

Article

The Benedictine Culture of Medieval Iceland

James G. Clark

Department of Archaeology & History, Faculty of Humanities & Social Sciences, University of Exeter,
Exeter EX4 4QH, UK; j.g.clark@exeter.ac.uk

Abstract: The monastic tradition of St Benedict of Nursia inspired and influenced Iceland's medieval monasteries. Four communities, two each of men and women, which were identified in contemporary records as 'under the rule of Saint Benedict', endured for four hundred years, until the Protestant suppressions of the mid-sixteenth century. The monasteries of men emerged as Iceland's most important centres of literary production; each of the churches was the focus of public worship and popular cults, and at times in their history, they may also have maintained the largest monastic populations seen in the island. With no visible trace of their physical environment, material evidence only now being revealed in excavations and very few documentary records describing their form of Benedictinism, their observant customs and broader Benedictine culture remain elusive. Drawing on the inventories (*máldagar*) of their property made at intervals between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries, together with the representation of their regular life in contemporary *biskupa sögur*, this paper reveals a monastic practice that did diverge from that of Benedictines elsewhere in northern Europe but that nonetheless expressed a powerful attachment to some of the principal ideals of the Benedictine Rule: abbacy, conventual fraternity and the interplay of contemplative and active occupation. Above all, these communities appear to have propagated a cult interest in the figure of Benedict himself, placing him at the centre of their worship life long after Benedictines elsewhere in Europe had allowed him to be eclipsed by national and regional cults of more recent creation.

Keywords: Iceland; monasteries; Benedictine



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1. Introduction

Medieval Icelanders regarded the churches and communities of the regular religious, established in the north and south of the island early in the twelfth century, as a vital source of their Christian culture. The bishops' sagas (*biskupa sögur*), which narrated the rise of an institutional church from its two sees at Holár and Skálholt and the exemplary leadership of their pioneering prelates, celebrated these monasteries as the beating heart of a growing Church Militant. There, more often than not, future bishops had received their education and spiritual formation, their vocation had been inspired and their priesthood had been conferred. It was in these places, so the sagas represented, that the Latin language of the Church was cultivated 'ripely' and 'well' (... kunni hann sör vel í nyt at færa: *Lárentíus saga*, c. 30; [Sigurðsson and Vigfússon 1858–1878](#), vol. I, p. 827; [Elton 1890](#), p. 60). Churchmen might learn from the person of the bishop in their cathedral church, but it was in the precincts of the monastery that they could enter a school for clerks (*skóla*: *Lárentíus saga*, c. 30; [Sigurðsson and Vigfússon 1858–1878](#), vol. I, p. 827; [Elton 1890](#), p. 60). The observant life of these places not only prepared the clergy of Iceland for their service in the Church but also offered them protection: *Lárentíus saga* told of a vision that counselled the man of God to 'read daily the hours' (*les dagliga heilags anda tíðir*)—that is, to follow the office of the professed monk—to be sure of a 'turn for the better in [his] fortunes' (*Lárentíus saga*, c. 29; [Sigurðsson and Vigfússon 1858–1878](#), vol. I, p. 825; [Elton 1890](#), p. 56). The particular appeal of this routine of religion, away from the world and according to a rule, was, in the view of the saga writer, a powerful influence on the island's laity to invest their livelihoods

and sometimes their own lives in the cause of the Mother Church (ok ráðasc under regulo; undir regulu haldit: *Þorláks saga*, cc. 6, 8; [Jakobssen and Clark 2013](#), pp. 6, 7).

The image and inspiration of monastic religion in Iceland were not overtly marked by a customary identity. There were four monastic communities enduring to the Reformation that identified with the Benedictine tradition: Munkaþverárklaustur, Þingeyraklaustur, Reynistaðarklaustur and Kirkjubæjarklaustur; two early colonies, Bæjarklaustur and Hítardalsklaustur, by tradition believed to be Benedictine, did not continue beyond the thirteenth century. Alongside them, there were four that followed the canonical tradition associated with Augustine: Helgafellsklaustur, Möðruvellir, Skriðuklaustur and Þykkvibær ([Kristjánsdóttir 2022](#), p. 99).

The profiles of these places were transmitted in contemporary annals and sagas, primarily by their own names—Munkaþverár (or simply, Þverá: e.g., *Lögmanns-annáll*, 1293: [Storm \[1888\] 1977](#), p. 261) and Þingeyrar Þykkvibær—and the names of those priests—abbots, bishops and parish clergy—whose own stories were woven around their own. Although the history of their foundation was associated with a self-conscious affiliation to one or another regular tradition—the Augustinian rule for canons and the Benedictine rule for monks—in subsequent saga narratives, they were typically represented in generic terms, such as abbey (klaustur), monastery (munkaklaustur) and convent (nunnuklaustur). ‘Múnklífum’ was a description applied to the customs of the clergy at churches and communities identified as both Augustine and Benedictine: ‘men went to Abbot Þorlákr’s canon’s seat from other monasteries or places of the regular life’ (menn fóru til kanokasetrs Þorláks ábóta or öðrum múnklífum eða reglustöðum: *Þorláks saga*, c.8), which would challenge the claim that their use must always denote a Benedictine identity ([Haug 2008](#), pp. 76–77). In the same way, the diocesan annals noticed ‘munka regla’ at Augustinian Viðeyjarklaustur (*Skálholts-Annaler*: [Storm \[1888\] 1977](#), p. 210). The figureheads of these monastic traditions, Augustine and Benedict, were claimed as patrons of the Icelandic Church to stand alongside their royal and episcopal saints, but they did not become the cornerstones of a congregational, corporate structure.

Medieval monastic custom has long been misrepresented in retrospect. For historians of the regular orders writing in the wake of the European Reformation, there was a powerful imperative to claim a cultural continuity with the churches and communities of the ancient past ([Moore 2009](#), p. 80). Yet even in the modern era, in an effort to explain the spread and reach of regular religious life, there has been a presumption of uniformity in observance and unity in organisation; this has been apparent in histories of the Scandinavian Church as much as elsewhere ([Kristin-Kali 2009](#), p. 4). Among the monasteries that owed their inspiration to the Rule of St Benedict, the ambitions of Cluny and Cîteaux have too often been taken at face value and have tended to influence the interpretation of the wider network of Benedictines. Those who claimed to follow the customs of Benedict did often identify as members of an order (Latin, *ordo*), but they did not understand it with the same form and force as their Counter-Reformation successors. ‘Order’ for them was no more or less than that of the cenobite, the common identity not only of Benedict but also of other fathers of the Church, Gregory, Cassiodorus and Jerome, and adumbrated by distant Biblical forbears, as far distant as the Old Testament prophets. ‘The beginning of the convent of monks or cenobites,’ declared Andrew Aston, a fifteenth-century monk of the abbey of Bury St Edmund’s (Suffolk, England), ‘is in the Old Testament prophets, Samuel, Elijah and Elisha’ ([Arnold 1890–1896](#), vol. III, p. 145); a comparable perspective was set out in a historical anthology tracing the antiquity of the monastic tradition by the fifteenth-century Durham Benedictine John Washington (‘in Helya propheta monachus exordium habuit in veteri testamento . . .’: Durham Cathedral Chapter Library, MS B. III. 30, fos. 1r–25v at 1r).

Without the anachronisms of cohesion, conformity and corporate order, of course, the character of monastic customs in any regional setting is not easily recovered. The primary sources—the customary formed in a particular foundation, the associated liturgical reference points (calendar, breviary) and the superiors’ constitutions that guided the governance

of the house more directly than either the rule or the canons—are not well preserved for most regions of northern Europe, especially for the period after 1200. Recent research in monastic studies has heightened the critical awareness of the diversity in monastic practice, as much in observance as in the domestic dimensions of the conventual routine; it has also highlighted the limitations of successive movements for reform (Diem 2020; Diem and Rapp 2019). The Benedictine tradition of medieval monastic life was subject to more frequent measures of reorganisation by a central authority—episcopal, papal and royal—than any others before the Reformation, but by and large, it proved resistant to them all (Clark 2011, pp. 289–98). To understand the lived experiences of those who identified as followers of Benedict especially, we are challenged to search the space between the original inspiration of the rule and the aims of those who claimed authority over them, picking over the fragments, written and material, that remain.

For Iceland's monasteries identified as Benedictine, the challenges are immense. There are no continuous written records of their institutional lives. The names of a sequence of superiors are known from the notice of their entry into office and their death in the diocesan annals, but only a thin trail of their *acta* now remains. For the community of women at Kirkjubæjar, there is a period of three generations (1210–1293) between the first foundation and continuous occupation that cannot be accounted for (Sigurðardóttir 1988, pp. 34–35). Not only are there no standing remains of any of the four monasteries that persisted as far as the Reformation, but even their very footprint in the landscape remains largely a matter of speculation pending ongoing archaeological excavation (Collen and Mehler 2015; Kristjánsdóttir 2022, pp. 86–90). The island stands apart from the rest of Protestant Europe for its speedy and systematic stripping of the fabric and infrastructure of all its religious houses. Munkaþverár and Reynistaðarklaustur saw remnants of their old professed and lay communities persist for more than a decade, and each one of the old monastic churches may have been re-used for reformed worship, but the subsequent farming of the sites and the re-development of the standing buildings robbed them of any visible features of a monastic environment (Kristjánsdóttir 2022, pp. 174, 199, 204).

The environment for the observance of monastic life can be read only from inventories and surveys of the sites and estates, which give snapshots at intervals between the early thirteenth century and shortly before their suppressions in 1550 (Sigurðsson et al. 1857–1972 [hereafter = *DI*] vol. I, pp. 394–97 [1218]; 780–82 [1343]; vol. VIII, pp. 4–6 [1343]; vol. III, pp. 717–18 [1408]; vol. IV, pp. 238–39 [1397], 374 [1429]; vol. V, pp. 305–7 [1469]; vol. IX, pp. 305–16, 320–22 [1525]). These accounts concentrate attention on the working life of the monasteries, the buildings used for the storage of tools and agricultural produce and the community's holdings of land and livestock. The church and conventual buildings are sketched only in outline; they give no more than a sidelong glance at the interior space as they list the treasures they contained: devotional artefacts, vestments and books. The dateline of some of these documents undermines their value as a witness to a living-and-working monastery: the earliest Kirkjubæjar survey (1218) was made when the presiding bishop seized control; the 1408 inventory from Reynistaðar captures a community in recovery from near-extinction during the plague (*DI*, vol. I, pp. 392–95 at 394–95; vol. III, pp. 717–18; vol. IV, p. 374; Kristjánsdóttir 2022, p. 105).

The saving grace for the study of the island's monastic culture is the existence of manuscript books and fragments, many of them recovered by the hands of the antiquarian Árni Magnússon (1663–1730: Gunnlaugsson 2017, pp. 164–69). Yet the corpus, dominated by the saga literature, cannot offer a direct connection to the customary life of the monasteries where they were made.

