irish *Céili Dé*, meaning those vowed to God) on his family estate at Monymusk in the second half of the twelfth century (Simpson 1925, pp. 40–42). Such *burgh* or *baile* (settlement or township) foundations were not typical of either Scotland or Ireland, however, nor did they retain their tie to the hereditary domain for as long as their Scandinavian counterparts (Oram 2012, pp. 334–38).

Congregational affiliations did not undo these secular ties. The Cistercian settlement at Cistercian Sorø rested squarely on the estate (and continuing investment from) the Skane clan of Hvide (Hybel 1995, p. 261; Esmark 2006, p. 96). There was a continuity in the circumstances of landlordship, and in the conception of a monastic foundation, for this approach to persist in later phases of settlement. Rein, a convent of women under a canonical rule was created in 1226 on the principal Fosen peninsula estate of Duke Skule Bardsson (Bagge 2010, p. 117).

Scandinavian monasteries were coterminous with royal and clan lordship, not only because they were built on the *stadr*, but also because they took a share in the particular

fiscal rights on which that lordship was sustained, both those that were a feature of any settlement (tithes) and those that by which the clan itself exerted its influence over the outlying region, levies on fishing, on market trade, on the exploitation of woodland and, where applicable, the mining of minerals. The fiscal framework surrounding these foundations set them on a different course to many of those in the regions further south. The Cistercians of Esrum were supported early in their history by the singular privilege of the monopoly on money-lending (Hybel 1995, p. 262). Where settlement and economic activity did not develop, they were vulnerable and some did not survive, but where there was expansion and growth they were sustained, and the extension of their own territorial domain may have been a secondary consideration. Eldena, Cistercian daughter house of Esrum, after a difficult beginning which saw the community driven from Dargun, was revived with the benefit of the levy on the neighbouring salt pans (North 2015, p. 28). The community's prosperity was expressed in its fine brick-built church in the Gothic style, begun within half a century of their arrival. Later, from the fourteenth to the sixteenth centuries, some foundations, from Denmark to Iceland, did extend their own domain, standing as a proprietor on their own local horizon with a profile that might have been recognisable to the tenants of a Benedictine monastery in England or northern France. However, the monastic estate in these kingdoms could not claim the fiscal influence and income of their Nordic counterparts.

As a development of the infrastructure of their own lordship, such foundations were approached as a locus for their own social community. Kinfolk joined the life of the regulars. Some of these were retirements, and sometimes perhaps sincere penitential acts, conversion to a monastic life at the point of death *ad succurrendum* (for redemption). Famously, Magnus IV Sigurdsson of Norway (r. 1130–1135; 1137–1139) was compelled to enter Niðarholm, worn out, according to Saxo Grammaticus, from his wielding of the monarch's sceptre (Friis-Jensen 2014, ii. 978–79), where, according to Snorri Sturluson, the community claimed him as one of their own believing him to have 'take[n] his vows as a monk' (Finlay and Faulkes 2015, iii. 181, 186). King Erik Lam ended his life in claustrum at Odense in 1146 (Gertz 1917–1920, i. 32; King 1966, p. 197). The presiding chieftains in the territories of Iceland's monasteries joined the communities at the end of their active career: Jón Loftsson at Keldur, Þorkell Geirason at Þykkvibær, Ólafr Þorsteinsson at Saurbær and Þorvaldur Gizurarson in Viðey (Vésteinsson 2000, p. 140). Such acts were not unknown in other regions of Europe. Roger Mowbray, earl of Northumbria (*d. c.* 1125), patron of the Benedictine priory at Tynemouth (Northumberland) was remembered as making a monastic profession at St Albans Abbey, to which he presented his priory, after two decades of martial lordship on the English-Scottish borderland and as many years imprisonment for rebellion against the Norman monarchy (BL, MS Cotton Nero D VII, fo. 91v). Yet, in these neighbouring territories, it never became the natural last move that it seemed to be for some Nordic lords.

