

Community and Conflict in the Chronicle of Bury St Edmunds

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Jocelin of Brakelond's chronicle provides a remarkably detailed account of conflict within the monastic community of Bury St Edmunds over the course of two decades in the late twelfth century, tracing the convent's division into factions following the death of the negligent Abbot Hugh, the controversial election of his successor Samson, and the community's subsequent difficulty negotiating its relationship with him. This article examines the position of conflict within Jocelin's narrative, and argues that it played a fundamental role in shaping the monastic experience by mediating relationships within the convent and between the convent and the abbot.

Jocelin of Brakelond entered the abbey of Bury St Edmunds in 1173 as a novice during the rule of Abbot Hugh (1157–80). The abbey was one of the largest, wealthiest and most privileged religious houses in England, and in Jocelin's time consisted of around eighty monks. For thirty years he remained there, acting in that time as chaplain to the prior and then to the abbot, and finally as guest-master. His chronicle, written around the turn of the thirteenth century recounts the death of Abbot Hugh and the election of the sub-sacrist Samson (1182–1211) as his successor.¹ It goes on to describe the daily life of the community and

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All translations of Jocelin's chronicle are my own.

¹ Jocelin's chronicle has no agreed title. The most accurate is perhaps the one favoured by H. E. Butler in his translation, 'The chronicle of Jocelin of Brakelond concerning the acts of Samson, abbot of the monastery of St Edmund', a translation of the

the difficulties that it faced, extending the narrative down to 1202. Jocelin's authorial tone invites confidence through the sharing of his own thoughts on the events he describes: he is remarkably forthcoming, going as far as to recount moments when he embarrassed himself and caused offence, and the reader is often reminded that the author is both a participant in and a witness to the narrative.

Alongside Jocelin's forthcoming style, much of the appeal of his chronicle stems from his detailed account of the day-to-day running of the abbey. He relates, for example, an agreement between the cellarer and the abbot's buyers about who should have priority at the town market under various circumstances.² When the abbot was away, the cellarer and his buyers were to have first pick of food, and when the abbot was home, whoever arrived first had the first pick. If both arrived at the same time then the abbot's buyers were to have priority, but Abbot Samson instructed his buyers to give precedence to the cellarer's. As a result, both parties agreed to buy any supplies of which there were not enough jointly, and to divide them equally. At this point Jocelin drew on Lucan's *Pharsalia* and observed that a 'discordia concors', a 'discordant harmony', remained in the community.³ This appears at first glance to be an unusual way to describe a community living within the peaceful enclosure of monastic life; however, the *Chronicle* is a text which frequently addresses the theme of conflict, and which makes no attempt to present the community as idyllic. Its stated purpose was rather to present 'certain evil things as a warning, and certain good things as an example', guiding the community by foregrounding such disputes.⁴ The ways in which the tensions of the community are presented in this text therefore offer an important insight into monastic conflict, one which it would be a mistake to overlook.

Nevertheless, discussions of the *Chronicle* have largely focused on Abbot Samson, to the exclusion of other aspects of the text. Brian Patrick McGuire observed in 1978 that the *Chronicle* 'has not received sufficient

text's incipit in British Library, London, MS Harleian 1005. In this article, it is referred to simply as the *Chronicle*. For an overview of the *Chronicle*'s historiography see Brian Patrick McGuire, 'The collapse of a monastic friendship: the case of Jocelin and Samson of Bury', *Journal of Medieval History* iv (1978), 369–97 at pp. 369–72.

² *The chronicle of Jocelin of Brakelond*, ed. H. E. Butler, London 1949, 102–5.

³ *Ibid.* 105; Lucan, *The civil war*, ed. J. D. Duff, London 1928, 1.98.

⁴ 'quedam mala interserens ad cautelam, quedam bona ad usum': *Chronicle*, 1. For discussions of Jocelin's purpose in writing see McGuire, 'The collapse of a monastic friendship', 378, 387, and Daniel Gerrard, 'Jocelin of Brakelond and the power of Abbot Samson', *Journal of Modern History* xl (2014), 1–23 at pp. 4–7, 10. I concur with Gerrard's view that the *Chronicle* is a work primarily concerned with Abbot Samson's actions in response to opposition, but contend that it also reveals much about the convent's own responses.

attention for what it reveals about the dissolution of a monastic friendship', itself a microcosm of the broader tensions in the community.⁵ Since then, various works have addressed some aspects of conflict within Jocelin's text. McGuire himself observed the community's movement between dispute and unity, but attributed it to 'the volatility of emotion among medieval people' rather than seeing it as a particular quality of monastic conflict.⁶ Antonia Gransden described how Samson got his way in conflicts through 'persuasion', but declined to examine more closely the techniques by which he achieved this.⁷ Recently, Daniel Gerrard's article on Abbot Samson's exercise of power has made significant inroads into appreciating the ways in which conflict was resolved. Yet more remains to be done, especially when it comes to understanding the convent's part in such conflicts. The historical focus on Samson has left the convent neglected, even though both parties were active participants in disputes: as Gerrard notes, the lengths Samson was at times forced to go to demonstrate 'how determined the convent could be when it chose to resist the abbot's commands'.⁸ Both parties likewise felt the repercussions of such disputes. There is therefore need for a framework that embraces the whole community, and examines how conflict and its resolution shaped the monastic experience at all levels.

This article therefore investigates the ways in which the *Chronicle* presents monastic conflict and conflict resolution, and their effect on the community. In doing so, it seeks to push back against David Knowles's suggestion, echoed by McGuire, that this is a text which 'denies and eludes any process of analysis or synthesis'.⁹ Quite the opposite is true: when one attempts to categorise the examples of conflict found in Jocelin's narrative, a clearer picture of its causes and effects emerges. This article therefore approaches the *Chronicle* in three parts. The first traces the division of the convent into factional groups, which both generated conflict and informed how it played out. The second examines the tensions between the convent and the abbot, which had the potential to generate unity within the previously discordant community. The final part considers disputes between the abbey and external parties, and demonstrates that such conflict could generate a comparable unity between the convent and the abbot. Throughout, attention is drawn to the evidence of another Bury text, the *Chronicle of the election of Hugh, abbot of Bury St Edmunds and later bishop of Ely*.¹⁰ Written in

⁵ McGuire, 'The collapse of a monastic friendship', 369.