It might be tempting to pre-empt a fuller enquiry with the hypothesis that the Benedictine interest in medieval Iceland was largely circumstantial and superficial. Implanted by missionary bishops, it was an instrument of institutionalisation for a Christian community in its infancy, drawing it into a wider Nordic network and ultimately under the authority of Rome. As the island's own clergy and converted chieftains confronted the Norwegian ascendancy, monastic custom became a counter in a game of power. The heavy press of

Norway on Iceland's prelacy for more than two centuries only compounded the ebb and flow of monastic organisation. In the early fourteenth century, when the secular canon Auðunn Þorbergsson held Hólar and the Dominican friar Jón Háldorsson ruled Skálholt, it may have appeared that the old order of monks was in retreat, as it was then in Norway itself (Haug 2008, pp. 90–94). Monastic organisation was undoubtedly unstable. Arngrímur Brandsson, who had begun his clerical career as a secular priest in the service of Bishop Háldorsson, passed through the Augustinian monastery at Þykkvibær and was then presented to the abbacy of Benedictine Þingeyrar (1351), retaining the office for as long as five years (Harðarson 2021, pp. 271–74). In 1343, Bishop Jón Sigurðsson of Skálholt (1343–1348) changed the customs of Viðeyjarklaustur from the canonical tradition of Augustine to St Benedict's Rule (*Gottskalks Annaler, 1341–1344*: Storm [1888] 1977, p. 352).

Yet it would be wrong to interpret either episode as proof that monastic custom in Iceland lacked depth and that the 'operational differences between [Augustinian and Benedictine] were minimal' (Storm [1888] 1977, pp. 209–10; Kristjánsson 2022, p. 99). Of course, procedurally, if the customs of the churches and their communities had been indistinguishable, then there was no call for the exertion of episcopal authority. But it may also be possible to see here the latent strength of an insular monastic tradition. Abbot Brandsson was deposed as soon as his episcopal patron was dead. Sigurðsson was the only Icelander to hold the see in almost a century (from 1321 to 1413), and at Viðeyjar, it may be that he aimed to challenge the Norwegian drift and reassert the status of customs deep-rooted in the island's Christian practice. In fact, as Gottskálk Jensson and Haraldur Hreinsson have suggested, these roots may have first been planted in the insular challenge to the Norwegian influence in the Gregorian contest at the close of the twelfth century (Jensson 2016; Hreinsson 2021).

2. Representations of Monastic Custom

From their first beginnings, the island's monastic churches and communities were distinguished from the two cathedrals, other discrete churches and their clergy by their customs. Their clerical (episcopal) founders and their early chieftain patrons conferred on them the identity of a 'holy rule and good life' (*hæilaga reglu ok fagrum lifnade* [Reynistaðarklaustur, 1315]: *DI*, vol. II, pp. 397–99 at 398), a convent (*nunnuklaustur*) committed to a rule (*vnnder reglu*: [Reynistaðarklaustur, 1340]: *DI*, vol. II, pp. 734–35 at 735). Looking back at the time of the Reformation, these churches and their communities were still recalled for their 'fine customs' (*fagran sið*: Sigurðsson and Vigfússon 1858–1878, vol. II, pp. 486–96 at 485).

In their early years, it seems there was a stronger awareness of the special culture of the monastic settlement, the *klaustur*, than of a rule, still less of an order. The saga life of Þorlákur (d. 1198), which began to take shape in the first half of the thirteenth century, spoke of diverse clergy drawn to the holy man's colony at Þykkvibær to witness his 'good customs' (*goða sið*: *Þorlákur saga*, c. 8; Jakobssen and Clark 2013, p. 8). Writing at around the same time, probably from the community at Þingeyrar, the author of the Latin life of Jón Ögmundson recognised 'the rules of good religion and book learning' (*reglu guðligrar siðsemdar ok bókligrí vizku*) that the saint-bishop imbibed, not least in his encounter with the Black Monks (*svartmúnkaklaustur*) of Nidarholm (*Jóns saga*, c.c. 5, 13: Sigurðsson and Vigfússon 1858–1878, vol. I, pp. 219, 226). The general features of a monastic church—communal and self-contained—were more often represented than the particular forms of a given rule. The bishops' sagas followed their subjects' progress from one (Þykkvibær) to another (Þingeyrar) and passed no comment on the ostensible differences between them. What these itineraries did impress on their readers was the common culture of these colonies: their commitment to the teaching of clergy and to the formation of priests and their curation of the cult memory of saints, both those of the past and those in the making.

The episcopal founders and benefactors of these settlements seem to have been satisfied with an outward display of regular life without strict adherence to the discipline of a given rule. Their priorities were institutional as the tensions of Gregorian reform

aggravated the development of the Nordic Church (Jensson 2016). Þorlakur's priority at Kirkjubæjarklaustur was perhaps to propagate a colony of women living under vows. It has been suggested that his designation of the church as under the customs of St Benedict was, above all, a self-conscious reach for the renown of a name associated with churches of high status; such image making may also have influenced his placement there of his protégé Halldóra Eyjólfsdóttir (Sigurðardóttir 1988, p. 23).

These pioneering prelates fixed their new monastic churches firmly within their own diocesan network, giving their churches dedications and, no doubt, festal calendars aligned with their own domain (Cormack 1991, p. 27). This was reflected in their early expressions of institutional identity. The designs of the earliest surviving capitular seals from Munkaþverár (1375) and Þingeyrar (1428) display a generic identity bearing the stylised profile of a church lacking the identifying devotional figure found in the Norwegian examples on which they may well have been modelled (Kristjánsdóttir 2022, p. 108; Harðardóttir 2016, pp. 218, 221; Harðardóttir 2023, p. 198).

The culture of a community distinguished by its church more than by the regular discipline of its clergy is perhaps evoked in the early-thirteenth-century anthology of devotional texts now known as the *Old Icelandic Homily Book*, which may have been compiled and written in a monastery setting (van Weenen 1993, p. 4; Hreinsson 2021, pp. 79–81). The manuscript presents a sequence of homilies on the Mass and on devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary and other principal saints; acts of worship led by a community of clergy in concert are clearly pictured: 'Þessar kirkio sæonghus ero beóner oc sálma sæongr' (Text 29, Kirkjudagsmál: Kungliga biblioteket, Perg. 15 4to, fos. 45r–46v; van Weenen 1993). In the same period, the community of women at Kirkjubæjarklaustur was identified as a church in this form, designated at the head of its 1218 inventory as 'the church of [St] Mary' (Mariu kirkia: *DI*, vol. I, pp. 394–95 at 394).

Later saga lives, new *biskupa sögur* and translations of Latin hagiographies that emerged in the course of the fourteenth century gave fuller expression to the particular practice of the island's *svartmúnka*. The first contributor to the *Guðmundar saga* (A, 1330 × 1350) reflected the lived experience of Benedictine observance when he pictured the piety of Jarl Erling Sakke rising 'in the night for matins . . . as he always did [and] singing the psalms' (Turville-Petre and Olszewska 1942, p. 6). Also writing in the early or middle years of the fourteenth century, the creator of the *Benedictus saga*, a vernacular version of the *vita Benedicti* that Gregory the Great incorporated in the second book of his dialogues, presented the sixth-century pioneer to their readership as scenes of 'monastic custom' (*siðr munkna*: *Benedictus ssaga*, c. 14: Unger 1877a, pp. 166, 168; Cormack 1991, pp. 84–85; Wolf 2013, 59–61 at 60–61).

The *Lárentíus saga*, a later addition to the corpus dating from the third quarter of the fourteenth century, was unusual in its explicit identification of Lárentíus Kálfsón as a Benedictine, clothed in the habit of such a monastery 'svartmúnkalifnaði' (i.e., a community of Black Monks) and commended by the Norwegian incumbent of Hólar, Bishop Auðunn (1313–1322), for his exemplary adherence to the rule (*Lárentíus saga*, cc. 36, 46; Elton 1890, pp. 75, 97). Here, the close attention to custom may have reflected the circumstances of the saga author, Einarr Hafliðason (1307–1393). Not only was he a pupil of Bishop Lárentíus, but also, he was himself a secular priest, perhaps especially conscious of the differences in status and custom between the churches and clergy of seculars and regulars.

3. An Icelandic Benedictinism

It does seem that, in the generations after 1300, these distinctions of custom, if not quite a corporate identity, came to be more clearly defined. By 1318, Munkaþverár was known as 'the monastery of St Benedict at Þuera' (klaustur hins heilaga Benedicti ad Þuera: *DI*, vol. II, pp. 485–87 at 485). At this time, the schools and scriptoria at Þingeyrar and Munkaþverár flourished (Jensson 2021; Patzuk-Russell 2021, pp. 116–21); although both involved the activity of secular clergy and laymen, as well as those who professed to follow a rule, the traffic in prospective pupils and book exemplars points to a certain energy within

the monastic communities themselves. There is no precise documentary record, but it seems probable that their population of monks had realised a critical mass, a circumstance that might have encouraged (re)organisation according to the customs of the rule.

It appears that now the customs and culture of the island's two traditions of regular life were more readily distinguished from one another. When a new abbot was installed at Viðeyjarklaustur in the middle years of the century, the Gottskálk annalist observed its 'canons' rule' (kanunka reglu: *Gottskalks Annaler*: Storm [1888] 1977, p. 355). The Benedictine communities of men demonstrated their shared identity in the frequent traffic between them. Abbot Godman of Þingeyrar died (1348) at Munkaþverár and was returned to his house for burial (*Logmanns-annáll*, 1343–1350: Storm [1888] 1977, p. 272). Among the women, there is evidence of wider exchanges: Margrét Þorbergsdóttir began her life under vows in Norway but then, after five years, made a fresh profession at Reynistaðar in February 1440 (eins og hún hafi fyrr sagt hlyðni í hennar klaustr í Noregi, og að hún hafi verið í fimm ár í greindu klaustri: *DI*, vol. IV, pp. 603–4).

This greater recognition of the particular character of a Benedictine was increasingly apparent in lay society. When Björgólfur Illugason presented his daughter Steinunn and his cousin Sigríðr to Reynistaðarklaustur in October 1413, it was expressly stated that they were to be made sisters under the Rule of St Benedict (til þess ath þær skyldu verða systur vnder reglu hins heilagha Benedicti: *DI*, vol. III, pp. 751–52 at 752). Likewise, Bishop Jón Vilhjálmsson of Hólar (1425–1435) confirmed the entry of Margrét Bjarnadóttir at Reynistaðar in 1432 to take 'godly service and the sacred rule of the order of St Benedict' (gudhliga þjónozstu ok hælaga ræglu hald in ordinem sancti Benedicti abbatis: *DI*, vol. IV, pp. 520–521). At this time, Bishop Árni Ólafsson of Skálholt (1413–1426) also attempted, with Bishop Annbjörn Sunnúlvsen of Hamar (Norway 1420–1433), to commit the community at Munkeliv (Bergen) to Benedictine custom; ultimately, it gave way to the novel customs of the Birgittines (*DI*, vol. IV, p. 285). In 1493, Reynistaðar was defined in territorial transactions as 'under reglu sancti Benedicti' (*DI*, vol. VII, pp. 163–64 at 164).

The impulse, at more or less the same moment in the fourteenth century, to make saga lives for both Benedict and his own hagiographer, Gregory, must be a measure of their significance in the cult and customs of Iceland's clergy (Wolf 2013, pp. 59–60, 116–17; Grønlie 2012, pp. 10–20). The compilation of these works, which may itself be connected to a monastic context, may also have been a response to a relative scarcity of customary texts, the codes and associated commentaries, which were the cornerstones of book collections in the larger Benedictine networks of north-west Europe. Gregory's account of the genesis of Benedict's monasticism and his own biographer's description of his experiences in the monastery of St Andrew in Rome might be taken up as surrogates for a more systematic treatment of the monastic way of life.