Yet, in Scandinavia, there were as many instances where the monastic community appears to have absorbed the kinship network of its founder; or rather, was itself absorbed into it. The original codes of the Benedictines and the Cistercians represented the monastery as a family, the superior represented as the parent of one community, and the governing abbey standing in that capacity for a chain of sibling foundations. Scandinavia's monastic families were more than a figure of speech. They were familiar and close-knit. The Nævested calendar made the obits of the founder Peter Botildis and his mother the largest and more colourful entries of all; as it happened, falling in the month of April, dependent on the date of the Easter festival, they would have marked both the beginning and the end of the monastery's year of worship (Copenhagen, Royal Library, E don. var. 52 2°, 21v, 23v). Generation after generation of the founding *Hivdefolk* (Hivd family) were buried at Sorøkloster; their donations accounted for as much as half the land of the monastery documented in the *gavebogen* (gift book) (Esmark 2019, p. 109). Munkaþverá began as a family enterprise under the abbacy of a brother of Bishop Gilsson. Both Þingeyrar and Saurbær early in their history were led in their abbacy by kinsmen of the chieftain clan

within whose estates they had been established. Rein was first put under the governance of the founder's daughter, Sigurd Bardsdóttir (Bagge 2010, p. 117).

The raising of regular communities from clansmen and women marked their culture. It is possible that the tight bonds of the folk restricted recruitment to these new settlements. If the numbers that formally professed monastic vows were low, then it may have limited the degree to which they could replicate conventional observances in their church. The expatriate Cistercian communities in Denmark and Norway may have held the minimum complement of priests for the customary patterns of worship but elsewhere it may be that these human resources were accrued only over time. The evidence of manuscript fragments confirms that by the end of the twelfth century knowledge of monastic rules in the region was based on more than general renown, or the word of individual evangelists (Gullick and Ommundsen 2012). Yet, since insular values still influenced the conduct of the secular clergy, it cannot be assumed that the standards of these early generations of regulars were themselves strictly canonical. The hereditary principle was applied to the office of superior, and under the gravitational pull of *folk*, *kind* and *heim*, it is unlikely that all of those that made a monastic profession were detached from wider social relations or remained celibate.

The social catchment of these communities gave vernacular language and literature a central place. It can now be brought into a clear focus by the identification of a native Nordic scribe as the copyist of translation of the *Regula Benedicti* and the eleventh-century *Decreta Lanfranci* in the years around 1200 (Gullick and Ommundsen 2012). Vernacular literature may have been latinised in the same context, such as the legend of Saint Hallvard which is found in fragments from c. 1300 (Ommundsen 2008, p. 43). There were parallels in Ireland's monastic network but at this very moment in Anglo-Norman England Latin had all but eclipsed what had once been a lively multilingualism. Within two generations of the Norman Conquest writing in the Old English language had disappeared from the monasteries together with many of the books they must have once held.

The connection to the clan and its patrimony also made these settlements volatile and vulnerable. Looking back more than a century later the Cistercians of Varnham still recalled how the place and permanence of their original settlement for several years depended on the whim of their magnate patron, Sigrid (Gertz 1917–1920, ii. 138). The Icelandic colonies established at Hítardalsklaustur, Keldnaklaustur, and Saurbæjarklaustur could not endure the clan conflict surrounding them and were abandoned (Kristjánsdóttir 2021, p. 5. See also Kristjánsdóttir 2017). Nor was this a weakness only of their early years: a hundred years after their arrival in the region the Guldholt chronicler lamented the wasting of his convent at the hands of its own patrons (Waitz 1892, pp. 239–40).

Nordic monasteries did not grow apart from secular lordship as did the larger and more diverse networks of religious houses in England and Wales and in some regions of the European mainland. The continuing imprint of regional power on their institutional and even their observant life is comparable rather to the communities in Scotland, Ireland and Wales, in and outside the four counties under English rule (See, for example, Ó'Clabaigh 2005; Browne and Ó'Clabaigh 2020; Stephenson 2013; Oram 2007; 2011, pp. 358–60). Similarly to them, their function as instruments of Nordic lordship did not necessarily efface the monastic features of their life.

8. Social and Religious Culture

The social context has caused Nordic monasteries to be caricatured as 'retirement homes for aristocrats' (Vésteinsson 2000, p. 133). This misrepresents both the causes and the consequences of the relationship. These foundations were conceived as collateral for the territorial presence, seigniorial, social, economic and fiscal influence of a regional dynasty. As such they are analogous to the *eigenkloster* or *hauskloster* (i.e., proprietary or house church) foundations which were widespread in Germany and for which analogues can also be identified in northern Scotland and in Ireland beyond the jurisdiction of the English colonists. At the same time, the Nordic monasteries formed part of their founders' settlement network: here the monastic ideal, and the church and convent in which it was

played out, were garnered at the centre-point of a mixed social community, an environment that in its character anticipated certain features of the ‘modern devotion’ (*devotio moderna*) communities of the fifteenth century.