⁶ Ibid. 387. For a discussion of performative emotion and its role in conflict resolution see Gerrard, 'Jocelin of Brakelond', 8–10.

⁷ Antonia Gransden, *A history of the abbey of Bury St Edmunds, 1182–1256*, Woodbridge 2007, 32–43.

⁸ Gerrard, 'Jocelin of Brakelond', 14.

⁹ David Knowles, *The monastic order in England*, 2nd edn, Cambridge 1963, 309; McGuire, 'The collapse of a monastic friendship', 371.

¹⁰ *The chronicle of the election of Hugh, abbot of Bury St Edmunds and later bishop of Ely*, ed. R. M. Thomson, Oxford 1974.

the 1220s in the aftermath of an election far more tumultuous than Abbot Samson's, it reflects the tensions within the community at that time, and sheds light on the conflict recorded in Jocelin's earlier chronicle. Nor is the significance of this study restricted to Bury St Edmunds, despite Ellen Arnold's observation that it is 'worth studying the ways in which individual houses responded to and remembered conflict'.¹¹ Arnold argues that houses' unique experiences of conflict shaped their distinct histories and cultures, while also reflecting broader patterns shared with other houses.¹² Thus, while some aspects of the conflict in Jocelin's text are specific to Bury, others point towards general trends which shaped and defined twelfth-century monastic experiences.

Conflict within the convent

Following the death of Abbot Hugh in 1180, the abbey of Bury St Edmunds entered into a vacancy. Jocelin observed that although the prior 'dedicated himself to preserving peace within the convent' during this time, he was unsuccessful, and the conduct of the obedientiaries (monks who held particular responsibilities within the monastery) went unchecked.¹³ William the sacrist neglected his role, while Samson – then sub-sacrist – carried out a number of projects which included the general maintenance of the church's fabric, the construction of a choir-screen and the beginnings of a great tower for the abbey.¹⁴ William prevented Samson from completing this last project, perhaps concerned about the influence it might have on the election of the new abbot, but the damage was done: when the time came to choose candidates for the abbacy, 'everyone considered that Samson would almost certainly be one of the three'.¹⁵ There was a twist, though. The building works carried out by Samson during the vacancy had the potential to influence the community, but Jocelin specifically noted that Samson 'won for himself the esteem of the convent, and especially of the cloister-monks' as opposed to the obedientiaries.¹⁶ This distinction between the obedientiaries and the cloister-monks can be traced

¹¹ Ellen F. Arnold, *Negotiating the landscape: environment and monastic identity in the medieval Ardennes*, Philadelphia, PA 2013, 112.

¹² Ibid. 112–13.

¹³ 'prior super omnia studuit ad pacem conseruandem in conuentu': *Chronicle*, 8–9.

¹⁴ Ibid. 9.

¹⁵ 'habentes tamen omnes quasi pro certe Samsonem esse unum ex tribus': ibid. 18.

The community was troubled by the question of whether or not they would be permitted a free election: they did not want to arrive at court unprepared, but could not hold an election in advance for fear that the king would deny their request. The solution on which they alighted was for six respected monks to go away and choose three candidates for the abbacy; these names were then sealed and given to the thirteen electors who were to travel to the king, to be opened if their request was granted.

¹⁶ 'conuentum et maxime claustrales sibi conciliauit in gratiam': ibid. 9.

throughout the *Chronicle*. When the news of Samson's election reached the abbey, Jocelin noted that 'all the cloister-monks, or almost all, and a few obedientiaries, but only a few, rejoiced', and when Samson later criticised the obedientiaries' spending, Jocelin observed that 'many cloister-monks, hearing this and almost smiling, considered what had been said pleasing'.¹⁷ In the discussions after Abbot Hugh's death, one of the monks was discounted as a candidate for the abbacy because, although amiable as a cloister-monk, as an obedientiary he frequently became impatient and scornful, and preferred the company of laymen.¹⁸ There was clearly a divide between the interests and activities of the obedientiaries and those of the cloister-monks, one which can also be observed in practice: Jocelin himself moved between these groups, becoming guest-master in 1197, and it was around this time that his narrative became more critical of Abbot Samson.¹⁹ His response to Samson's attempts to run the obedientiaries' affairs seemingly demonstrates why the obedientiaries formed a faction within the convent.²⁰

At other times, the distinction between the obedientiaries and the cloister-monks appears to have been negotiable: resentment against the learned monks of the community was strong enough to bring the obedientiaries and cloister-monks together. Following the death of the prior in 1201, the community gathered to elect his successor; after some consideration they decided to appease Samson by nominating his preferred candidate, the sub-sacrist Herbert, despite his shortcomings. When he was chosen, however, Herbert declined the role because he felt that he was insufficiently learned to preach in the chapter. In order to reassure Herbert that he was not unsuitable for office, Samson spoke 'as if to the prejudice of the learned', praising simple sermons delivered in French or English – as Samson did himself, in a Norfolk dialect – over more florid ones in Latin.²¹ On account of this, 'certain uneducated brothers, both

¹⁷ 'huius electionis rumor cum ad conuentum perueniret, omnes claustrales uel fere omnes, et quosdam obedienciales, set paucos, letificauit': *ibid.* 23; 'multi claustrales hec audientes, et quasi subridentes, gratum habebant quod dicebatur': *ibid.* 88.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 13.

¹⁹ McGuire, 'The collapse of a monastic friendship', 375–6.

²⁰ Within this faction, there was further rivalry between the sacristy and cellary. As the two most important departments at Bury, their rights and duties overlapped sufficiently to bring these obedientiaries and their supporters into frequent and direct conflict. In a particularly noteworthy incident, the sacrist prevented the cellarer from using the town gaol to confine thieves caught in the cellarer's fee; consequently, the cellarer was blamed for the default of justice: *Chronicle*, 100. Samson ultimately stepped in to define the respective rights of each office, but favoured his former department. Unsurprisingly, this rivalry continued to trouble the community: following Samson's death the two candidates for the abbacy were Hugh of Northwold and Robert of Gravesly, respectively the cellarer and sacrist, lending an increased bitterness to the conflict: *Chronicle of the election*, pp. xxxiv–xxxvi.

