

NOTE

The cycle of monasticism: understanding the nature of medieval economic and political innovation

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Abstract

This research note develops a new theory about innovation in medieval monastic orders that, first, allows us to better understand medieval society and the nature of its dynamism, and second, can be applied to other areas of research on medieval Europe. Medieval monasteries were set in a society that—despite its famous dynamism—was deeply backward-looking. But monastic life generated antinomies that came from the tension between the degeneration into well-living and the ideal of the asceticism of the first Christians. These tensions sparked repeated attempts to reform monastic life, which were understood by reformers not as innovations but rather as efforts to restore the good old ways. This invention of tradition had economic and political repercussions, first in the monasteries themselves and then in surrounding lay society. To understand these processes, we must avoid reading history backward from a modern context that looks entirely different.

Introduction

There is a broad agreement that the three centuries after AD 1000 saw a series of crucial developments that were to permanently shape European state-formation. In the last 50 years, historians have pushed the crucial period of European state-formation back to the tenth, eleventh, and twelfth centuries (e.g., Berman, 1983; Black, 1992, 191; Bartlett, 1993; Moore, 2000; Oakley, 2010, xi; Siedentop, 2014; Wickham, 2016, 254; Møller and Doucette, 2022). Social scientists have emphasized the rule of law tradition that crystallized in this period, as well as other institutions of constraints such as medieval parliaments and urban self-government that also date to this period (e.g., Downing, 1992; Ertman, 1997; Fukuyama, 2011; Stasavage, 2011, 2016; Blaydes and Chaney, 2013; Belloc *et al.*, 2016; Acemoglu and Robinson, 2019; Møller and Doucette, 2022). Finally, economic historians have pointed to the technological innovations that took place and the economic growth they fostered (see, e.g., Boix, 2015; Abramson and Boix, 2019).

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Why was this period so innovative? New research has taken up but refined an old idea: that medieval monastic orders played a crucial role in both economic and political development in the high Middle Ages (AD 1000–1300). There is certainly nothing new about the claim that medieval monasteries are an important part of European history. During the early Middle Ages (AD 500–1000), they preserved a flicker of learning in a society where urban civilization had collapsed and where secular education had disappeared. In Anderson's (1974, 131) marvelous metaphor, the monasteries were "the main, frail aqueduct across which the cultural reservoirs of the Classical World now passed to the new universe of feudal Europe, where literacy had become clerical" (see also Oakley, 2012, 44–45; Fried, 2015, 53). But recent years have seen more specific work on the way medieval monastic orders affected European state-formation in the high Middle Ages. According to a series of new contributions, three monastic orders—the Cistercians, the Cluniacs, and the Dominicans—spearheaded a series of startling innovation: they promoted early capitalist work ethics (Cistercians), they facilitated the transition to urban self-government (Cluniacs), and they spread the practice of representation (Dominicans) (Andersen *et al.*, 2016; Doucette, 2021; Doucette and Møller, 2021; Møller and Doucette, 2022).

If we accept these findings, the medieval monastic orders played a crucial role in European processes of state-formation, regime change, and economic development. They made up what in retrospect can be seen as a sledgehammer of economic and political change in a society where tradition normally kept such startling change in check, or at least kept it moving at a snail's pace. So far, the new research has mainly focused on the lay receptivity of monastic innovations—that is, how they diffused from monastic centers to lay society and what enabled this diffusion. These are, of course, crucial questions. Had there been no receptivity, the monastic innovations would have remained isolated—in their islands of learning—soon to be forgotten. But the first-order questions surely concern the mechanisms of production: Why was it that innovations would regularly occur within monastic orders? How and why did bursts of innovation begin and how and why did they end?

The new research on monastic orders has so far had very little to say about the conditions that facilitated the innovations themselves. In this short research note, I propose an explanation for why startling innovations repeatedly took place in monasteries in the period from 1000 to 1300 AD. This is what I term "the cycle of monasticism,"¹ which again and again played out in monasteries in the period 1000–1300 as reformers introduced innovations to secure a return to lost piety, followed by a gradual fall back into sumptuousness that triggered another burst of innovation. These dynamics were facilitated by state weakness which created the demand for bottom-up religious renewal, and the innovations had lay knock-on effects, first in the areas surrounding the monasteries and then diffusing wider in medieval society. I first place these developments in historical context, then proceed to develop my argument, which emphasizes how breakthroughs paradoxically owed to efforts to return to tradition. The penultimate section discusses how far the argument can travel; the Conclusions reflect on the wider consequences for European state-formation and economic development.