To label such communities as un-monastic by comparison with other regions of Europe is also to misinterpret the values and practice of the mainstream of congregations, even of the reform movements of the mid-twelfth century. The monasticism of Cluny, Cîteaux, St Victor and Premontr  was propagated by and for an aristocratic and educated elite with ready access to social, seignorial and political capital. Even at the cutting-edge of regular reform, such as at Gorze (Lorraine) in the tenth century, to separate ‘the material and religious or spiritual spheres of a monastery’s existence [is] artificial’ (Nightingale 2001, p. 263). The success of the Cistercian and Victorine settlement in Denmark may be due in part to a mutual recognition in the context of their foundations. William of  belholt (d. 1203) may have been celebrated as a saint of Scandinavian monasticism (canonised 1224) but clearly, he accepted the essential dynamics of his adopted society, commending new recruits to his monastery not only for the devotion to religion but also for the advantage of their birth (McGuire 2015, pp. 176–77). Despite criticism of Benedictine communities as ‘unreformed’, the discourse of the Cistercians celebrated the patronage of the social elite and cultivated the same outlook of separation from the peasantry. The biographer of the Cistercian Bishop Gunner of Ribe (r. 1230–1246) recalled his sharp words when confronted by ‘rustics and farmers’; with a Latin tag from Ovid’s *Remedia amoris*, he was said to have muttered, ‘wars are in store for me’ (Gertz 1917–1920, ii. 275).

Perhaps above all, if too much emphasis is placed on the elite aspect of early Nordic monasticism it obscures the wider dynamics which drove the onward development of the monastic estate in the region. The handful of surviving calendars and necrologies provide a valuable reminder that the early communities attracted a wider social involvement. Lund recalled the life history of one Tovi who came to the community as a *conversus* but ultimately made his profession as a monk. He was no aristocrat but a man of property bequeathing the foundation his mansion in the town of Oshogu (Lund, University Library, Medeltidshandskrift 6, fo. 124v). Naetsved remembered a cohort of *conversi* (lay brethren)—for example, Herby, Johann, Rothbert, Sven—and *familiares* (members of a household) among which were unvowed secular *clerici*—for example, Georg the priest—and artisans—for example, Ascer the carpenter (Copenhagen, Royal Library, E don. Var. 52 2^o, fo. 44r). The representation of the colony at  m to be a ‘tiny team’ (*pusillum gregem*) of *devoti* was an expression of its spiritual ambition to be separated from the sin of the world (Waitz 1892, p. 161). The Cistercian network recruited laybrothers and sisters and the early annals recorded their advance alongside that of the professed population (Waitz 1892, p. 232).

By the early thirteenth century, local Scandinavian society had established a presence also among the professed. Saxo Grammaticus represented the first monastic settlements as the preserve of ‘outsiders’ (*exteros*: Friis-Jensen 2014, ii. 1386–87) but towards the end of his life these same communities held recruits that were home grown. Niels, the ninth abbot of  m, had been a child oblate (in *monastici ordinis disciplina a puero enutritus*: Gertz 1917–1920, ii. 192–93). It may be a measure of increasing insular recruitment that when Gunner welcomed Cardinal Gregory to his monastery, he was obliged to act as translator ‘for he had no knowledge of Danish’ (*quia ipse cardinalis noticiam lingue Danice non haberet*), and when he preached to them in the chapter house, he did so in the same vernacular (Gertz 1917–1920, ii. 266).