4. Knowledge of the Rule

Certainly, there is only a faint trace of the Rule of St Benedict among the manuscripts and fragments surviving not only from Iceland but also from its immediate Nordic neighbours. Four parchment fragments of an Old Norwegian partial translation (since the text retains some Latin phrases) of the rule have been recovered from the bindings of volumes in the Norwegian Riksarkivet (NRA). The first pair are cut from sequential leaves and carry phrases from the rule's chapters 7, 8, 10 and 11; the remaining three stand apart, with one preserving phrases from chapters 58–59 and 61, while the final pair are taken from the leaves containing chapters 38–40 (Oslo, Riksarkivet, Nor. fragm. 81a, 1–5; Walter 1960, pp. 83–131). The script, which has been dated to the last quarter of the twelfth century, suggests that the manuscript originated in Norway, where the principal Benedictine community at Nidaros is the most plausible context of production. The hand of the scribe, now named the 'Benedict scribe', has also been identified in fragments from two antiphons and a breviary also associated with Nidaros (Ommundsen and Gullick 2021, pp. 38–48).

Three leaves of another vernacular translation written in a script of the fifteenth century are preserved in a manuscript apparently of Danish origin. The text on the first

leaf is too damaged to be meaningfully transcribed; the remainder appears to carry the text for Chapter 58, on the reception of entrants to the monastery (Copenhagen, Safn Árna Magnússonar, AM 79 I zeta 8vo, fos. 1r-2v; [Brandt 1856](#), pp. 201–2). There is no indication of provenance: there were more than twenty Danish Benedictine communities in the period after 1400.

Also among the fragments found at the NRA are three parchment strips cut from a copy of a Norwegian translation of the *Decreta Lanfranci*, a sequence of customs presented to the monks of Canterbury Cathedral Priory by Lanfranc, the first Norman archbishop of that province who was previously the abbot of the Cluniac monastery at Bec-Hellouin (Oslo, Riksarkivet, Nor. fragm. 81b; [Gjerlow 1961](#), pp. 80–97 at 80–91; [Knowles and Brooke 2002](#)). This is not a witness to the transmission of Benedict's Rule itself, but it does indicate that what might be termed para-regular texts were transmitted into the Nordic network of churches and regular communities. The passage into Anglo-Norman England of Archbishop Eysteinn of Nidaros (1161–1188) may have initiated the circulation, but it was surely sustained by subsequent contact in the next century, not least perhaps the mission of the St Albans monk Matthew Paris to Nidarholm in 1247 ([Weiler 2012](#)).

No copies of the rule or related texts in manuscripts of Icelandic origin have yet been discovered. There is no sight of the code itself or a customary in any of the surviving inventories; even where there were altar images of St Benedict (both Þingeyrar and Munkaþverár), the impression is that there was no written record of the customary tradition that carried his name. This is in contrast to the community of Augustinians at Mödruvallaklaustur, where a copy of the code of the canons, 'institutiones ordinis canonicorum regularium', was listed first among their collection of twenty-five Latin books (*DI*, v. 288).

The absence should be approached with caution. Monasteries that identified with the customs of Benedict were established throughout Scandinavia; in Denmark, they formed the largest network of regulars, men and women in the kingdom, and retained their prominent presence as far as the Reformation. Eldbjørg Haug has argued that the creation of the first monastic communities in Norway was informed by the introduction of the Rule of St Benedict ([Haug 2008](#), pp. 76–82), which manuscript fragments now bear out. The presence and self-conscious identity of Nordic Benedictines cannot be doubted.

While from Europe as a whole, there is a substantial number of manuscript witnesses to the Latin rule, relative to the known reach of the code over ten centuries of the Middle Ages, the overall survival rate is low. Vernacular translations, known to have been used in communities of men and women, are poorly preserved from every European region. It might be speculated that there were time periods when the supply fell short of the demand: surrogates to the text, which found a wide readership in the generations after 1300, such as commentaries on the formula of profession, may have originated as a pragmatic response to scarcity. In England in the early sixteenth century, a supervising bishop lamented the ignorance of the rule among the Benedictine women of his diocese and made and printed his own translation ([Fox 1517](#), fo. Aii^{r-v}).

If manuscript copies of the text in any language were rare, and rarely, if ever, copied in Iceland, the reception of its customs and values is nonetheless clear. Text 53 in the *Old Icelandic Homily Book* is a vernacular meditation of the tools of good works derived from the fourth chapter of the Rule of St Benedict (Stockholm, Kungliga biblioteket, Perg. 15 4o, fo. 89r-v; [van Weenen 1993](#), p. 15). It is not a direct testimony to the transmission of the rule itself as it has sometimes been represented ([Bandle et al. 2002](#), p. 796); in fact, the last line of the original Latin, which fixes the homily in a monastic context, has been cut from the translation. Apparently, the primary interest of the intended readership was not monastic practice. There is a glancing awareness of what might be seen as a Benedictine elsewhere in the *Homily Book*: in a Sunday sermon for the feast of the Ascension that speaks of a prelate (heilagra biscopa), an abbot (abbótom) and a monk (munkom) (Stockholm, Kungliga biblioteket, Perg. 15 4to, fo. 9r-v at 9v; [van Weenen 1993](#), p. 8); in a commentary on the Lord's prayer that refers to the performance of the psalter (salma skáldit: Stockholm, Kungliga biblioteket, Perg. 15 4to, fo. 13r; [van Weenen 1993](#), p. 8), the mainstay of any

monastic office; and in a sermon for the feast of All Saints, the invocation of Pope Gregory (fra Gregorio: Stockholm, Kungliga biblioteket, Perg. 15 4to, 18v; [van Weenen 1993](#), p. 9). The Old Norse version of Gregory's *vita Benedicti*, the *Benedictus saga*, also suggests a familiarity with the rule, particularly its prescription for abbacy, as presented in the stories of Benedict's early struggles with his unruly followers (*Benedictus saga*, cc. 5, 24; [Unger 1877a](#), pp. 160–61, 171).

5. The Monastic Formation of Iceland's Benedictines

While these texts do indicate an influence on the devotional discourse of the Icelandic Church, they offer no clues to the place and application of the rule within the communities themselves. The bishops' sagas, the only available narrative accounts of the internal life of the monasteries, depict a general clerical practice: the teaching of clerks; the formation and ordination of priests; and the celebration of Mass and calendar feasts in the church. They do carry anecdotes of conversion to the life of the *klaustur*, but they do not bring into focus the nature of a monastic profession. There is a glimpse of a formal preparation of an entrant in the saga accounts of the first superiors. Hallbera Þorsteinsdóttir, who first led the women at Reynistaðar, was remembered as beginning her monastic career at Munkaþverár. Perhaps this was a mark of the episcopal patronage that put her in her position, although it is also possible that it was the sign of an early commitment to inculcating the particular customs of the Benedictines to the new community of women ([Gunnarsdóttir 2008](#), p. 14). The making of a monk in the *Dunstanus saga* is represented as an ordination (var munkr ordinn, c. 8: [Vigfússon 1887](#), p. 393). Yet throughout these narratives, the clergy of the monastery are identified as named individuals, not by their status as professed religious. This contrasts with the annals of communities made in the larger and longer-established networks of northern Europe, where it was common to distinguish the *conversus* from the clothed religious, the novice from the professed, the priest-monk from those in minor orders, the official from the cloisterer (*claustralis*) and even the literate (Latin literate) from those who remained unschooled (for example, [Butler 1949](#), p. 130; *Annales de Wintonia*, Anno 1198; *Annales de Theokesburie*, Anno 1258; *Annales de Dunstaplia*, Anno 1258; Anno 1288: [Luard 1864–1869](#), vol. I, p. 162; vol. III, p. 67; vol. III, pp. 210, 342).

The record of the entry of a sister at Reynistaðarklaustur in February 1431 offers a vital viewpoint of the application of regular custom. Here, there was a profession of women who conformed wholly with the customs of Benedictines in other regions of northern Europe: Sigríð Sæmundardóttir made her profession invoking the dedication of the convent of St Mary and St Benedict, promising obedience to her superior, stability, chastity and personal reformation according to the rule (*secundum regulam beati Benedicti patris nostri*... after *heilaga faudrs sancti Benedicti*). Like any community of Benedictine women at this date, her profession was recorded both in Latin and in the vernacular (*DI*, vol. IV, pp. 438–39).

Icelandic women making a formal profession in this form sometimes adopted a new first name to mark their entry into religion. Occasionally, it was deferred until entry into office, as for Jórum Hauksdóttir at Kirkjubæjarklaustur in 1343 ([Gunnarsdóttir 2008](#), pp. 14–15; [Sigurðardóttir 1988](#), p. 20). It was an expression of monastic *morum conversiae*, which was not universal in other regions of northern Europe; in England, it was practised only in the last generation of professed religious before the Reformation.

A commitment to the strictly regular formation and profession of monastics, both women and men, may have been challenged by a lay interest in the environment of the monastery. Steinunn Björgólfsdóttir was brought to Reynistaðar by her father with an understanding that she might be free to leave when she reached adulthood ([Sigurðardóttir 1988](#), pp. 115, 127 & n). Widows were often presented as much as a pragmatic resolution of their social position as for reasons of personal piety. Margret Bjarnadóttir was pressed on the women of Kirkjubæjar by their diocesan. She was no convert and, two years later, remained unprofessed (*DI*, vol. IV, pp. 521, 551). Wives also entered with their husbands following the widespread European custom of penitential professions, 'ad succurrendum'. These too rarely made for recruits who were fully observant ([Sigurðardóttir 1988](#), p. 26).

The force of these demands at the women's houses was heightened by dowry payments made to the superior and her convent at the point of entry. Ingeborg, daughter of Olafur Einarsson, at Reynistaðarklaustur in 1340, was made possible with the father's gift of substantial farmland (*DI*, vol. II, pp. 734–35). Further instances are found among the records in 1378, 1401 and 1413 (*DI*, vol. III, p. 334; vol. IV, p. 438; Gunnarsdóttir 2008, p. 21). Proscribed by Canon Law, the rule and any customary, the practice was nonetheless widespread among European nunneries. It was an irregularity that drew Iceland into the mainstream.

Except for the profession scene reported from Reynistaðar, there is no trace of the presentation or performance of the rule in any of these communities. The most extensive of the *máldagar*, made at Munkaþverár in 1525, does offer a view of the chapter house (*kapituli*), the customary centre point of the professed community (*DI*, vol. IX, pp. 305–12 at 307; Kristjánsdóttir 2022, p. 104). It found there a deposit of books of hagiography and legends for liturgical use—ten saga texts and three legends—which might signal the use of the space as set out in Benedict's Rule for a communal reading and collation led by the superior (*DI*, vol. IX, p. 307). Yet the inventory there also included a store of tools and clothing—twelve iron helmets (*jarnhattar*)—for outdoor labour (*DI*, vol. IX, p. 307). Of course, this may indicate a change of use late in the monastery's history, but at least at this date, it is difficult to reconcile with the convening of a daily chapter meeting. At any rate, the rule text itself is no more visible here than in any of the records.