Context: the invention of tradition

It is widely recognized today that the European Middle Ages were innovative in several respects, from technology and intellectual pursuits to law and politics (Wickham, 2009, 2016; Møller and Doucette, 2022). However, as all great agrarian civilizations, the medieval Latin West was also a society that was traditionalist in a way that is difficult to understand today. In medieval Europe, authority—political, legal, and intellectual—was normally venerated because it was old. In their self-understanding, medieval intellectuals did not attempt to create new knowledge. Even after the advent of universities, academic study took the form of revisiting classical authorities, not going beyond them (Oakley, 2012, 207–208).

Much the same can be said about the nature and exercise of law, singled out as one of the great contributions of the Middle Ages. It is to this period we normally date the notion of the supremacy of law or that “law transcends politics” (Berman, 1983, 9) by standing above and constraining rulers (Berman, 1983, 86; Tamanaha, 2004; Krygier, 2016, 209–210). The medieval conception was indeed that “law was found not made”; that it was “a matter of knowledge rather than of will” (Tierney, 1982, 30). For a very long period, no medieval monarch had the right to make new laws: rather than law-makers, they are better seen as judges who in royal courts or by visiting local courts interpreted the rules that already existed (Boucoyannis, 2021).

So, even in the areas where medieval society was most vibrant—the study of theology and the study and exercise of law—it was vibrant in a backward-looking way that is very different from modern intellectual pursuits.² How do we reconcile the dynamism of the Middle Ages with its veneration for established authority and knowledge? At the core of this paradox lay what we today refer to as the “invention of tradition” (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983). The Middle Ages were characterized by a series of staggering changes that were presented as nothing more than a return to the good old ways. The dynamism of the Middle Ages was, thus, combined with a constant need to invoke historical precedent. Astonishing innovations were constantly dressed up as a revival of tradition.

The cycle of monasticism: antinomies of monastic life and radical innovation

It is through this lens that we should understand the monastic innovations of the high Middle Ages (AD 1000–1300). Monastic environments were characterized by the same mental outlook as the rest of society, but the yearning for tradition paradoxically carried the seeds of radical innovations. There was constantly a minority of fervent monks and friars who “sought the renewal of Christianity and the raising of the standards of the Christian life” (Cowdrey, 1998, 242). In their own understanding, what they longed for was a return to the *vita religiosa* of the early believers, even the asceticism of the apostles (the *vita apostolica*).

These yearnings were so strong because they ultimately concerned salvation, or the status of the individual believer in the afterlife.³ In the Christian East, these cravings found extreme expression in hermits who chose to live in total asceticism in the desert or even on pillars, such as the famous Syrian Christian ascetic Simeon Stylites who in the fifth century allegedly spent 36 years on top of a column near Aleppo. In the Latin West, we find similar individual cases of holy men, but the

restorative efforts were mainly channeled into monastic institutions. The desires for a return to the purer Christian life were particularly strong in the well-functioning monasteries, especially in new foundations that had been established to make a break with laxness and well-living in monasteries that had lost their zeal. In these new communities, pious reformers would attempt to restore the Christian ways by reforming lax practices and replacing these with a much sterner discipline. Then—after a couple of generations guided by this revolutionary spirit—the monastic communities would gradually fall back on the easier living that their founders had broken with.

A case in point is the Franciscan order, which was based on a lifestyle of evangelical poverty, or more precisely, the assumption that the apostles had owned no property but had begged for their daily bread and a place to sleep. Massive endowments to the pious Franciscans quickly created a tension with this doctrine, which was illustrated by their sumptuous church buildings in, for example, Italian cities. Pope Gregory IX (r. 1227–1241) had come to the aid of the Franciscans by ruling that the property bequeathed to them belonged to the papacy but that they had the (full) right to use it. Gradually, a conflict arose within the order where some Franciscans (known as “Spirituals”) attempted to defend St. Francis’ principle of evangelical poverty whereas the majority of the friars accepted the new situation and the benefits it created for the order (as well as the individual friar). The conflict came into the open and split the order when Pope John XXII (r. 1316–1334) revoked Gregory IX’s ruling and forced the Franciscans to own up to their endowments or forfeit them.