²¹ 'quasi in preiudicium literatorum multa respondit': *Chronicle*, 128; 40. For a discussion of Samson's views on learning see Gerrard, 'Jocelin of Brakelond', 19–20.

obedientaries and cloister-monks, gathered and sharpened their tongues, “in order to secretly shoot” [Psalm lxiii.5 Vulgate] at the learned’, and one monk observed that the learned ‘have declined so much in the cloister that they have all been declined’.²² In a discussion which transpired during the vacancy after Abbot Hugh’s death, the question of whether an uneducated man could make a good abbot divided the monks: one of them praised Abbot Ording (1146–56) despite his illiteracy, while another questioned how an unlearned abbot could preach in chapter or to the people, and exclaimed ‘let it not be that a dumb figurehead is raised up in the church of St Edmund, where there are known to be many learned and conscientious men’.²³ Another monk declared that ‘God does not want a man who cannot read as abbot’, while Jocelin himself stated that he ‘would not consent to anyone becoming abbot who did not know some dialectic’.²⁴ This distinction between the learned and the unlearned monks was an enduring one that would rise again in the vacancy after Samson’s death: one of the lines along which the two parties in that election were split was education. Rodney Thomson observed that all the masters attested in the later chronicle were on Hugh of Northwold’s side of the conflict, and noted several instances when Robert of Gravesly and his party were characterised by their lack of learning.²⁵ One of their number, the precentor, was ridiculed in chapter for mispronouncing ‘Bologna’ as ‘Babylon’, in an episode reminiscent of John of Cornwall’s mocking of a student for their confusion over the phrase ‘in die busillis’.²⁶ Robert himself was criticised for the biblical errors in his sermon, and was later derided for having confused ‘canon’ and ‘ius’ (a single statute and a body of law respectively).²⁷ Such rough treatment was evidently pervasive, and readily explains the resentment felt by the unlearned monks towards their learned brothers.

Another division in the community was that between the older, more experienced monks, and the novices and younger monks. In the discussions following Abbot Hugh’s death, one candidate for the abbacy was ‘rejected by certain seniors of ours on the grounds that he was a novice’, while ‘the novices said of their seniors that they were infirm old men,

²² ‘conuenerunt quidam illiterate fratres, tam officiales quam claustrales, et exacuerunt linguas suas, ut sagittarent in occultis literatos’: *Chronicle*, 130; ‘tantum declinauerunt boni clerici nostri in claustro, quod omnes declinati sunt’: *ibid.*

²³ ‘absit ut statua muta erigatur in ecclesia Sancti Ædmundi, ubi multi literati uiri et industrii esse dinoscuntur’: *ibid.* 12.

²⁴ ‘nolit Deus ut homo, qui non potest legere ... fiat abbas’: *ibid.*; ‘non consentirem alicui ut fieret abbas, nisi sciret aliquid de dialectica’: *ibid.* 14.

²⁵ *Chronicle of the election*, pp. xxxvi–xxxviii.

²⁶ *Ibid.* 28–9; Hugh Thomas, *The secular clergy in England, 1066–1200*, Oxford 2014, 290.

²⁷ *Chronicle of the election*, 56–9, 80–1.

less suited to governing the abbey'.²⁸ In a dispute over the cellarer's rights, the 'older and wiser members of the convent' argued that Samson ought to be obeyed, while 'the novices opposed him, and with them almost half of the convent'.²⁹ When Herbert was elected as prior, the older and younger monks were treated as separate parties: considering whether they should appease Samson and put Herbert's name forward, the monks were canvassed on the issue, 'seniors and juniors alike', and that there were many, 'both seniors and juniors', who found him agreeable.³⁰ Nevertheless, Jocelin remarked that there were some who did not believe that Herbert should be prior, because he was 'young and almost beardless, a novice of twelve years, who had not been a cloister-monk except for four years'.³¹ Those who objected, 'more praiseworthy in council and from the sounder part of the convent', preferred the experienced sub-prior Hermer as a candidate.³² This divide arose again in the election following Samson's, with Thomson observing that Hugh of Northwold's party was comprised generally of younger and more recently professed monks.³³ Hugh himself was 'exceptionally young' for an abbot, having only been a monk for eleven years before his election, which partly accounted for his support among this group.³⁴

Finally, locality could be a factional marker. In the discussion during the first vacancy, one monk exclaimed 'preserve us from Norfolk barrators'; this was probably a veiled reference to Samson, who originated from Norfolk and who was later described by the same phrase.³⁵ At the same time, the couching of this criticism in a stereotype hints at a more pervasive rivalry between local and non-local members of the community. Once again, the *Chronicle of the election* offers a more detailed picture of the distinction between these two groups at Bury. Thomson's analysis of the membership of the two parties in that election reveals that Hugh of Northwold's party was comprised largely of local men, while that of Robert of Gravesly contained more outsiders. Moreover, it emerges that strict geographical distance was not the defining feature of locality: rather, the 'local' men were those who hailed from East Anglia, where there was a closer association with the cult of St Edmund and a stronger belief in his

²⁸ 'reprobatum esse a quibusdam prioribus nostris hac causa, quia nouicius erat'; 'nouicii dicebant de prioribus suis, quod senes ualitudinarij erant et ad abbatiam regendam minus idonea': *Chronicle*, 14.

²⁹ 'seniores uero et sapientiores de conuentu': *ibid* 118; 'restiterunt nouicii et cum eis fere media pars conuentus': *ibid*.

³⁰ 'senes cum iunioribus': *ibid*; 'tam de senioribus quam de iunioribus': *ibid*. 125.

³¹ 'iuueni et fere inberbi nouicio xii. annorum, qui non nisi iiii^{or} annis claustralis fuit': *ibid*. ³² 'concilio laudabiliores et de saniore parte conuentus': *ibid*.

³³ *Chronicle of the election*, pp. xxxviii–xl.

³⁴ *Ibid*. pp. xxxix.