If the place of the original code remains uncertain, it does seem clear that Iceland's communities did not engage with the large corpus of para-regular texts, which, elsewhere in northern Europe, emerged as the primary resource for teaching the precepts and practice of monastic life. No commentary on Benedict's Rule survives in a manuscript copy or fragment from Iceland or its immediate neighbours, nor is there a textual reference that hints at knowledge of it. It was common practice in England, France and Germany for a Benedictine community to hold a copy of the canons for the reform of the observance issued by Pope Gregory IX in 1235; in the generations that followed, they were joined by the decrees of councils that had wrestled with recurrent weaknesses in regular discipline, such as Vienne in 1311 and Constance in 1414–1417 (Clark 2011, pp. 289–98 at 292, 297). In England's communities, a compendium and commentary on the succession of canons, called by its incipit, *Abbas vel prior*, was compiled in the first half of the fourteenth century, apparently to aid in the instruction of novices (for example, Durham Cathedral Chapter Library, MS B. IV 26, fos. 148v–154r). Here, the canons *Summi magistri* issued in 1336 by Pope Benedict XII were also made, a code to which each professed Benedictine subscribed (for example, Durham Cathedral Chapter Library, MS B. IV 26, fos. 70r–102r). Commonly called the *Benedictina*, under the authority of the General Chapter of the English congregation, a fair copy was to be kept in every monastery to be formally read out and explained annually (Pantin 1931–1937, pp. 6–13 at 9; for example, Sharpe et al. 1996, pp. 607 (B102. 9), 616 (B105.4)). Arguably, it was an awareness of this legislative framework that separated the outlook of professed Benedictines in the later Middle Ages from their forebears. It may have left a gulf between them and the experience of observant life learned and lived in the four communities in Iceland.

6. Benedictine Governance

If it lacked the increasing codification that marked the monastic life of their counterparts, nonetheless, there are indications that Iceland's Benedictines did adhere to some of the defining customs of their regular tradition. The saga narratives give the impression that both the spirit and letter of Benedict's Rule were fulfilled in the office of the abbacy. The abbots of the communities of men at Munkaþverár and Þingeyrar were pictured as both pastors and prelates of their communities, recalling the representation of the office in the second chapter of the rule. Peers of the island's two presiding bishops and those of their neighbours, they are seen to share in their public ceremonial and in their private counsels, enjoying a profile and influence that, after the end of the twelfth century, were

comparatively rare for their counterparts in other regions of the north. Their entry into office and their eventual passing away were recorded in the annals kept in episcopal churches and secular courts (e.g., *Lárentíus saga*, cc. 7–8, 21–24, 31–36; [Sigurðsson and Vigfússon 1858–1878](#), vol. I, pp. 796–99, 812–19, 827–37; [Elton 1890](#), pp. 12–16, 37–48, 60–76; *Gottskalks Annáll*; *Annales regii* (C) 1310–1314; *Skálholts-Annaler* (D) 1289–94, *Gottskalks Annaler* (P) 1288–1309; [Storm \[1888\] 1977](#), pp. XXX, 150, 197, 2002, 204, 211, 338–39, 341).

Benedict's Rule set a boundary between the leadership of the monastery and the diocese (chps. 62: 9, 64: 4). In Iceland, the bishops were both founding fathers and enduring patrons of the monasteries; at times, their interest extended as far as a de facto ruling of their affairs. In 1247, the papal legate affirmed the right of the regulars to make a free election of their superior, no doubt recognising that in the first century of the island's communities, it had not always been respected (*DI*, vol I, pp. 546–48 at 547). The social, cultural and kinship ties between professed men and women and the bishops and clergy of Hólar and Skálholt somewhat clouded these distinctions. The selection of the superior of any of the houses is less well documented than the episcopal confirmation of their entry into office. For the communities of men in particular, perhaps the only certain conclusion is that the balance of power was subject to a frequent ebb and flow. There is no doubt that the scrutiny of the diocesan intensified in the sixteenth century against the background of advancing Reformation doctrine, just as it did for Benedictines across the regions of the north. When a monk of Þingeyrar was found to have fathered a child in 1539, it was Bishop Jón Arason (1524–1550) who imposed punishment upon him (*DI*, vol. X, pp. 416–17).

The influence of the diocesan bishops in governance was most visible in the two communities of women. In the course of their history, their superiors were not always recognised as autonomous superiors with the title of abbess but were designated prioress, subject to episcopal authority ([Sigurðardóttir 1988](#), pp. 28–30, 32–33). The settlement at Kirkjubæjar remained under the rule of Bishop Þorlakur Þorllasson (1178–1193) for three years before a woman was placed at its head ([Sigurðardóttir 1988](#), p. 23). His successor-but-one, Magnús Gissurarson (1216–1237), again took the house into his own hands, appointing his own brother, Þorvaldur, as steward. The next superior whose name is recorded, Agatha Helagðóttir in 1293, was herself the sister of Bishop Árni Þorláksson (1269–1298) ([Sigurðardóttir 1988](#), p. 36). Episcopal interference receded in the fourteenth century when the island's dioceses were frequently filled by Norwegian incumbents; an exception was the decade-long term of the Danish diocesan Mikael at Skálholt (1382–1391), who twice dismissed the superior at Kirkjubæjar and left the house without its head for a further four years ([Sigurðardóttir 1988](#), p. 46; [Kristjánsdóttir 2023](#), p. 152). Now, the independent election of a superior from within the community was possible, and perhaps typical. The choice of Þóra Finnsdóttir as abbess of Reynistaðarklaustur in 1437 was acknowledged by Bishop Jón Vilhjálmsson (1435–1437) as 'with the consent of the convent of sisters' (*DI*, vol. IV, pp. 569–70; [Sigurðardóttir 1988](#), p. 56). She was below the canonical minimum age for the office: whether this was a deliberate challenge to episcopal preference or a concession to it remains unclear. Still, the diocesan presided over new professions and ruled on matters that elsewhere might be expected to be in the province of the sisters' own superior, such as the transfer of one of the professed from one house to another (*DI*, vol. IV, p. 625). In the second half of the fifteenth century, Bishop Ölafr Rögnvaldsson (1458–1495) persisted in the designation of Reynistaðar's superior as prioress, subject to his authority, in principle and practice (1461; *DI*, vol. V, pp. 228–29).

This interdependence between superior and secular prelates recalled the rule's vision of the governance of the monastery within the wider church network; it contrasts with developments, from the twelfth to sixteenth centuries, in the status of the Benedictine superior elsewhere in northern Europe: the assertion of rights for the independent election; petitions for papal exemption from any episcopal authority; and the separation of monastic and seigniorial responsibilities in a *commendam* appointment ([Clark 2011](#), pp. 294–95; [Heale 2016](#), pp. 27–37). If they had met Benedictine superiors of England, France and Scotland in the later Middle Ages, the heads of Iceland's communities might have been surprised

most by their constitutional difference from other offices in the Church hierarchy. Abbey in Iceland was one aspect of a clerical authority in which the bishop, secular priest and professed religious all shared.

Yet there also appears a corollary: by contrast with the wider trend among Benedictine communities in the later Middle Ages, in Iceland the notion of a common corporate identity of the superior and convent continued to hold sway. The administration of land, livestock and associated rights was invariably directed under the authority of the head of the house with ‘the consent of all the regular brethren’ (meðr samþykke allra reglu brædra *DI*, vol. II, pp. 788–89 at 789) or the ‘understanding and agreement of the sisters’ (wíj wndirstadht af fyrsaght convent ok syster: *DI*, vol. IV, pp. 569–70). An act of 1345 at Munkaþverárklostur specified that the unified decision was promulgated by the professed community formally convened in the chapter house (*DI*, vol. II, pp. 788–89). Elsewhere in northern Europe, there was a growing fragmentation in Benedictine governance reinforced by the settlement of a discrete portfolio of estates on the office of the superior (Heale 2016, pp. 122–31). In England, by the turn of the fifteenth century, not only the superior but also the prior and senior obedientiary officers issued acts of their own under their own seal (for example, Kew, National Archives, E 328/146/ii-26, Cellarer of Leeds Priory, Kent, dated 1511). Ironically, a single corporate act undertaken in the chapter house resurfaced in these places most clearly at the Reformation when they were compelled to surrender.

7. Regularity

The superior of Benedict’s Rule presided over, and preserved, a community of the professed. Successive reform movements driven through the Benedictine networks of England, France and Germany from the ninth to eleventh centuries had aimed at reinforcing the separation of the monastery from the outside world, refining the observant regime and restricting the interaction with secular clergy and laity (Semmler 1963; Clark 2011, pp. 35–38). Iceland’s Benedictine superiors oversaw a quite different environment: it appears to have been porous, with those committed to the regular life of the monastery mixing with secular clergy and laity. *Ósvalds saga*, which in Icelandic form dates from the early fifteenth century, pictured ‘Lords and chieftains, bishops and abbots . . . [at] table . . . and served there daily’ (Kalinke 2005, pp. 114–15). The mix of men, women and children that excavated burials have revealed at the Augustinian community at Skriðuklaustur may not have been exclusive to that house (Kristjánsson et al. 2014, pp. 563–64).

The bishops’ sagas describe schools in which both regulars and seculars taught and pupils were prepared not only for a monastic profession but also for the secular priesthood and even for returning to the life of a layperson (Patzuk-Russell 2021, pp. 116–121 at 120–21). *Lárentíus saga* remembered him teaching Olaf Hjaltason, a ‘poor lad’ (fátækr piltur), to become a ‘good scholar’ (góðr klerkr) who subsequently became a schoolmaster at Holár (*Lárentíus saga*, c. 30; Sigurðsson and Vigfússon 1858–1878, vol. I, p. 827; Elton 1890, p. 60). The dwellings of corrodians came close to the centre point of the monastic community, sometimes to the point of dispute (Kristjánsson 2022, p. 180).

In later centuries, the communities may have known greater restriction. The story told in *Morkinskinna* (first compiled in Iceland in the second quarter of the thirteenth century) of the denial of the layman Einarr of a place at the common table of the nuns of Baekke may signal an awareness of the expected norms of a monastic enclosure (Andersson and Gade 2000, p. 160). In the decretal *Periculoso* (1298), Pope Boniface VIII aimed to compel the uncompromised enclosure of professed women (Makowski 1997). The statutes of successive archbishops of Nidaros who wielded provincial power in Iceland (1306, 1334, 1351) likewise called for the unequivocal claustration of women, although there is insufficient documentation to know the degree of their success (*DI*, vol. II, pp. 351–53 at 352, 702–4 at 703; vol. III, pp. 57–65 at 62).

The fluid dynamic of the monastery community was matched by the Icelanders’ expression of monastic vows. Benedict’s Rule called for the profession of obedience (to the rule and the superior as its guardian); stability (to remain committed to the observant life

of their community); and an undertaking to bring about a reformation of the self (*morum conversiae*: *Regula Benedicti*, 58: 17), which was not only a spiritual transformation but a shedding of all traces of their life in the world. From what is represented in the saga texts, the lives of the men and women in these four communities were not always or entirely aligned with these expectations. The episcopal prescription of 1281 that only women who were known to be unmarried should profess at a monastery reads as a response to a current practice (*DI*, vol. II, pp. 211–12). Whether or not they were truly free to take up a monastic life, the women who entered Iceland's communities did not always commit at once to their vows. Sólveig Hrafnadóttir entered Reynistaðar in 1493 and lived among the sisters, apparently in a liminal state, as it was a 'vowess' who had entered into the enclosure but without the adoption of its vows (*DI*, vol. VII, p. 163; Gunnarsdóttir 2008, p. 23).