In fact, this was not an unpopular monasticism. Early on, episcopal patrons reached for a community and its regular customs to secure churches which were, or had the potential to be, popular cult centres. The religious routine, and underpinning discipline, of the vowed religious were adopted to curate cathedral shrines. Even beyond these centres of population there are signs that monastic settlements emerged as a focal point for social religion. Indeed, it may have been only the first regular foundations in the episcopal towns that saw their role in lay religion recede over time, as some chapters again turned away from the regular life, and new mendicant convents were established from

as early as the 1230s. Among the more dispersed populations of the remoter provinces, there is no doubt that monastic centres made space for parish worship. The Cistercians of Hovedøya were inclined to serve as the Norwegian King Sverrir's personal chaplains, receiving a reprimand from their General Chapter in 1200 for overlooking the monarch's own sentence of excommunication (Bandlien 2016, p. 167n). In the context of sparse and dispersed settlements of Greenland the intersection between monastic and parish church may account for the few material traces of a distinct conventual complex (Vésteinsson 2010, pp. 140–41).

This is not to say that the Nordic monastic plan was predisposed to the provision of parochial space. The footprint of Munkaþvera has suggested quite the opposite, the conscious creation of an environment for exclusive conventual religious practice. However, in a broader sense, monastic sites did draw the devotion attention of the laity. The conventual church at Æbelholt became the beacon for the cult of its first abbot, William, which reached as wide across the region as those of monastic pioneers in other parts of Europe. Bishop Gunner invited the local elite and their families (*nobiliores milites et eorum vxores*) to celebrate the feast of the assumption at Asmild (Gertz 1917–1920, ii. 270). The texts of the surviving homily books suggest some pastoral outreach, at least in the form of public preaching. In 1200, the Cistercian General Chapter condemned monks for holding masses for the excommunicated King Sterrir (Harðarson 2016, pp. 116–17). The Norwegian homily collection contains a sermon that was surely the work of a canon of St Olav, Stavanger (Harðarson 2016, p. 52). There are also hints of the monasteries' service to satellite parishes. It was claimed in 1517 that secular priests had become accustomed to celebrating mass using books borrowed from the religious orders. Given the volume of liturgical books known to have been owned, and made by Nordic monasteries before 1250, there is no reason to think this was already happening before 1400 (Ommundsen 2008, p. 41).

Excavations have revealed patterns of non-clerical burial comparable to those of monastic and mendicant sites elsewhere in Europe. At Sorø, it was done apparently in defiance of the Cistercian General Chapter (Esmark 2019, p. 109). The evidence from the later medieval foundation at Skriðuklaustur may well be an indication that it was now common practice at Iceland's monasteries. (Kristjánsdóttir 2015b, pp. 155, 166). The impression that only the defined social network of the founder and their folk surrounded these communities is countered by references to customs of hospitality. It was as a result of their support for passersby that the monks of Løgum secured the grant of the income arising from a parish church in 1327 (France 1992, p. 225). Iceland's monasteries offered lodging to longer-term boarders (*próventufólk*) whose benefits were presented to benefactors in a similar way to corrodies and pensions (Vésteinsson 2000, p. 140). Environmental analysis has also pointed to provision of general medical and perhaps palliative care (Gilchrist 2020, p. 94). See also (Larsson and Lundquist 2010, p. 3; Kristjánsdóttir 2008; Kristjánsdóttir et al. 2014b). According to Saxo Grammaticus (*Gesta Danorum* XV, 6.9) it was a Swedish abbot (perhaps from Oved) who was summoned to treat Valdemar 'although as a practitioner of medicine he was more brash and sckilful' (Friis-Jensen 2014, ii. 1491). Even in the—apparently vestigial—monastic environment of Greenland at Siglufjord, the fourteenth-century visitor Bárðarson observed that the neighbourhood came to bathe in the fjord waters under the jurisdiction of the church 'and . . . are cured of their illnesses' (Grayburn 2015, pp. 11–12).

Even recent surveys of Nordic monasticism have been reluctant to distinguish insular patterns of monastic thought and action from those imported and instrumentally adopted from outside. Yet, the evidence for it is tangible, among fragments of parchment, and in landscape and environment data; and some of it may be dated as much as a century earlier—mid-12th as opposed to mid-13th—than might have been anticipated.