³⁵ 'a baratoribus de Norfolchia nos conseruare': *Chronicle*, 12, 40, 42.

role as the protector of the abbey's liberties.³⁶ This was clearly a view held by Samson, who became a monk after receiving St Edmund's protection in a dream, and who invoked the saint's aegis frequently in external conflict.³⁷ Although the connection is not explicitly made in the *Chronicle*, Samson's view suggests that the divide between local monks and outsiders during Jocelin's day was driven by similar differences in belief about St Edmund's protection. This dimension to conflict at Bury is surprising, but finds a close parallel at the abbey of Ely, where Winchester monks introduced by Abbot Simeon were received with hostility and treated as outsiders by the existing community.³⁸ The sole exception was a monk named Godric, who was 'characterised by religious devotion and piety' and who received a vision of the abbey's saints saving the community from illness.³⁹ Like St Edmund, Ely's saints were local and Saxon, and the *Liber Eliensis* attests throughout to a strongly-held belief in their role as protectors of the abbey. At Durham, too, there was a local belief in St Cuthbert's role as a protector of 'his people'.⁴⁰ The divide over locality at Bury is perhaps indicative of a type of conflict specific to a certain subset of monastic houses, namely those with comparable local saints.

Clearly, the community of Bury St Edmunds was not a peaceful one. Conflict frequently arose and split the convent along numerous factional lines. These factions were based both on roles within the convent and on individuals' pre-monastic experiences: as Jane Sayers noted, the stripping of social differences when members entered monastic communities was an imperfect process.⁴¹ Individual members of the community belonged to multiple factions simultaneously: Jocelin himself identified with the cloister-monks and then the obedientiaries in turn (and within the latter category, with the cellary), with the learned monks and – to judge from his name – with the local monks. Occasionally, these factions aligned with one another with dramatic results: thus, in the *Chronicle of the election*, the two parties were split along almost every factional line at once, and they became increasingly intractable. More often, though, factional identities were independently-held and deployed situationally: the sacrist and cellarer came together as obedientiaries against the cloister-monks, and the unlearned obedientiaries and cloister-monks came together against the learned. Factional identity was therefore negotiable, able to be taken up or set aside according to circumstance.

³⁶ T, *Chronicle of the election*, pp. xl–xliv.

³⁷ *Chronicle*, 37, 51–2, 54 and esp. p. 98.

³⁸ *Liber Eliensis*, ed. E. O. Blake, London 1962, ii.133, 137–8.

³⁹ 'religione ac pietate peditus': *ibid.* ii.133.

⁴⁰ Symeon of Durham, *Libellus de exordio atque procursu istius, hoc est Dunhelmensis, ecclesie*, ed. and trans. David Rollason, Oxford 2000, 182–5, 196–201.

⁴¹ Jane Sayers, 'Violence in the medieval cloister', this JOURNAL xli (1990), 533–42 at pp. 537–8.

Conflict between convent and abbot

As separate parties with their own properties and rights, there was plenty of potential for tension between the convent and the abbot: the mensal division created 'two potentially conflicting spheres of interest, with each party alert to encroachments by the other'.⁴² As Brian Golding noted, writing on the Gilbertines, this was an issue 'encountered by all the orders ... as abbots became ever more independent from their communities'.⁴³ In relation to this trend, Antonia Gransden charted the development of a 'democratic movement' at Bury which strengthened the convent's position.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, the abbot's power made for an unequal balance, and a fear of reprisals prevented many potential disputes from developing into outright conflict: abbots' anger may have been pretended, but its effects were real.⁴⁵ As a novice, Jocelin had asked Samson why he did not speak out against Abbot Hugh's abuses during a visitation, and Samson replied that he was afraid of punishment: Hugh frequently imposed exile or imprisonment on the monks, and Samson named several including himself who had been punished in this way.⁴⁶ The practice of exiling or imprisoning monks as punishment was not at all unusual during this period, and is similarly attested at the abbey of St Albans, at Christ Church Canterbury, at the Gilbertine priory of Watton, and in Cistercian houses from the thirteenth century onwards.⁴⁷ As abbot, Samson maintained his predecessor's practices, several times imprisoning or exiling monks.⁴⁸ Jocelin received several rebukes for speaking his mind when he was the abbot's chaplain and resolved to remain silent from then onwards, and he observed that other monks similarly preferred to remain silent rather than challenge the abbot: at one point, he remarked that 'we did indeed know the truth, but we were silent because we were afraid'.⁴⁹ Despite Bury's democratic movement, the monastic ideal of obedience to a superior also informed the convent's passive response: twice in the *Chronicle*, Jocelin justified inaction with acknowledgements that 'the

⁴² Antonia Gransden, 'A democratic movement in the abbey of Bury St Edmunds in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries', this *JOURNAL* xxvi (1975), 25–39 at p. 26. For a general overview of the tensions between Samson and the convent see Gransden, *A history*, 32–43.

⁴³ Brian Golding, *Gilbert of Sempringham and the Gilbertine order*, Oxford 1995, 161.

⁴⁴ Gransden, 'A democratic movement', 25–39.

⁴⁵ Ibid. 25; Gerrard, 'Jocelin of Brakelond', 9–10.

⁴⁶ *Chronicle*, 4–5, 49.

⁴⁷ Gransden, 'A democratic movement', 28; Gerrard, 'Jocelin of Brakelond'; Knowles, *The monastic order*, 332; Golding, *Gilbert of Sempringham*, 35, 159; Megan Cassidy-Welch, 'Incarceration and liberation: prisons in the Cistercian monastery', *Viator* xxxii (2001), 23–42 at pp. 29–30.

⁴⁸ *Chronicle*, 73, 119, 122.

⁴⁹ McGuire, 'The collapse of a monastic friendship', 383–4, 386; 'ueritatem quidem sciebam; set tacebam quia timebam': *Chronicle*, 88.

abbot ought to be obeyed in all things' and 'all things are in the disposal of the abbot'.⁵⁰ Thus, both fearful silence and obedience played a role in preventing conflict from developing.