The stories of the celebrated bishops show clergy committed to their church and convent site and the community that sustained them, yet nonetheless permitted a degree of self-determination. Lárentíus Kálfsson professed the life of the monk but still passed from one place to another, at times at the direction of the diocesan but also apparently of his own volition (e.g., *Larentíus saga*, cc. 37–38: Sigurðsson and Vigfússon 1858–1878, vol. I, pp. 838, 840; Elton 1890, pp. 77, 80–81). Of course, the man of destiny is a trope of hagiography, but the importance attached to his itinerant nature is in contrast with the representation of leader figures in the literature—*vitae et gesta abbatum*—of other regions of northern Europe. In these texts, the higher calling of the subject—to office outside the monastery in the Church and State—was secondary to their demonstrations of domestic piety. Here, the superior was the exemplar of *stabilitas* (for e.g., Clark and Preestand 2019).

The bishops' sagas' few passing references to members of the monastery below the ranks of the leadership likewise point to a personal independence out of step with the experience of the Benedictine mainstream. Gunnlaugr Leifsson of Þingeyrar heard the story of the vision of Hildr of Hólar of Saint Jón from another woman, Oddný Knútsdóttir (Egilsdóttir 2021, p. 188 &n). Þórólfr, a brewer (*cervisiarius*) and monk of Munkaþverár, was present at a marriage celebration in a lay family in 1253 (Kristjánsdóttir 2022, p. 172). Perhaps he was there at least in part on account of his craft skill; even so, his presence, and his impulse to record it, was also quite probably an expression of the accustomed interaction between a professed community and the social networks that surrounded them.

The mobility of those identified as monastics may have been a consequence of the comparative instability of these communities. There are scarcely any records of their population, but from the faint outline of their buildings and their contents, they may have never exceeded more than about a dozen professed men and women; probably, there were moments in their four centuries when they counted fewer than half this number. At times, meaningful monastic life undoubtedly was interrupted: at Þingeyrar as early as 1157, at Reynistaðarklaustur in 1210 after a first effort to establish a community and then at Munkaþverár in 1429 (the result of a fire: Logmanns-annáll, 1429–1430: Storm [1888] 1977, p. 295), where the community had previously been ravaged by the plague in 1402–1403, which also assailed the communities at Kirkjubæjarklaustur and Reynistaðarklaustur in the same year (Kristjánsdóttir 2022, pp. 110, 127, 133, 135; Gunnarsdóttir 2008, p. 16; Sigurðardóttir 1988, p. 107). When a sister was professed at Reynistaðarklaustur in 1431, there were eight nuns (*DI*, vol. IV, p. 438). In 1484, only four *conventubrædur* witnessed a charter of Abbot Einar of Munkaþverár (*DI*, vol. VI, p. 526). The customary expectations of an obedient and stable life in place of an original profession were not always or wholly compatible with the island's prevailing conditions.

The men in these communities did not share in the conversion of their Benedictine counterparts. The saga stories of schooling, and the books recorded in the surviving inventories, do bear witness to their formation as clerks: they learned Latin, the liturgy of the Church and the cults of the calendar. But they did not commit to the life of celibacy, which had become the accepted obligation of secular and regular life by the end of the twelfth century. Church leaders, including those such as Lárentíus Kálfsson, who first professed to live the regular life, are known to have fathered children; Bishop Lárentíus'

son Arni himself entered Þingeyrar ([Sigurðsson and Vigfússon 1858–1878](#), vol. I, pp. 827, 830, 842, 844, 850; [Elton 1890](#), pp. 60, 68, 85, 89, 97). A novice who entered Munkaþverár, Eiríkr Eiríksson, had fathered a child by the end of his probationary year in 1488 (*DI*, vol. VI, pp. 633–34). It would be wrong to represent this as a rejection of a primary monastic precept since celibacy was never securely established in any constituency of this church. A formula for the absolution of a professed monk for the breaking of their vows is among the records of the bishops of Hólar (*DI*, vol. II, pp. 136–37). Here, the offence against Benedictine custom was explicit: ‘frangendo votum religionis sub regulari professione ordinis et beati patris nostri Benedicti’.

Episcopal pressure to conform grew steadily over time. In 1281, it was prohibited consciously to contract a marriage with a woman who had professed vows (*DI*, vol. II, pp. 211–12 at 212). In his statutes of 1334, Archbishop Pál Bárðsson of Nidaros (1333–1346) condemned the practice of clergy in minor orders of priests cohabiting with women (*DI*, vol. II, p. 704). When Þóra Illugadóttir, a novice at Reynistaðar, bore a child in 1431, Bishop Jón Vilhjálmsson of Hólar sentenced the secular priest who was the child’s father to lifetime claustration (*DI*, vol. IV, pp. 456–58). In 1539, Bishop Jón Arason of Hólar acted to discipline a monk of Þingeyrar, Jón Saemundsen, who had fathered a child with one Eingilrað Sigurðsdóttir, demanding his return to a life of ‘chant and reading according the precepts of the rule’ (at song og sidferdi lesning og lifnadi so sem ordar adur sagdrar reglu) (*DI*, vol. X, pp. 416–17 at 417).

The formation of family ties is surely a further indication of the fluid nature of community life at the site of the monastic church. It was given an institutional sanction by the presiding bishops’ promotion of their own kinfolk and reinforced by personal and property exchanges in the wider social network of the monasteries (e.g., Agatha Helgadóttir, placed at Kirkjubæjar by her uncle, Bishop Árni Þorláksson: [Sigurðardóttir 1988](#), p. 36). Perhaps the monastery should be seen not as the archetypal self-contained colony but as the hub of a connected community of clergy and chieftain and farming families sharing in kinship and the subsistence economy of their region.

These communities of individuals, still passing through clerical and lay societies, may not have formed the internal organisation for which Benedict’s Rule had provided an outline and which, over time, was elaborated elsewhere in northern Europe. No formal records of the superior and the full complement of their convent, offices and functions have been found that might be compared to those often incorporated in registers and letter books that survive from other European regions. The inventories of buildings and their contents can inform only an approximation of the scale and scope: the churches were large enough to accommodate a professed community performing the monastic office, celebrating a daily (and perhaps a public) Mass together with ad hoc devotions at subsidiary altars. From the mid-fourteenth century at least, there were clocks to maintain the marking of the hours (e.g., at both Kirkjubæjar, Reynistaðar: *DI*, vol. II, pp. 780–82 at 781; vol. XI, pp. 320–23). The number of liturgical books, song books and suits of vestments does suggest that there were simultaneous acts of worship in different spaces within the church.

From what is known of the regular churches elsewhere in Europe, this would equate Iceland’s sites perhaps to a dependent monastery or a provincial friary in England, France or Germany: at best, perhaps there were as many as twelve professed, and at worst, fewer than half that number, under the authority of a superior but with little or no further hierarchy or framework of offices. If the Icelandic superiors did appoint a deputy, the prior prescribed by the rule, they are not visible in any surviving document, nor is there any reference either to a cellarer, the only obedientiary office, or to the deacons, whose original roles were to be deputies to the prior in the church and the cloister. Given the documentary witness to a brewer of the monastery, it does appear that some domestic tasks were vested in a designated office. Nonetheless, if these communities were provisioned largely from their own resources within their own immediate environment, there would have been no need for the framework of departments overseeing the flow of income and expenditure, which became the hallmark of major Benedictine monasteries in the later Middle Ages.

The absence of this further separated the experience of these Icelandic regulars from their counterparts. Almost any man or woman professed as a Benedictine in England, France or Germany in the eras after 1200 would have known years of office-holding and its associated tasks of administration, accountancy and the employment and supervision of paid staff. Increasingly, their experience was as consumers, active in the wider economy, on much the same terms as the laity. Iceland's Benedictines perhaps remained aligned with the original archetype of self-sufficient production captured in the rule.

8. Religious Observance

Benedict's original monastery was animated by the performance of the *Opus Dei*. It is perhaps the greatest challenge in recovering the Icelanders' experience to determine how far this was realised in their communities of either men or women. The saga narratives gave these churches a reputation for good—i.e., piously Christian and canonical—custom. The corpus of literature produced in the workshops that operated within their orbit and under their patronage has served to develop this profile, perhaps particularly as it has attracted fresh critical attention in recent years: apparently, there were churches and their clerical communities cultivating cult interests, increasingly integrated with the wider devotional culture of northern Europe. Yet whether and to what extent these characteristics were conspicuous at these sites between the twelfth and sixteenth centuries remains far from certain. A textual tradition of hagiography and moments of manuscript production are not themselves reliable proxies for an observant religious life.

It is true that at intervals from the late fourteenth century to the end of the monasteries' existence in the mid-sixteenth century, the inventories give an impression of churches equipped for communal worship. At each of the four churches, there were altars and associated devotional artefacts, plates, vestments and service books (*DI*, vol. II, pp. 780–82; vol. IX, pp. 305, 312–13, 320–21). Yet it is important to notice that almost all of these furnishings are associated with the performance of the Mass: the vestments are for the celebrant and their deacon and subdeacon; the books are missals and the designated liturgies for the feasts of the Blessed Virgin Mary and the Office of the Dead, together with lectionaries for the calendared feasts of the saints; gilded images of Icelandic and European saints reflect a commitment to votive Masses.

A notable absence is any tangible trace of the monastic office itself. The surviving inventories of the fourteenth, fifteenth and sixteenth centuries include no books that could be connected to the form and content of the conventual observance: neither breviary nor ordinal that might be expected to record their own local usage; no customary that would capture the roles and responsibilities of the choir. An *ordobók* was noticed at Kirkjubæjarklaustur in 1397, but the contents remain unclear (*DI*, vol. IV, p. 238). The earliest inventory of this church (1218) holds only a hint of the eight office hours of the *horarium*, recording 'books and bells' (bokum oc klukum), which surely summoned them into the church (*DI*, vol. I, pp. 394–95 at 394). It is worth noting that office books are more apparent in some of the inventories of the island's canon houses. At Möðruvallarklaustur in 1461, there was an antiphoner opening with 'Aspiciens', from the night office, together with a further eleven antiphoners (*DI*, vol. V, pp. 286–87, 307–8 at 307).