9. Growth of the Monastic Network, 1182–1241

It was the wider and deeper roots of the monastic enterprise which surely explains the further investment of clerical and lay patrons as the thirteenth century turned. The

Valdemarian dynasty continued its conspicuous patronage of the principal Cistercian and Victorine colonies at least as far as middle years of the new century. Knut VI cleaved to the counsels of William of Æbelholt (Hermanson 2016, p. 82). His great nephew, Abel was celebrated by the Ryd annals as a patron of their network (Lappenberg 1859, p. 407). The strength of these ties to the prevailing dynasty perhaps now gave these congregations more of a guiding hand in the development of their network. Certainly, the inherent impulse to colonise seemed unchecked from the last years of Valdemar I, the chain of Esrum's offspring projecting the influence of Danish monasticism to Eldena and a new frontier with German and Slavic peoples (North 2015, p. 28). In 1231, Valdemar's cousin Vitzlav of Rugen chartered the Cistercians as Neuenkamp to begin settling villages, drawing populations of any peoples under their jurisdiction. The canons' ambitions were more modest but reached westward from Tommarp to Bakaskog on the southern shore of Ivosjon (North 2015, p. 41).

The continuing commitment of secular patrons to what were now older customs of regular life contrasts sharply with the outlook in neighbouring regions. In England and Wales, and also in Ireland and Scotland where the ties between monasteries and local lordship endured, patrons turned their attention to the ascetic ambition and evangelical energy of more recent currents, the friars and the new monastic codes. No new house of Benedictines or Regular Canons was founded in England and Wales after 1267; only two further Cistercian communities were established between 1281 and 1540, one of which was a University *studium* (Knowles and Hadcock 1971, pp. 112–15, 137–35, 184–85).

10. The Deepening of Monastic Identity

The congregational vigour apparent in this continued expansion can perhaps be connected with signs of a sharpening sense of monastic identity. The first compilation of Cistercian foundation stories in the thirteenth century may itself be an expression of a more clearly defined understanding of a Nordic congregation. Their vocabulary, 'conventus', 'mutatio claustris' of course reflects the imprint of Cîteaux and its legislation but it also points to the identification of their own living Scandinavian *communitas* (Waitz 1892, p. 225). The author of the life of the Cistercian Bishop Gunner of Viborg commended him as an offshoot (*membrum*) of our order (*nostri ordinis*: Gertz 1917–1920, ii. 265). An understanding of the meaning of their mode of life and their membership of the *ordo* (order), is apparent also in the iconography of the Naestved calendar and necrology. A pair of images present the community of monks, on their departure as a new colony sent out by their original superior, and on arrival. Each of the five figures standing at the front of the cohort clutches a book, a reminder of the rule that was the foundation of the life they professed, if not also of its call to *ad litteram* observance (Copenhagen, Royal Library, E don. Var. 52 2°, fos. 5v–6r).

At a distance of a century from their first foundation, these makers of books were now imbued with an idea of the monastic *opus*. Bishop Gunner's biographer represented the *Regula Benedicti* as the very essence of the man. He said that even when the prelate travelled he would halt and dismount at regular intervals in order to observe the hours of the Office, 'according to the duty of his order' (*secundum debitum sui ordinis*: Gertz 1917–1920, ii. 267). The clearer articulation of monastic values by the thirteenth century was perhaps reflected in discourse beyond the convents themselves. The saga of King Sverrir (*d.* 1202) that the former the former abbot of Þingeyrar Karl Jónsson (*d.* 1212) composed from within his court circle surrounded his life with a climate of monastic asceticism (Bandlien 2016, pp. 166–67). The portrait of the Norwegian priest-pretender Sigurðr Slembe made by Snorri Sturluson (*d.* 1241) was of a piety that was unmistakably monastic: Sigurd was said to have sung a third of the psalter at the point of death (Finlay and Faulkes 2014–2016, iii. 197).

These expressions of community and custom, however slight, lend some context to the hints and impressions offered by the surviving manuscript fragments. Of course, it is perilous to argue on the grounds of loss but the pieces of parchment which have been preserved point to the early (i.e., pre-1250) transmission of some of the staple manuals of

monastic devotion such as Cassian's *Instituta* and sections of the *Vitae patrum* together with the twelfth-century *De claustro animae* of the Victorine, Hugh Fouillou (NRA lat. Fragmenter 8, 1–2; 18; 24, 1–2; 30, 1; [Karlsen 2013b](#), pp. 228–29, 236). Half of the known Norwegian fragments date from before 1225 ([Ommundsen 2008](#), p. 40). Pieces in the Swedish National Archives (SRA) can be shown to form the same copy Possidius' *Vita Augustini* (No Fr 42–43; [Björkvall 2013](#)). The reproduction of a readable text of the *Regula Benedicti* and the *Decreta Lanfranci*—before the mid-thirteenth century the only complement to the rule that seems to have passed between houses speaks of a pattern of monastic education and formation in a Nordic community which counterparts in other northern European regions would have known well. The trace of monastic—Benedictine, Cistercian—attributes in the saga portraits produced at Þingeyrar at this same time, in the years either side of 1200, might be taken as another signal of a quickening of a distinctively monastic outlook ([Jensson 2021](#)).