Nevertheless, tensions sometimes grew into more serious conflicts. Concerns over the obedientiaries' conduct, and in particular around the management of the cellary, were a fixture of Samson's abbacy. Successive cellarers accrued mounting debts as the rents from the cellary's manors repeatedly proved insufficient, perhaps the result of under-endowment as was the case at Ely and St Albans.⁵¹ Samson eventually responded to the cellary's problems by imposing one of his clerks to oversee the cellarer's activities.⁵² This caused concern in the convent: one monk asked whether the abbot would 'place a clerk with the sacrist, a clerk with the chamberlain, a clerk with the sub-sacrist ... and so on with each official'.⁵³ Another apprehended that 'the property and revenue of the abbot and convent which, after taking council, Abbot Robert of good memory divided and kept apart from each other, might thus be mixed and confused'.⁵⁴ This risked the king's bailiffs seeking to impose clerks over the obedientiaries when they took stewardship of the abbot's barony during future vacancies, a perpetual concern for the convent: during the vacancy after Abbot Hugh's death, royal bailiffs had attempted to appoint the town reeves on a similar precedent.⁵⁵ During the subsequent vacancy, the convent bought the advantageous right from the king to administer the abbot's estates, but nevertheless thought it set a dangerous precedent.⁵⁶ Soon after imposing the clerk, Samson took the management of the cellary and the guesthouse into his own hands, replacing the cellarer and guest-master and again imposing a clerk 'without whose assent nothing could be done in respect of food, drink, expenditure or receipts'.⁵⁷ At this point, Jocelin recorded incredulity among the knights and townspeople that the monks would risk the convent's properties and revenues by allowing them to be mixed.⁵⁸ In an attempt to provoke a response from Samson, and in a way that drew on Bury's specific history, the convent arranged for

⁵⁰ 'obediendum esse abbati in omnibus': *Chronicle* 118; 'omnia sint in dispositione abbatibus': *ibid.* 75. See also McGuire, 'The collapse of a monastic friendship', 374, 379.

⁵¹ *Liber Eliensis*, iii.8, pp. 25–6; *Gesta abbatum monasterii sancti Albani*, ed. Henry Thomas Riley, London 1867, 73–6. ⁵² *Chronicle*, 79–80.

⁵³ 'clericum ponat cum sacrista, clericum cum camerario, clericum cum subsacristis ... et sic cum singulis officialibus': *ibid.* 80.

⁵⁴ 'ita poterunt commisceri et confundi abbatibus res et redditus et conuentus, quos abbas Robertus bone memorie requisite consilio distinxit et ab inuicem sepepauit': *ibid.* 81.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.* 72–4, 81; McGuire, 'The collapse of a monastic friendship', 384.

⁵⁶ *Chronicle of the election*, 4–5.

⁵⁷ 'sine cuius assensu nichil in cibo uel poto, nec in expensis nec in receptis ageretur': *Chronicle*, 89. ⁵⁸ *Ibid.* 89–90.

the church bells to be rung during Abbot Robert's commemoration in the chapter.⁵⁹ This kind of theatrical gesture is seen by Gerrard as a means by which both the convent and Samson could manoeuvre to obtain a better position in conflict.⁶⁰ In this instance, the convent's ploy worked; Samson kept quiet, and later he restored the offices to the monks and reduced the clerk's involvement in them.

Abbatial infringements on the convent's rights also generated conflict. Early in his chronicle, Jocelin related how the convent was forced to feed three knights and their hangers-on, even though Samson's predecessor Hugh was at home. The cellarer, who had then only been in post for three days, took the knights to Abbot Hugh. Offering up his keys, he declared: 'my lord, you know well that the custom of the abbey is that knights and laymen should be received in your court, if the abbot is home; I am unwilling and unable to receive guests who belong to you. Otherwise, take the keys of your cellary, and appoint another cellarer to your pleasing'.⁶¹ Thereafter, Hugh received guests according to the custom, which was observed until Jocelin's day. Nevertheless, Samson abused this arrangement as abbot: Jocelin recorded his habit of 'staying at his manors in a manner unlike his predecessors, burdening the cellary with guests that ought to have been received by the abbot, so that he might be called a wise, well-stocked and circumspect abbot at the end of the year; while the convent and obedientiaries would be considered ignorant and improvident'.⁶² This practice drew criticism, but later Samson pleased the convent by declaring 'that he would remain at home more than he was accustomed to'.⁶³

A particularly egregious dispute concerned the conduct of the gate-keeper Ralph who, according to Jocelin, was 'standing in cases and grievances against us, to the injury of the church and to the prejudice of the convent'.⁶⁴ In response, the convent stripped Ralph of certain grants which the cellarer had made to him, but not of the corody which rightfully belonged to his office. Ralph nevertheless complained to Samson that he

⁵⁹ Ibid. 90.

⁶⁰ Gerrard, 'Jocelin of Brakelond', 15, 17–18.

⁶¹ 'domine, bene nouistis quod consuetudo abbatie est, ut milites et laici recipiantur in curia uestra, si abbas domi fuerit; nec uolo nec possum recipere hospites qui ad uos pertinent. Alioquin, accipiter clauis cellarii uestri, et alium constituere celerarium pro beneplacito uestro': *Chronicle*, 6.

⁶² 'iacens ad maneria sua aliter quam predecessores sui, onerans celerarium hospitibus ab abbate pocius suscipiendis, per quod abbas posset dici sapiens et instauratus et prouidus in fine anni; conuentus uero et obedientiales inscii et improuidi haberentur': ibid. 35. For the financial implications of monastic hospitality see Julie Kerr, *Monastic hospitality: the Benedictines in England, c. 1070–c. 1250*, Woodbridge 2007, 177–96.

⁶³ 'se magis solito domi commoraturum': *Chronicle*, 96.

⁶⁴ 'stare in causis et querelis contra eos in damnum ecclesie et in preiudicium conuentus': ibid. 117. See also Gerrard, 'Jocelin of Brakelond', 14.

had been unfairly deprived of the corody, and Samson demanded in chapter that the cellarer Jocellus restore everything that had been taken away.⁶⁵ Jocellus refused to do so, and Samson punished him by restricting his food and drink. Samson then fled to one of his manors, declaring that ‘he would in no way venture among us, on account of the conspiracies and oaths which he asserted we had made against him, to kill him with our knives’.⁶⁶ Surprisingly, Samson’s fears may have been well-founded. At Bury, during the election following Samson’s death, the monk Taillehaste pushed down the third prior in the chapter house, and later the two parties in the election barricaded themselves in separate buildings and set guards on the doors.⁶⁷ Only a century before, the monks of Glastonbury had been killed in their church on the orders of their abbot, Thurstan.⁶⁸ Abbot Robert of Evesham sent armed men after thirty monks who had left the abbey in protest, and the monks bested their pursuers in a fight despite only being armed with staves.⁶⁹ The Gilbertine nuns of Watton beat one of their sisters who had sexually transgressed with a lay brother, and forced her to castrate her lover.⁷⁰ And, in the most directly comparable example, a Cistercian monk threatened in 1226 to kill his abbot with a razor.⁷¹ Monastic violence was therefore well within the realms of possibility.⁷² Samson’s flight certainly represented the nadir of his relationship with the convent. Ultimately, the conflict was resolved peacefully when the community gave way to the abbot; and, notably, Samson ensured a successful outcome for himself by dividing the convent and undermining its ability to act against him. Through intermediaries, he ‘terrified some with threats, enticed others with charms, and separated the more important members of the convent ... from the counsel of the body as a whole’.⁷³ The last part of this statement perhaps refers to the fact that Samson excommunicated the ringleader of this opposition and

⁶⁵ For a concise summary of the debate over Jocellus’ identity and whether he should be identified with Jocelin of Brakelond see Kerr, *Monastic hospitality*, 203–4.