The principal text for the performance of the monastic office was the psalter. Psalters do appear among the books kept in these churches in the early sixteenth century, although noticeably eclipsed by the number and variety of volumes used in the daily and festive Masses. Munkaþverár in 1525 was shown to hold as many as eight, but their condition was reported to be 'good and bad' (iller og guder), perhaps an indication of their age, of years of neglect and of no action to repair or replace them (*DI*, vol. IX, p. 307). At Þingeyrar on the same date, there were two psalters, one of which was apparently bound together with an antiphoner; at Reynistaðarklaustur, there was one (*DI*, IX, pp. 313, 320). There can be no doubt that psalters were present in these churches and communities throughout their history. Early on, there may have been a dependence on imported manuscripts. An example now at Copenhagen's Safn Árna Mágnussonar, AM 618 4to, which carries the

Latin psalter together with hymns, was begun in England in the last quarter of the twelfth century, given an Old French gloss, which was in turn overwritten with an Icelandic text (for this manuscript, see also [Lorenz 2022](#)). Nonetheless, it seems that regional production soon followed. Fragments of an early-thirteenth-century Latin psalter now in the NRA were the work of a Norwegian scribe (Oslo, Riksarkivet, 100, 116, 807; RK LR Bergenhus len (Sunnmøre) 1629–1630; [Ommundesen 2013](#)), and the manuscript may have later been brought to Iceland. None of these survivors offers up an identifiable provenance for any church, regular or secular. Still, contemporary commentary connected the professed religious to a commitment to the psalter. Katrin, first superior of Reynistaðar, was remembered for an eye infection that kept her from her psalter ([Sigurðardóttir 1988](#), p. 93). In the next generation, Lárentius Kálfsson was celebrated for his energetic performance of the psalms—a ‘mighty man in prayer’ (bænahaldsmadr var hann mikill)—although it is worth noting that the focus of his biographer’s descriptions were, on the one hand, his contribution to the celebration of Marian feasts (c. 32) and, on the other, his pattern of private devotions (c. 45, ‘... las hann lengi psaltara’: [Sigurðsson and Vigfússon 1858–1878](#), vol. I, pp. 830, 847; [Elton 1890](#), pp. 65, 93, 95); here, there is no sight of the communal *opus* of the choir.

It is certainly possible that the books of the monastic office were the first and foremost casualties of the Reformation change since the command to adopt a vernacular liturgy was issued as early as 1537 ([Sigurðardóttir 1988](#), pp. 70–72), although the traces of later script in AM 618 4to attests to an impulse to retain and re-use.

The bishops’ sagas represent the experience of clerical education as an introduction to the Latin language, grammar and chant or song, as embodied in the psalter; *Lárentíus saga* expressly commended Bishop Lárentíus for his teaching of the psalms ([Patzuk-Russell 2021](#), p. 119). Ásdís Egilsdóttir has suggested that the twelve citations in *Þorlaks saga* are the mark of an author with a monk’s capacity to recall the psalter from memory ([Egilsdóttir 2021](#), p. 185). But this cannot explain their slight profile in inventories. A possible answer is that Iceland’s Benedictine communities were not, or not consistently, large enough to support the day–night observance of the office and that, generally, it was eclipsed by the expectation to keep custody of a Mass church and cult centre for the surrounding neighbourhood. The only glimpse of religious life at Kirkjubæjarklaustur in its first full century is of its complement of three priests and deacon (with sufficient vestments for two further clerics (*DI*, vol. IV, pp. 238–39 at 238; [Sigurðardóttir 1988](#), pp. 42–43). This was a church well equipped for Masses. In her account of the two communities of women, Anna Sigurðardóttir pictures monastic churches that acted as a focus for the worship life of outlying manors, such as Skál in the thirteenth century ([Sigurðardóttir 1988](#), pp. 32–33).

The gravitational pull of public worship and popular religion was the shared experience of monastic churches of all customary traditions in the later Middle Ages. The commitment of Iceland’s Benedictines to their most local cults connects them to their counterparts in other regions of the north. It also accounts for the sharing of books and devotional furnishings between the monastery and the neighbourhood, such as the donation made by a laywoman, Ulfhildr Ketilsdóttir, to Reynistaðar in 1443 (*DI*, vol. IV, pp. 636–37).

Their adoption of Franciscan saints, Bonaventure and Clare of Assisi, is also a mark of their integration into the devotional mainstream (e.g., at Munkaþverár, Þingeyrar: *DI*, vol. IX, pp. 305, 313). An affinity for the spirituality of the mendicants may have arisen under the increasing influence of the Norwegian prelates who held both Icelandic sees for much of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. It was with the Dominicans at Bergen (1357) that Arngrímur Brandsson, the custodian of the abbacy of Þingeyrar, encountered the form of the office that he subsequently introduced in Skálholt ([Harðarson 2021](#)). At Bergen, there were ties of confraternity between the Benedictines and the Dominicans (1468: *DI*, vol. V, pp. 523–24).

Here, too, there are Benedictine parallels: in the later Middle Ages, the lives and works of the friars’ founding fathers attracted attention in the learned communities of northern Europe. In England, the monks of St Augustine’s Abbey, Canterbury, and Durham Cathedral Priory held copies of the Rule and Testament of St Francis ([Barker-Benfield 2018](#),

vol. II, p. 57; [Raine 1838](#), p. 70. The manuscript survives as Durham Cathedral Chapter Library MS B. III. 8, fos. 352ra-353ra; 353v-358va). A mid-fifteenth-century anthology made at Melk brought together Jerome's *Regula monachorum ad Eustachium* with the rule of Columbanus and Bonaventure's *De vitis mystica* (Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Lyell 60).

9. *Lectio*, Learning and Teaching

While the monastic office in Iceland remains out of focus, the record of books and the witness of manuscript copies point to customary complements to the *Opus Dei*, that is, a routine of communal and individual readings. Among those kept at the high altar Þingeyrar in 1525 were a '*Dialogus*', most likely the work of Gregory the Great; a copy of the *Vitae patrum* (presumably in Latin, given the use of the title); and a volume of Sunday sermons, texts not found in the performance of the office but typical of those that might be the subject of a collation led by the superior (*DI*, vol. IX, p. 314). The sermon book was described as 'worn and old' (rottnar og gamlar), which may be a mark of recent neglect but might also be a sign of long-term use. *Vitae patrum* was also among the books recorded at Reynistaðarklaustur in the same year. It was one of only two non-liturgical Latin books listed. The other was a bible, a volume unlikely to have been made in a format suited to individual reading but which might have been used for a communal collation (*DI*, vol. IX, pp. 320–21). The vernacular translation of the text *Heilagra feðra æfi*, which has been dated to the thirteenth century, may have been prompted by an established custom of reading of this kind. Indeed, among its exemplary stories is that of a monk so well practised in *lectio* that he can repeat the speeches of Christ from Holy Scripture after he gave up his own books to the poor ([Egilsdóttir 2021](#), pp. 181–82). The insular form of homiliary, witnessed in the so-called *Icelandic Homily Book* (now in the National Library of Sweden, Perg. 4to 15), might also point to an early adoption of customs of claustral *lectiones*. The texts in this sequence, although often described as sermons, are in fact brief collations of a length ideally suited to exposition—as in a monastery chapter house—or individual meditation. Their subjects are taken from the daily and calendar routines of any church served by a community of clergy, although the recurrent images of chant and song and glancing references to an abbot and their monks appear to anchor it to a monastic context. One of the two recensions of the Icelandic saga life of Gregory the Great (preserved in Stock, perg. fol. no. 2; [Wolf 2013](#), p. 118) portrayed the practice of contemplative reading. Gregory was shown to be 'bookish' (bokfrodr) and occupied with 'sacred reading' (lesa helga bæk: [Unger 1877b](#), p. 379).

None of the inventories indicates the particular placement of books in the monastery building for the purposes of private reading; in fact, it would appear that collections were kept together in the church. Nor is it yet clear if there was a communal space for personal, private *lectio* equivalent to the carrel-seat of a classical cloister walk. Yet the selection of texts they record do suggest a priority attached to readings that, in other regions of Europe, would have been regarded as the mainstay of the syllabus. Hagiography outnumbered other genres: the 1525 inventories from Munkaþverár, Reynistaðarklaustur and Þingeyrar counted a total of 20 saints' sagas between them (*DI*, vol. IX, pp. 307, 314, 321). There was also a mix of Mariology—a miracle collection at Reynistaðarklaustur and a sequence following the *Mariusaga* at Þingeyrar and a legend of the Blessed Virgin (mariu historiu)—among the chapter-house books at Munkaþverár (*DI*, IX, pp. 307, 314, 321).

The witness of the inventories would suggest that the dominance of the same texts among the surviving manuscripts may not be the skew of collectors' preferences. In the Árnastofnun alone, there are as many as twenty surviving books and fragments of books made in Iceland before 1550 that contain only the legends and lives of saints (<https://handrit.is/>, accessed 1 June 2023). Of course, the evident energy of the translation enterprise in the period c.1250–c.1375, which saw the composition of the vernacular lives of monastic (Basil, Benedict) and prelate saints (Dunstan, Thomas Becket), may be interpreted as a response to patterns of reading that were then well established in Iceland's monasteries ([Camiz 2021](#)). It might be objected that these writings were expressions of a general clerical practice established in the island, and the only direct connection to a monastery may be in

the crafting of the manuscripts themselves. But the landscape of each of these lives was essentially monastic—Caesarea, Cassino, Glastonbury and Canterbury—and their chapters brought the observance of monks clearly into focus: ‘Calling together both the venerable clergy and the monasteries and all the people who were dear to Christ’, recounted the *Basiliusaga*, the Monk Bishop urged them to do their duty by the office; ‘he said to them: My beloved children . . . we must keep vigil the night, and to implore his will, that the corrupter of souls may not prevail’ (*Vita Basili*, c. 8. Migne 1860, 295–312A at 302. See also Cormack 1991, 83–84 at 83; Wolf 2013, pp. 56–57). As Sigbjørn Olsen Sønnesyn has suggested for the narrative of Knut, it may be that saga lives themselves were shaped not only by a busy calendar of church feasts but also by a rising impulse for devotional reading (Olsen Sønnesyn 2016, pp. 145–46).

The provisions for reading in these communities, including the phases of manuscript production associated with Munkaþverár and Þingeyrar, surely arose from a commitment to the teaching and learning of the professed community. Benedict’s monastery was a ‘school for the service of the Lord’ (*Regula Benedicti*, c. 48) but not primarily a place of practical education. The followers expected to answer his call were the literate laymen of the Roman *urbs*, although there was an expectation of unspecified instruction for the children pledged to the colony by its patrons. A monastery school teaching the language and other skills necessary for the discipline of the rule was the creation of the rule’s early champions in the regions of the north, lacking even the residue of the learned culture of Rome. The syllabus of this schooling in England, France, Germany and Ireland developed far in advance of the Benedictine identity itself. By the twelfth century, it was becoming the defining feature of the monastic profession, to the extent that the illiterate who still came to the cloister were set apart from their peers (Butler 1949, p. 130). In the wake of the Fourth Lateran Council, it was overwritten with the expectations of a general clerical education, a grounding in the primitive sciences of the scholastic and an exposure to the legal and theological commentaries of the schools.

The bishops’ sagas connect Iceland’s Benedictines with schools early in their history. *Lárentíus saga* suggests a syllabus: the teaching of Latin for sacerdotal service in the church (Elton 1890, p. 60) to a mixed constituency of *klerkr* and *brædr* (Patzuk-Russell 2021, p. 117). There is no trace of the texts that might support such teaching in the surviving inventories, although their absence may only reflect that these were intended as accounts of ‘church furnishings’. The presence of (unspecified) books both in Latin and in the Norse language at Kirkjubærjarklaustur in 1397 might testify to a grounding in grammar given there (*DI*, iv. 238–39 at 238). In the fifteenth century, Abbess Barbara of Reynistaðar agreed to receive a boy to be taught and trained as a novice, which would indicate that there were the resources to teach the first principles of a clerical education (*DI*, vol. IV, pp. 640–41).