Perhaps it informed the advancing development of the sites of these settlements. Naestved itself raised a new church and conventual range in the first decades of the new century. The proportions of these churches may not have matched their English, French or Scottish counterparts. Æbelholt was no more than 30 metres in length, smaller than even a provincial friary in England. However, their scale should not distract from the fact that they incorporated a full monastic complex as well as attendant spaces for public burial. A proposed outline for the first structures at Utstein suggests a simple nave church with a timbered conventual range attached on the south side ([Haug and Ekroll 2007](#)). New studies of the Icelandic monasteries have drawn attention to the traces of a conventual plan comparable to those typical in the neighbouring regions of northern Europe ([Kristjánsdóttir 2014a, 2015a, 2015b, 2017](#); [Riddell et al. 2018](#)). They may have been close-bound to chieftaincies but these were no manor-house monasteries. It may be only the comparatively limited scope of the material evidence that obscures the view.

11. Renewal

If the monastic identity of these settlements was more clearly communicated by the second half of the thirteenth century then it would appear to have been a message well-received in Nordic society, as investment in new monastic foundations continued. The impulse to invest in monastic settlements it seems was strong enough still to withstand the early introduction of the mendicant orders ([Lovén 2001](#), pp. 247–48), by the end of the 1230s, and what has been seen as a rising tide of anticlericalism ([Bagge 2010](#), pp. 303–12, 312–16). In certain respects, the new communities created between 1252 and the beginning of the Black Death changed the profile of the monastic estate in the region. The early tie to cathedral chapters was largely cut Bishop Gunner of Ribe (1230–1246) established a canon house at Tvilum after failing in his effort to transform Ribe's cathedral chapter to the Augustinian rule. Now there were more communities of women in every territory. Bishop Laurentius of Linköping had sent women to Solberga on Gotland in 1246. The women of Fogdo, Sweden, moved to Varfruberga and was recast as a daughter house of Julita in 1289. A century after its first, a new female settlement in Iceland was established by Bishop Jörundur Þorsteinsson of Hólar (1267–1313) at Reynistaður (1295). The Cistercian advance was now overtaken by new canon houses. Magnus IV placed Augustinians at Utstein and in Iceland canons were settled at Möðruvallaklaustur and *Skríðuklaustur*. *Conversion of the island convent at Viðey to the Rule of St Benedict proved short-lived and it reverted to the customs of the regular canons after c. 1352* ([Jorgensen 2011](#), pp. 133–35; [Sigurdson 2016](#), p. 69). Premonstratensians were brought to Dragsmark by Haakon IV (*d.* 1263). In Denmark the tradition of royal patronage of the Cistercians persisted after 1300. The unfortunate Christopher II founded a daughter house of Sorø at Knardrup as late as 1326 and was buried at Sorø six years later ([Trap 1898–1906](#), ii. 159).

On the eve of the Black Death there remained an impulse across the Nordic region to invest in monastic religion which had no match among its immediate neighbours.

12. Conclusions

Perhaps it is the resilience of the monastic principle that is the most striking feature of the Nordic experience. The press of episcopal and seigniorial imperatives in the twelfth century may have moulded it at first in forms quite different from those in other regions of the north but contact with the wider network of congregations, their own personnel and participation in the textual communities, garnered and grew monastic identity. Already by the beginning of the thirteenth century, on the manuscript page as well as a material plan, the region saw a monasticism that was an expression of that seen right across the north west of Europe. Additionally, in contrast to those territories, as it continued to evolve—extending its commitment to the Augustinian tradition, and to the vowed life for women—Nordic monasticism still prospered. After the Black Death, it provided an environment in which a new monastic reform, of the Birgittines, might be broadcast to those kingdoms from which their Christianity had come.

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