⁶⁶ ‘se nequaquam uenturum inter nos propter conspiraciones et iuramenta que, ut aiebat, feceramus in eum, cniplulis nostris occidendum’: *Chronicle*, 119.

⁶⁷ *Chronicle of the election*, 17, 19–21.

⁶⁸ David Hiley, ‘Thurstan of Caen and plainchant at Glastonbury: musicological reflections on the Norman conquest’, *Proceedings of the British Academy* lxxii (1986), 58.

⁶⁹ *Chronicon abbatiae de Evesham ad annum 1418*, ed. William Dunn Macray (Rolls Series, 1863), 203–4; Gransden, ‘A democratic movement’, 27.

⁷⁰ Golding, *Gilbert of Sempringham*, 35.

⁷¹ Cassidy-Welch, ‘Incarceration and liberation’, 30.

⁷² For an overview of monastic violence see Sayers, ‘Violence in the medieval cloister’, 533–42.

⁷³ ‘quosdam minis terruit, quosdam blandiciis attraxit, et maiores de conuentu ... a consilio uniuersitatis separauit’: *Chronicle*, 119. Gransden notes this ‘divide and conquer’ approach but does not discuss it further: *A history*, 41; Gerrard recognises its significance as a means of conflict resolution: ‘Jocelin of Brakelond’, 14.

imprisoned him in the infirmary, thereby spiritually and physically separating him from the convent.⁷⁴ Jocelin, fully aware of what had happened, added the maxim that ‘every kingdom divided against itself shall be desolated’.⁷⁵

This episode illustrates two important conclusions. First, conflict between the convent and abbot had the potential to draw the divided factions of the community together. The unity of the convent is a point stressed by Jocelin in this sort of dispute. When the gatekeeper was stripped of his grants, it was done by the prior ‘with the assent of the whole chapter’.⁷⁶ In a moment reminiscent of – and perhaps drawing on – the conflict over the three knights, the cellarer held out his keys and declared in chapter that ‘he would rather be deposed from his office than do anything against the convent’.⁷⁷ Conflict with the abbot thus acted as a balance against the convent’s internal divisions. Second, this unity improved the convent’s position in conflict: if ‘Samson’s strength lay in his strategy’, then the convent’s strength lay in its unity.⁷⁸ Conversely, division weakened the convent, and Samson’s tactic of ‘divide and conquer’ is observable elsewhere. By attacking the learned monks and the obedientiaries with deliberately inflammatory language, he exploited existing factional divisions and garnered support from certain groups. When the time came to elect a new prior, there was disagreement in the convent as to who they should choose, and Samson, discovering this disunity, ‘said that he wished after chapter to hear the counsel of individuals, so that he might proceed wisely in the matter’.⁷⁹ This paid lip-service to the *Rule of St Benedict’s* instruction that abbots be guided by the advice of the convent; however, by questioning the monks individually, he was able to exploit divisions within the convent and effect a more favourable outcome for himself.⁸⁰ Samson recognised this, and so did the monks: one of them remarked that Samson had contrived things so that the election of his candidate ‘might appear to be done by the counsel of the convent, and not by the

⁷⁴ *Chronicle*, 119. The use of the infirmary as a prison is also seen at Christ Church Canterbury (Knowles, *The monastic order*, 332), and in the later election at Bury one party barricaded themselves inside the infirmary (*Chronicle of the election*, 20–1); the infirmary’s physical separation from the rest of the conventual buildings perhaps explains this practice, although see also Cassidy-Welch, ‘Incarceration and liberation’, 26, 40–1.

⁷⁵ ‘omne regnum in se diuisum desolabitur’: *Chronicle*, 119 (Luke xi.17–19).

⁷⁶ ‘responsumque est ab uno, ceteris omnibus conclamantibus, hoc est factum per priorem et assensum tocius capitulu’: *Chronicle*, 117.

⁷⁷ ‘se malle deponi de balia suaquam aliquid facere contra conuentu’: *ibid.* 118.

⁷⁸ Gerrard, ‘Jocelin of Brakelond’, 14.

⁷⁹ ‘tumultum audiens, dixit se uelle post capitulum consilium singulorum audire, ut sic consulte procederet in negotio’: *Chronicle*, 126–7.

⁸⁰ Gransden, ‘A democratic movement’, 26.

will of the abbot'.⁸¹ Two further examples of monks being questioned individually can be found in the *Chronicle of the election*, both under circumstances when solidarity might be expected if they were questioned together.⁸² Thus, both the convent and the abbot recognised the efficacy of a unified community, and this recognition informed attempts at conflict resolution as both parties tried to exploit it to their own advantage.

Conflict between the abbey and external parties

Despite the royal foundations of its power, the relationship between the abbey of Bury St Edmunds and the crown was inherently unstable.⁸³ Conflict with the crown and other external parties frequently arose, and in such conflicts the abbot took a leading role; Samson himself declared that 'if there should be a default of the king's justice in this town, I will be unjustly blamed, I will be summoned, the burden of the journey and expense will fall on me, and the defence of the town and that which pertains to it; I will be considered foolish, not the prior, not the sacrist, not the convent, but I, who am and ought to be their head'.⁸⁴ As abbot, Samson identified very closely with the struggles of the abbey as a whole.⁸⁵ The purpose of this final section is not to examine the ways in which Samson and the abbey prevailed in external conflict, a position already occupied by Gerrard's recent article; instead, it seeks to draw attention to certain aspects of how such conflict affected the relationship between the convent and the abbot.⁸⁶

At times, the mishandling of external affairs generated tension within the community; in dealings with the town in particular, Samson frequently overrode the convent's rights, bringing him into conflict with the monks.⁸⁷ In one instance, the convent complained to Samson that the burgesses were encroaching on the town markets without their consent, and asked him to deprive them of their holdings; in turn, the burgesses maintained that this was their right in return for a fixed sum of £40 a year.⁸⁸ Samson reassured the monks that he desired to preserve their rights, but that he could not act against the burgesses without breaking the

⁸¹ 'fieret per consilium conuentus, et non per uolunstatem abbatis': *Chronicle*, 127.