Fragments among the surviving manuscripts do add substance to the sagas’ depiction of a monastic school. The fleeting glimpse of a bilingual psalter perhaps points to the teaching practice of such a schoolroom; certainly, the psalter was among the Benedictine student’s first steps in continuous Latin prose, to be mastered before solemn profession. There can be no doubt that church worship in Iceland, regular and secular, was spoken and sung in Latin, and so a parallel text surely served the same purpose as in other regions of Europe: as a point of entry for the novice and the ordinand. A small selection of textbooks widely used in Europe for teaching Latin listed at the Augustinian community of Möðruvallarklaustur in 1461 may be indicative of the approach also being taken among the Benedictines, not least given the traffic of priests and prelates between them. Here, there were Priscian’s *Institutiones grammaticae*, together with Éberhard of Béthune’s *Graecismus*; a guide to the principles of grammar written in verse; the Bible dictionary of William Brito; and a copy of the Christian poetry of Sedulius, a common choice of ‘reader’ for Latin beginners (*DI*, vol. V, p. 288). Brito’s introduction to the language of the Bible and Sedulius’ devotional verse might signal that, here, if not also among the Benedictines, the Latin reading of the *klaustur* was still aligned with the custom of early medieval monasteries in holding secular literature (Ovid, Virgil, et al.) at arm’s length.

There is no trace of any text of this kind among the surviving manuscripts associated with the Benedictine monasteries. A digest of Donatus' *Ars minor* had passed into Old Norse by the last quarter of the thirteenth century, contained within *Málskrúðsfræði*, the work of Óláfr Þórðarson (Patzuk-Russell 2021, p. 18). Clearly, there was a common acceptance of Donatus' status as the primary Latin textbook since the reform ordinance issued in 1537 named him and 'Cato' (i.e., the text known as *Disticha Catonis*) as the first of the syllabus authors (*DI*, vol. X, pp. 213–21 at 215).

There is evidence of provisions for teaching the advanced skill of the *compotus*, the foundation for a command of the liturgical calendar: a single leaf, containing an Easter table, dates from before c.1150 (AM 732 A VII 4to; Patzuk-Russell, 124); from perhaps decades later, another pre-1200 manuscript—which has been connected to the Augustinian community at Viðeyjar—carries a discussion of the determination of the calendar (Copenhagen, Royal Library, GKS 1812 4to; Patzuk-Russell 2021, pp. 165–67, 184; see also Harðarson et al. 2021). An incomplete text, again in translation, appears in a manuscript of the thirteenth century. The 'time order book' (tjidskipunarbok) found at Þingeyrar in 1525 may have been a practice guide to this same discipline (*DI*, vol. IX, p. 313).

From the texts most frequently appearing in the *máldagar*, manuscripts and fragments, the primary pedagogy of any school in operation at these sites was of priestly formation. Requests for the communities to accept youths to be taught only so far as their entry into the priesthood—such as Magnús Margrétarson dispatched to Munkaþverár in 1466—recognised the nature of this syllabus (*DI*, vol. IV, pp. 458–59). While there are more documented instances connected to the island's Augustinian communities, whose regular identity was more commonly associated with the practice of priesthood, clearly the capacity of the Benedictines was looked upon in the same way (Patzuk-Russell 2021, pp. 120–21, giving examples from Augustinian Helgafell). While the vernacular saga lives made in this environment may have responded to and reinforced popular cults, they also described a template for priesthood. *Benedictus saga* modelled the moral stature and spiritual impulses for the true 'holy man of God' (heilagr guds madr: *Benedictus saga*, cc. 11, 17; Unger 1877a, p. 165). The sagas of Basil and Dunstan represented their role in the Church Militant, with a particular emphasis that may have been especially resonant within the regular–secular networks of Iceland's church: in their respective missions, these men enabled monasteries and venerable clergy to come together in the service of the Christian people (Cormack 1991, pp. 83–84 at 83, 94; Wolf 2013, pp. 56–57, 92–95; for *Dunstanus saga*'s account of the spread of the monastic mission (munklifi for um allt England, c. 8), see Vigfússon 1887, pp. 385–408 at 394).

Conspicuously absent from the documentary and manuscript evidence are the scholastic works that, among Benedictines elsewhere in northern Europe, came to eclipse, or even efface, earlier textual traditions. The early contact between the island's Augustinian communities and the abbey school of St Victor does not appear to have led to regular traffic to the schools of northern Europe (*Þorláks saga*, c.4; Jakobssen and Clark 2013, xiii, 3–4). Archbishop Jørundar of Nidaros (1288–1309) intended every part of his province to follow the pattern of their colleagues. His statutes of 1306 included the call for suitable candidates (personae aptiores) from every monastery to be sent to study beyond the kingdom (extra regnum: *DI*, vol. II, pp. 351–53 at 351). Across the Nordic Church, it seems that it was seculars, especially those entering or established in cathedral chapters, who were most often drawn to the developing universities. After 1300, there were few if any Icelanders among them (Bagge 1984, pp. 4, 8–9, 13–15; Patzuk-Russell 2021, p. 126). In this respect, Iceland's monasteries may have followed a different course from their Scandinavian neighbours. Certainly, monk scholars from Denmark and Norway were seen in Paris and in the growing number of German schools in the fourteenth, fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries (Bagge 1984). It may have been only after the foundation of a university in Copenhagen (1479) that there was traffic in numbers from Iceland (Patzuk-Russell 2021, p. 126).

This apparent detachment from the academic syllabus of the northern schools may have been both a consequence and cause of the vigour of their vernacular culture. While the

working environment for the clergy was undoubtedly bilingual, their discourses of teaching, scholarship and creative expression were in their Norse vernacular. For Benedictine men, this was quite different from other regions of the north, where vernaculars retained a secondary status outside of the schoolroom. Among Benedictine women, by contrast, in later centuries, this had become their common experience (for e.g., see [Erler 2002](#), pp. 27–47; [Busnell and Brown 2012](#), pp. 17–18; [Lowe 2003](#), pp. 288–98).

10. Personal Discipline

In Benedict's Rule, an intellectual and spiritual regime was underpinned by rigorous physical discipline, the regulation of personal care and of independent activity outside of the observant routine. The customs of diet, dress, hygiene and recreation in Iceland's communities are almost entirely invisible in the surviving written evidence, although the saga literature commended the ideals of the rule. The *Dunstanus saga* pictured brethren dining at their common table (*bræðr til borðs*: *Dunstanus saga*, c. 17: [Vigfússon 1887](#), p. 406). The Stockholm recension of the *Gregorius saga páfa* showed the future pontiff following a strict regime of 'fasting, vigils and good living' (*i fòstum ok vòkum ok bæna halldi*: [Unger 1877b](#), p. 380).

Archaeological evidence is beginning to establish an outline of the likely pattern of life. It might be expected that Iceland, like its Scandinavian neighbours, could readily realise the Benedictine ideal of voluntary abstinence from meat. The experience of the domestic economy at fourteenth-century Þingeyrar led the monk Arngrímur to reflect on the 'poor country' (*fá tacku landi*) of his home ([Jensson 2022](#), p. 147). Fish were surely staple feature of the monasteries' provisions. In his contribution to the *Gudmundr saga*, Arngrímur pictured sea-fishing and the reap of the sea-field (*sjóreita*) with the vividness of an eye-witness (*Gudmundr saga D*, c. 87: [Sigurðsson and Vigfússon 1858–1878](#), vol. II, p. 179). It seems likely that at least some of the 25 barrels were counted in the Þingeyrar inventory of 1525 stored salted fish (*DI*, ix. 316; [Kristjánsson 2022](#), p. 109).

Nonetheless, the earliest of the monastery inventories made in the first quarter of the thirteenth century showed a substantial stock of sheep, a dairy herd and cattle. At Kirkjubæjar in 1218, there were some 260 ewes 'in lamb' (*gymbra lambaðar*: *DI*, vol. I, p. 396). The scale of the herds indicates an agricultural operation intended to serve the interests of the monastery and outlying settlements as well as a trading surplus. Again at Kirkjubæjarklaustur, there were 75 head of cattle in 1343 (*DI*, vol. II, pp. 781–82), a number second only to the farm stock of the larger Augustinian community at Helgafell ([McCooey 2017](#), p. 111). Certainly, this livestock provided the professed community with dairy foods, but it is also conceivable that red meat found its way to their table. Excavations at Reynistaðarklaustur and Þingeyrar—from precinct middens as well as the sites of satellite farms—have revealed the residue of a mixed menu of foodstuffs ([Riddell et al. 2018](#)): fish, dairy and meat, supplemented with cereals such as barley and a sedge plant (*melgrasstúfurinn*), which may have been the mainstay of bread and porridge ([Sigurðardóttir 1988](#), pp. 44–45), and herbs and root vegetables ([Asen 2021](#); [Kristjánsson et al. 2014](#), p. 565; [Kristjánsson 2022](#), p. 172; [Sigurðardóttir 1988](#), p. 113).

A degree of variety in the diet was the shared experience of any monastic in the later Middle Ages, and the presence of cattle suggests that Icelanders were inclined to mitigate their abstinence as much as their counterparts elsewhere in Europe. Perhaps the greatest differences in their experience arose from their unique environmental conditions: here, there were none of the fruits that were known to have enhanced the common tables of Benedictines in the southern regions of England, in Germany and certainly in much of France, nor were there the species of farmed poultry or game birds with which to side-step the prohibition of the meat of four-legged beasts. Perhaps these were the circumstances that caused Sigurd Jorsalfar at Munkaþverár to neglect the traditional Friday fast, as remembered in the *Morkinskinna* (*Morkinskinna*, cc. 84–85: [Andersson and Gade 2000](#), p. 393; [Magnúsdóttir 2013](#), p. 94).

Material remains offer a faint impression of the monastics' style of dress. Clearly, textiles were made at these sites, for their clothing certainly, although ecclesiastical vestments

may more often have been imported from elsewhere. Without any records of internal visitation, it remains unclear how much personal appearance was regulated and the degree to which distinctions between regular and secular and between clerical and lay were upheld. The Old Norse ‘svartmunka’ emerged as a byword for a monastic of the general Benedictine tradition; it was not used to describe the outward appearance of professed men and women. Nonetheless, the early-thirteenth-century compiler of *Morkinskinna* thought that to be disguised as a monk was a matter of putting on ‘dark clothing’ (svort klaedi: *Morkinskinna*, c. 18: [Andersson and Gade 2000](#), p. 160). Elsewhere in northern Europe, it was widely complained in the later Middle Ages that monastic men and women dressed too much like the laity. It does seem possible that the small professed populations in Iceland were not dissimilar. Close to their kinship groups, and in the case of the men, recognised as patriarchs in their own right, they may have presented themselves much like their lay peers.

The domestic environment in which these forms of personal discipline were applied remains difficult to resolve with any clarity. Beyond the church, the only communal space of the monastery complex that is documented is the chapter house at Munkaþverár. Anna Sigurðardóttir has suggested that the women of Reynistaðarklaustur occupied a communal dormitory ([Sigurðardóttir 1988](#), p. 294), but there is no clear account of such spaces at any of the four Benedictine sites, nor has archaeological excavation yet established the likely plan of any domestic range of buildings. By the turn of the fifteenth century, the women of Reynistaðar benefited from a bathhouse (klausturbaðstofa), although it does not appear to have been positioned within an enclosure exclusive to the professed since Abbess Agnes Jónsdóttir was witnessed conversing there with her brother (*DI*, vol. VIII, pp. 312–14 at 313). It seems there was a similar arrangement at Munkaþverár where access to a bathhouse was among the benefits offered in 1519 to the mother of a lay benefactor (*DI*, vol. VIII, pp. 686–87 at 687).