We can, thus, think of monastic environments as having a life cycle where individual monasteries (and later, new monastic orders) were repeatedly founded to improve discipline and adhere to the monastic rule in stricter ways than in old establishments. As Andersen *et al.* (2016, 1756) write about the early Cistercians, “[t]hey rejected the developments the Benedictines had undergone and tried to reproduce life exactly as it had been in St. Benedict’s time; in fact, they often ventured beyond it in austerity.” Over time, and often as a consequence of the successes of these revolutionaries, a new laxness and ossification was introduced before the cycle began anew with new reforms and reactions (see Figure 1). The analogy to Khaldun’s (1958 [1377]) theory of civilization in the *Muqaddimah* is obvious: fervent nomads conquer stale civilized areas and establish a fresh start that creates renewed progress. Over time, the new rulers become corrupted by civilization, and decay sets in, which is the point of departure for a new cycle (see Gellner, 1981).

This cycle characterizes all three of the examples that have been singled out in the new body of scholarship referred to above. The Cluniacs had been the vanguard of monasticism around AD 1000. But the Cistercians broke with the Cluniacs in 1098 because of the latter’s perceived lapse into ceremony and sumptuousness. Shortly after AD 1200, the mendicant orders—Dominicans and Franciscans—rebelled against the old monastic environment that the Cistercians represented. In the case of the Dominicans, one of the main points of contention was that the established Church did not provide the kind of pastoral care that townsmen were seeking—a vacuum that had opened the door to heretic ideas such as those of the Cathars of Languedoc.

The core mechanism of innovation is thus a very simple one. In the words of church historian MacCulloch (2022, 9), “[w]ell-functioning monasteries constantly

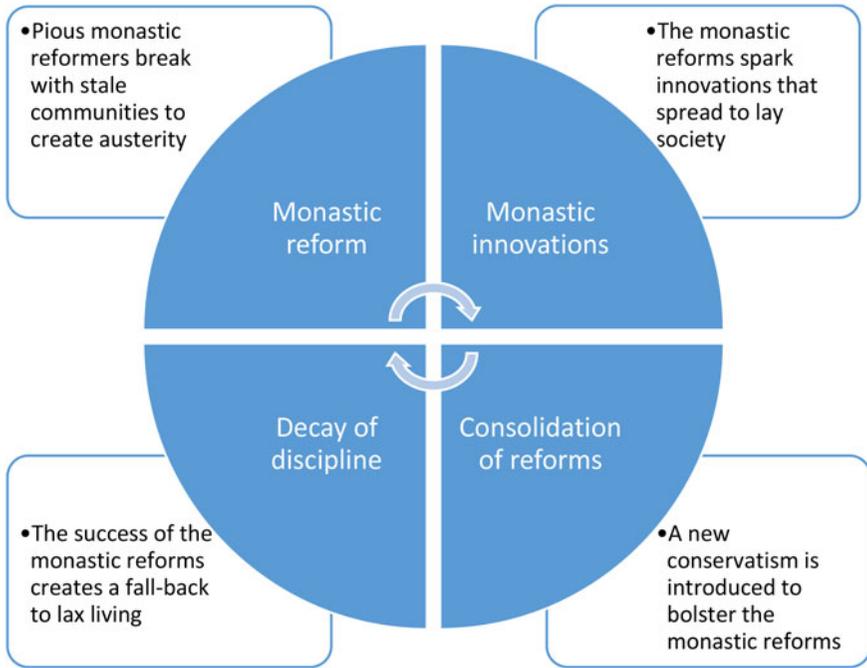


Figure 1. Monastic life cycle of reform, innovation, and reaction.

do their best to reform themselves, because monastic life is always prone to lapse into unheroic comfort and modified austerity.” These reforms then—if we trust the new literature reviewed in the Introduction—have wider repercussions: in the case of the Cistercians, in the form of economic development that would fan out in the vicinity of the monastic environments (Andersen *et al.*, 2016), and in the case of the Cluniacs and Dominicans, in the form of institutional creation that would trigger lay political regime change in medieval towns (Doucette, 2021; Doucette and Møller, 2021; Møller and Doucette, 2022). We thus see different variations of the same basic mechanism in the three cases of the Cluniacs, the Cistercians, and the Dominicans. These lay repercussions were, in all cases, unintended consequences of attempts to return to the *vita religiosa*.