⁸² *Chronicle of the election*, 16–17, 78–9.

⁸³ Gerrard, 'Jocelin of Brakelond', 20–2.

⁸⁴ 'si defectus fuerit regie iustitie in uilla ista, ego calumpniatus ero, ego ero summonitus, mihi incumbet labor itineris et expense, et defensio uille et pertinentium; ego stultus habebor, non prior, non sacrista, non conuentus, set ego, qui caput eorum sum et esse debeo': *Chronicle*, 74–5.

⁸⁵ McGuire, 'The collapse of a monastic friendship', 382, 394.

⁸⁶ Gerrard, 'Jocelin of Brakelond', 15–23.

⁸⁷ For an overview of the town's relations with the abbey see Gransden, *A history*, 44–50.

⁸⁸ *Chronicle*, 77–9.

king's law. The burgesses then offered the convent 100s. to keep their holdings, but the convent refused in the hope that they might later recover their rights in full; however, Samson later confirmed the burgesses' rights in the same words as his predecessors in return for sixty marks, leading to 'murmuring and grumbling' among the convent.⁸⁹ The burgesses then declared that 'never in the time of Abbot Samson would they lose their holdings or their liberties', and Jocelin added that 'even to this day we have lost those hundred shillings'.⁹⁰ Another dispute arose over Samson's remission of the burgesses' sorpeni payment (a sum owed to the cellarer annually in return for cattle-grazing rights) in exchange for a lump sum of four shillings a year; Jocelin records that 'the convent was indignant and took it badly', and invoked the memory of the former Abbot Ording by claiming that he would not have remitted the payment even for five hundred marks.⁹¹ As in other disputes between the convent and the abbot, these instances of conflict generated a unity within the convent that Jocelin highlighted: in the dispute over the burgesses the monks took their complaint to the abbot's court 'by the common counsel of our chapter', and when Samson remitted the sorpeni payment, 'the sub-prior answered in the chapter on the behalf of all'.⁹²

Conversely, an abbot's defence of the abbey's privileges could garner approval from the convent, and Samson was so active in defending his own rights and those of the abbey as a whole that Jocelin's chronicle is littered with examples. He prevented the half-hundred of Cosford from becoming hereditary, since the liberty of St Edmund would have been threatened if any part of it were to fall into royal hands.⁹³ He prevented the monks of Ely from establishing a competing market at Lakenheath, and Herbert the Dean from building a rival windmill at Haberdon.⁹⁴ At a legatine council he defended his right to keep a certain number of horses.⁹⁵ He prevented Hubert Walter's visitation in order to protect the abbey's privilege of answering to none but a legate *a latere*.⁹⁶ The measures he took to defend these rights were often proactive: he sent men to tear down the market at Lakenheath, and when his jurisdictional rights in the liberty of St Edmund were threatened by a conflicting charter, he sent eighty men to seize three criminals detained by the archbishop of Canterbury at the manor of Eleigh.⁹⁷ Samson was similarly proactive in

⁸⁹ 'murmurantibus et grunnientibus': *ibid.* 78.

⁹⁰ 'nunquam tempore abbatis S. amitterent tenement sua nec libertates suas': *ibid.* 79; 'nos uero illos c. solidos hucusque amissus': *ibid.*

⁹¹ 'indignabatur conuentus et moleste tulit': *ibid.* 100; Gerrard, 'Jocelin of Brakelond', 15.

⁹² 'de communi consilio capituli nostri': *Chronicle*, 77; 'supprior in capitulo respondens pro omnibus': *ibid.* 100.

⁹³ *Ibid.* 58–9.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.* 132–4, 59–60.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.* 54.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.* 81–5.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.* 133, 51.

securing new rights and possessions for the abbey; these included the right to give episcopal benediction wherever he went and full exemption from the archbishops of Canterbury, both of which he secured in perpetuity rather than for himself alone.⁹⁸ He claimed the advowson of churches, and recovered churches and manors which had fallen out of the abbey's possession, paying ten marks to recover the church of Boxford and the staggering sum of a thousand marks to recover the manor of Mildenhall.⁹⁹ When Samson did secure new rights and possessions for the abbey, Jocelin recorded this positively: in one instance, Samson gave the convent fine vestments and a crozier, declaring the act 'something which would befit an abbot', and Jocelin added that this was Samson's custom whenever he returned from travel abroad.¹⁰⁰

Jocelin's praise highlights an important dimension of external conflict: namely that, while it could worsen relations between the convent and the abbot, it also had the potential to bring them back together, acting as before as a balance on the community. At points in Jocelin's narrative when Samson faced external threats, he turned to the convent for advice. In one instance, the arrival of a royal messenger caused Samson concern, since he would have to 'offend either God or the king'; unsure of what to do, he hurried back to the abbey and, 'humbled and more timid than accustomed, he sought our counsel with the prior's mediation, about how he should act concerning the imperilled liberties of the church'.¹⁰¹ In a display of unity, the convent advised Samson to go to the king, borrowing money from the sacristy, pittances and other revenues, and to leave the abbacy in the hands of the prior and one of Samson's clerks. As before, this unity is a point stressed by Jocelin: when threatened with Hubert Walter's visitation, Samson and the convent agreed that they would receive him reverently, with a procession and the ringing of bells, up until he attempted to visit the chapter, at which point 'we should all unanimously oppose him to his face'.¹⁰² Here a comparison can be drawn with the abbey of Evesham where, despite previous complaints about their abbot's abuses, the monks resisted visitation by the bishop of Worcester 'by common council'.¹⁰³ They received the bishop into the church but prevented him from attending chapter, and they closed the doors to the guesthouse, stable and kitchen.¹⁰⁴ After this 'the abbot and

⁹⁸ Ibid. 56.