11. Manual Labour

The monasteries were a focus for food production and at least some forms of manufacture, but it does not follow that any of the labour associated with these activities fell to the professed themselves. Benedict’s Rule warned followers of the threat of idleness and urged them to take up productive occupations in between their office hours (chp. 48: 1). Yet the original vision of the communal cultivation of crops and livestock faded fast, and even the earliest monastic settlements in northern Europe probably relied on retained labour in the same way as any other significant landholding with its own infrastructure and a resident population.

Benedictine communities did come to accept lay brothers and sisters into their precincts as a supplementary labour force, although not on the scale nor under the same organisational framework as the Cistercians. This lay brother/sisterhood was certainly present in Iceland’s communities. At first, there may have been a mixed population in each house since, in his statutes of 1306, Archbishop Jörundur of Nidaros commanded only *conversi* of the same gender as the regulars to be taken in (*DI*, vol. II, pp. 351–53 at 352).

The lay brethren may have been the mainstay of the general, unskilled labour seen on these sites; their role may account for the fact that the inventories include equipment and tools cheek-by-jowl with the furnishings of the monastery (Reynistaðarklaustur 1408: *DI*, vol. III, p. 718; Munkaþverár 1461: *DI*, vol. V, pp. 303–7 at 305; [Kristjánsson 2022](#), p. 106). Skilled craft work, however, was probably always contributed by outsiders on commercial terms. An agreement made at Munkaþverár in 1498 brought in a married couple, he a worker in iron and wood, she capable of making clothes and shoes (*DI*, vol. 6, pp. 684–86; [Kristjánsson 2022](#), p. 173).

As among the Benedictines in other regions of Europe, the exception to this general rule may have been those craft activities that could be construed as acts of devotion, such as the creation of church textiles and the copying of manuscript books. Material traces have confirmed that Kirkjubæjarklaustur was a site of textile production, but the contribution of the professed women remains, for now, pure supposition. The connection of named

women with particular pieces, such as Margrét Bjarnardóttir of Reynistaðar, remembered in association with an altar cloth from Malu church (Sigurðardóttir 1988, pp. 53–54, 125, 128 &n), may well be a record not of personal production but of patronage.

Analysis of the script and painting style of the manuscript books made at Munkaþverár and Þingeyrar has succeeded in identifying individual copyists and artists. It has also shown that some carried their skill from one workshop to another, a freedom of movement that might point not to a monk but to a professional artisan (Drechsler 2017, pp. 181–85). The case of a woman of Kirkjubæjarklaustur who may have carried the name Katrin or Kristin and who was condemned for heresy in 1343 would appear to identify a professed woman practised in writing. Although no further named individuals are known, it may reflect a custom of copying in the community; as Anna Sigurðardóttir has observed, these women entered the religious life from a bookish lay society (Sigurðardóttir 1988, pp. 40–41), just like their counterparts elsewhere in Europe, although it does not necessarily follow that they carried the craft skill of writing or (as Sigurðardóttir has romantically imagined) that they fashioned quill pens for themselves (Sigurðardóttir 1988, pp. 52–53).

The Benedictines established centres of book production and publication across their northern European networks; some endured even after the advent of print and as far as the Reformation era suppressions (Clark 2004). But the role of the monks in Iceland's communities may have been more often that of a patron than a practitioner. They commissioned books; they composed or compiled texts, but it was not always their task to copy or illuminate them, at least not as a matter of conventual routine. Haraldur Bernharðsson has characterised the scribal practice of the thirteenth century as both 'learned' and 'hierarchical' which might point to a monastic context (Bernharðsson 2018, pp. 283, 313). Yet the homogeneity of hands and occurrence of linguistic errors in manuscripts made after 1300 could signal the contribution not of clerks but rather artisanal professionals (Jensson 2017, pp. 881–82; Jensson 2022, p. 147). Monk scribes did practice in every era from the twelfth to sixteenth centuries, but they were exceptions to a general rule of consumption, not creation. Like their counterparts, the contribution of Iceland's Benedictines may have been to facilitate and fuel the making of books to provide a focus for a 'labour exchange' of book artisans (Drechsler 2017, p. 185).

12. A Cult of St Benedict

Both the substance and the absence of sources for Iceland's Benedictines might encourage the overall conclusion that their mode of life was, in many respects, far removed from the customs recognised in other regions of the north. Yet there is one further aspect of their culture that can be clearly resolved and challenges this view. These communities expressed a powerful commitment to the cult of St Benedict. Their churches' dedication was dual—the Blessed Virgin Mary and Benedict (*DI*, vol. VIII, pp. 148–49 at 148)—although the cult identity of the communities of women would appear to have been aligned primarily with the Virgin (Kirkjubæjarklaustur 1343, 1397: *DI*, vol. II, p. 781; vol. IV, pp. 238–39). The obit of Agatha Helgadóttir at Kirkjubæjar in the summer of 1342 was reported as the community began the vigil for the feast of the Assumption (Sigurðardóttir 1988, p. 38).

An early-sixteenth-century altar cloth from the church at Skarð (National Museum of Iceland, no. 2028) was embroidered with figures of five Norwegian saints together with St Benedict; it also carries the name of Abbess Sólveig Hrafnadóttir of Reynistaðar (1508–1561). If not originally made for the monastery, the inscription might indicate an expression of identity in her act of patronage (Guðjónsson 1982, pp. 11–13; Sigurðardóttir 1988, p. 159; Gunnarsdóttir 2008, p. 30; Kristjánsdóttir 2022, p. 140). It was surely a recognition of the dedication of the church which in 1363 led a layman, Benedikt Kolbeinsson, to request burial at Þingeyrar with the spiritual benefit of suffrages (i.e., prayers) of St Benedict (*DI*, vol. III, p. 185). Þingeyrar maintained a discrete altar dedicated to the saint; the gilt image (likneske) at Munkaþverár and Þingeyrar (1525) may also indicate the presence of an altar alongside any commemoration at the high altar of the church (*DI*, vol. IX, pp. 305, 313; Cormack 2011). None of these images is known to survive; perhaps they were sculpted

from stone, such as the fragment of a figure of St Dorothy found at Viðeyjarklaustur (Kristjánsdóttir et al. 2014, p. 574). Possibly, they were similar in form to an Italian bust of the saint decorated with gilding and inset paintings, which dates from the last quarter of the fifteenth century (now, Philadelphia Museum of Art no. 101809 (<https://www.philamuseum.org/collection/object/101809>, accessed on 1 June 2023). The late witness to the *likneski* suggests there was no waning of cult interest in the sixteenth century. The principal feast of St Benedict (21 March) and the feast of the translation of his relics (July) were entered into the monasteries' liturgical calendars and, it would appear, remained there, identified in a date-clause as late as 1558 (*DI*, vol. XIII, pp. 318–19 at 319). Perhaps it was a final act of devotion that the surrender of the monastery at Þingeyrar was sealed in the chapter on 10 February 1550, the feast of Benedict's sister St Scholastica (*DI*, vol. XI, pp. 753–54 at 754).

The legend of Benedict, both as an exemplary ascetic and as a pioneering monastic pastor, was placed at the heart of their textual tradition, transmitted not only through the Old Norse saga text based on Gregory's hagiography, *Benedictus saga*, but also as an echo in the saga life of Gregory himself, *Gregorius saga páfa* (fragments of which are preserved in two recensions), and that of the English abbot Dunstan of Glastonbury (Cormack 1991, pp. 94, 97–98; Wolf 2013, pp. 117–22 at 118–20; Unger 1877b, pp. 377–96; Vigfússon 1887, pp. 385–408). The miracle stories that were joined with the Marian hagiography known as the *Mariu saga* also conveyed the legend of Benedict, calling him the 'sun of abbots with his flock of monks' (*Benedictus sol abotanna með utokiligiðum flokkum sinnaunka*: Unger 1871, vol. II, p. 482). These two works were written in the fourteenth century, but the fascination with the figure of Benedict can be traced to these communities' formative years. It was not the abbey of Montecassino that the pilgrim abbot Nikláus Bergsson, second superior of Munkaþverár (c.1155–1159x1160) celebrated in his poetic itinerary, but simply 'Benedict's church' (Hill 1983, p. 177).

Their celebration of Benedict washed over the wider Christian community, leaving a mark on secular churches and, arguably, on the lay community of believers themselves. The primary feast (21 March) was among those codified in 1275 by Bishop Árni Þorláksson of Skálholt (1269–1298) to be celebrated with no fewer than nine lections (Marner 2013). Annalists recorded both the primary feast and the translation of the relics of Benedict's sister St Scholastica to the abbey at Cluny (recorded in the *Skálholts-Annaler; Annales regii*: Storm [1888] 1977, pp. 94, 169). Portions of lections to be read at Benedict's feast are found in a breviary dating from the first half of the thirteenth century (AM 655 XII 4to + 686 4to; Cormack 1991, p. 240). There was an image of Benedict in the church at Alviðra in 1345 (*DI*, vol. II, pp. 786–87 at 787) and the church of St Matthew at Fagranes noticed in 1360 and 1394 (*DI*, vol. III, pp. 174, 562). Benedict and other monk prelates appear in a calendar that Árni Magnússon found at the church of Vallanes (AM, 249 fol. f). The figure of Benedict the pastor and the precepts of the *Regula Benedicti* carried a spiritual force quite independently of the island's network of monasteries. The balance of probability is that the *Icelandic Homily Book* was made for use by a secular priest in his lay ministry (van Weenen 1993, p. 4), yet he presented to his congregation a homily derived from the text of the rule. It might be said that Benedictinism in Iceland was articulated in two registers: one for the professed religious and one for those no less devout who did not live under vows.

This record of cult Benedictinism contrasts sharply with some other monastic constituencies in northern Europe. In England, the cult interest in Benedict faded over time. Although the greater abbeys typically retained an altar dedicated to Benedict, they increasingly languished in the shadow of other dedications whose observances drew more investment. Scarcely any later medieval images of Benedict survive from England after 1300, and few are attested in documentary records. Common and consistent commemoration of the saint's feast days broke down, prompting a complaint from the president of the congregation's General Chapter and investigations from its visitors (Cambridge, Trinity College, MS O. 9. 25, fo. 162v; Pantin 1931–1937, vol. II, p. 83). The English monks had not abandoned their claim to the Benedictine name, but more and more, their devotional

interests were aligned with those of their patrons. Also, their own discourse of monastic custom was marked by a growing eclecticism. They explored expressions of monasticism in the earliest church history and even among Old Testament archetypes. England's Benedictines' turn away from their founding father was especially marked, but communities in France, Germany and the Low Countries in the later Middle Ages displayed a similar tendency towards laicisation and localism in their devotional culture (e.g., [De Loos 2003](#); [Biennemann 2021](#)).

13. Conclusions

Although it remains difficult to recover the character of monastic life at Iceland's four enduring Benedictine communities with the same clarity as their counterparts in other regions of Europe, there can be little doubt that the rule represented more than an inspiration for the mode of monastic life: in the figure and legend of Benedict, it came to be a lifeforce of Iceland's Christian faith.

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