⁹⁹ Ibid. 60–2, 32–3, 45–6.

¹⁰⁰ 'quod abbatem deceret': ibid. 50, 87.

¹⁰¹ 'uel Deum uel regem offendam': ibid. 135; 'humiliatus et magis solito timidus, mediante priore quesiiit a nobis concilium, quomodo agendum esset de libertatibus ecclesie periclitantibus': ibid.

¹⁰² 'ei omnes unanimiter resisteremus in facie': ibid. 82.

¹⁰³ 'de communi consilio': *Chronicon abbacie de Evesham*, 116.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid. 116–17.

convent became friends', and worked together 'to establish the abbey's right to exemption from episcopal visitation'.¹⁰⁵

As in conflict between the convent and the abbot, there was also some contemporary recognition that a united community was more effective in external conflict than a divided one. In the *Chronicle of the election*, after the convent came into conflict with the king, the archbishop of Canterbury visited the abbey and warned them that 'if you are divided you will be subjugated, but if you are united you will never be made subject'.¹⁰⁶ The archbishop was 'pleased with their unity and cohesion', and not much later the abbot-elect, Hugh, asked the prior to accompany him on a journey 'to avoid the scandal of their broken unity'.¹⁰⁷ These examples highlight the potential that external conflict had to mediate the relationship between the convent and the abbot. This mediatory role was recognised by the convent, which utilised such conflict as a means of airing and resolving old grievances: thus, after Samson sought the convent's advice in his conflict with the king, Jocelin recorded murmuring among the monks that 'the abbot is diligent and careful for the liberties of his barony, but of the liberties of the convent which we had lost in his time ... he says nothing'.¹⁰⁸ Some of the monks approached the prior and encouraged him to raise the matter with Samson, who was enraged when he heard this. He quickly backed down, though, since he wished to leave the abbey on good terms; the next day he came to chapter and made excuses for the lost rights, promising to remedy them on his return. Jocelin concluded his chronicle by noting that because of this 'there was calm, but not a great calm, since "anyone may be rich in promises"'.¹⁰⁹ The wording of this expression echoes Jocelin's earlier observation that 'a discordant harmony remained' between the abbot and the convent, highlighting the fact that such unity was fragile and often transitory.

By drawing attention to the ways in which conflict was experienced and resolved at Bury St Edmunds, Jocelin's chronicle provided his community with a warning, and the modern reader with a framework for

¹⁰⁵ 'facti sunt amici eadem die abbas et conventus': *ibid.* 121; Gransden, 'A democratic movement', 27.

¹⁰⁶ 'si seperabiles et superabiles, et si inseperabiles insuperabiles usque reperiemini': *Chronicle of the election*, 20.

¹⁰⁷ 'ob unitatis gaudium et integritatis': *ibid.* 22; 'propter scandalum lese unitatis uitandum': *ibid.* 24–5.

¹⁰⁸ 'abbas diligens est et sollicitus de libertatibus baronie sue, set de libertibus conventus, quas perdidimus temore suo ... nichil loquitur': *Chronicle*, 136.

¹⁰⁹ 'facta est tranquillitas, set non magna, quia "pollicitis diues quilibet esse potest"': *ibid.* 137 (Ovid, *Ars Amatoria*, i, line 444).

understanding such conflict. He described the division of the convent into factions based on obedientiary status, learning, age and locality, which formed and reformed in response to specific circumstances and tensions. These divisions could weaken the convent, but conflict with the abbot could bring it back together; this was a dynamic of which contemporaries were aware and one which they were ready to exploit, influencing the ways in which conflict was resolved. In turn, external conflict could reunite the convent and the abbot, and there was once again a contemporary recognition of this dynamic. Conflict therefore played an important role in mediating monastic life; by providing a way for discordant factions to come together, it acted as a balance on the community. At the same time, this unity was often temporary, leading to a 'discordant harmony' within the community.

Jocelin's chronicle was specific to his own abbey, and reflects the house's individual experience of conflict. Bury's exemption from visitation meant that the convent had no one to whom they could complain of an abbot's wrongdoings, for example, a point which Jocelin himself acknowledged.¹¹⁰ Such exemption was far from universal, and in most cases appeal to a bishop was an option for afflicted communities. Nevertheless, the examples of Evesham and of Bury before it gained its exemption indicate that many houses responded similarly to the threat of visitation by closing ranks and seeking exemption. Comparable examples of other forms of conflict from various houses reflect the experiences of the monks at Bury recorded by Jocelin; thus while this study offers new insights into the ways in which conflict was experienced and resolved at Bury, it also points to broader patterns that shaped medieval monastic life. The question of how far these patterns reflect a distinctly Benedictine experience, posed by Sayers thirty years ago, is one which still requires further attention. Certain similarities across orders, such as tensions over the mensal division and the use of imprisonment, are suggestive of a shared monastic experience, but individual orders also provided new avenues for conflict generation and resolution. In both the Gilbertine and Cistercian orders, differing organisational structures led to tensions over the role of the lay brothers, resulting in the scandal at Watton Priory, and the revolts of the Gilbertine lay brothers in the 1160s and the Cistercian lay brothers from the late twelfth century onwards.¹¹¹ Further, Megan Cassidy-Welch has identified distinctly Cistercian conceptualisations of monastic imprisonment in the thirteenth century, suggesting that superficially similar patterns could produce different experiences in different orders.¹¹² The ways in which conflict manifested in each order therefore

¹¹⁰ Knowles, *The monastic order*, 331–45; *Chronicle*, 5.

¹¹¹ Golding, *Gilbert of Sempringham*, 33–8, 43–51; Sayers, 'Violence in the medieval cloister', 535, 539–40.

¹¹² Cassidy-Welch, 'Incarceration and liberation', 25, 34–42.

requires further examination, and it may be more accurate to describe overlapping patterns of conflict which produced a variety of monastic experiences. By treating Bury as a case study and examining the rich evidence there, patterns in how similar houses experienced and responded to conflict thus emerge; these patterns offer fertile ground for new enquiries into the ways in which conflict exerted an influence on communities, and raise new questions about how it shaped monastic experiences at a macro level.