The cases of the Cluniacs, the Cistercians, and the Dominicans also show how the mechanisms of innovation were nested in a more general scope condition that characterizes the high Middle Ages. Throughout most of the early Middle Ages (AD 500–1000), monasteries in the Latin West had been subservient to lay power and especially monarchical power. This came to an end with the ninth- and tenth-century state collapse, aka. the Carolingian state collapse (Wickham, 2009, 2016; see Møller and Doucette, 2022). As recently as in the first part of the ninth century, Carolingian monarchs had controlled and reformed their monasteries. A case in point is Benedict of Aniane’s monastic reforms, which Carolingian Emperor Louis the Pious forced on monastic communities of his realm at three synods in Aachen in 816, 817, and 818/19 (Melville, 2016, 40).

After the Carolingian state collapse—inaugurated by the tripartition of the realm at the treaties of Verdun (843) and Meerssen (870)—this royal control over and regulation of monastic institutions was missing (see Møller and Doucette, 2022). The post-Carolingian absence of strong royal power, capable of reforming monastic environments from above, gave free rein to the bottom-up reforms that we find in the cases of the Cluniacs, the Cistercians, and the Dominicans. We can thus think of state collapse or at least political fragmentation as a scope condition for medieval monastic innovation.

How far can the argument travel?

This last point help explain why these radical features of monastic environments gradually weakened as state power grew again in the late Middle Ages (after AD 1300) (Wickham, 2016, 142). Nonetheless, the monastic life cycle and the innovations it created did not entirely go away.

Perhaps the best example is the Society of Jesus, or Jesuits, founded by the Spanish nobleman Ignatius of Loyola in 1540. The Jesuits soon spread across Catholic Europe and later Latin America. In their pursuit of Catholic renewal, they emphasized education and helped spread institutions of higher learning across Europe (Friedrich, 2022). It seems plausible to see this as yet another example of how monastic reform—a deliberate return to piety—had lay repercussions in the areas it affected. This was especially important in areas of low state power such as Poland and much of Latin America, whereas the dynamic was more difficult in “absolutist” countries such as Spain itself, or France.

Likewise, the Lutheran and especially the Calvinist Reformation can be viewed through the prism developed above. These reformations were sparked by deeply pious reformers who confronted what they saw as a stale and corrupt Church establishment. As in the monasteries in the high Middle Ages, the aim of the reformations was strictly religious. But the known-on effects were substantial: the new piety and new organizations founded by the reformers have been attributed a cornucopia of effects on state formation, regime change, and economic development (for an overview, see Becker *et al.*, 2016). It has also been persuasively argued that the spread of the reformation was facilitated by state weakness or political fragmentation. Reformation ideas spread first in the many self-governing cities that we find in the “urban belt” running from the Netherlands, via Western Germany and Switzerland to northern Italy (Cantoni, 2012). Had state power been more robust in this area, rulers such as the Habsburg emperor Charles V (r. 1519–1558)—and later the Counterreformation leadership—would have been able to root out the Reformation.

To what extent can the argument travel beyond the Latin West? Here, it is important to recall that the purpose of this research note is not to put the theory formulated above to an empirical test. But the question still merits a brief discussion. One would imagine that at least in Eastern Christianity, similar mechanisms could play out in monastic environments. After all, here, too, we find the yearning for a return to the *vita apostolica*, backed by the incentives created by the awesome concepts of eternal salvation and eternal damnation. But historically, state power in, for example, the Byzantine Empire remained much more robust than in the Latin West, and church

institutions were generally subjected to the state (Oakley, 2010, 103–105; Stasavage, 2020, 104–105). In other words, we do not find the combination of politically autonomous church institutions and state weakness that characterized the Latin West at least in the high Middle Ages (see Møller and Doucette, 2022). This likely inhibited “the cycle of monasticism” theorized in this research note. It might also help explain why in the Christian East, the most famous attempts to practice religious asceticism were, as mentioned above, carried out by individual hermits rather than monastic institutions.

Nonetheless, it would be interesting to empirically apply these theoretical ideas to monastic environments in the different branches of Eastern Christianity, especially in periods where state power was low. It would also be interesting to probe whether similar dynamics played out in other monastic traditions, for instance, in Buddhist agrarian civilizations. After all, we find many areas and periods with monastic traditions where state power was rather feeble, including in what is today India (see Stasavage, 2020). But this kind of comparative empirical outlook lies beyond the scope of this short research note, the purpose of which is simply to shed light on the theoretical puzzle left by the new research on medieval Western monastic orders.

Conclusions

The new research on medieval monastic orders has important implications for our understanding of European history. They corroborate recent arguments that European state-formation and patterns of economic development cannot be understood without factoring in the role of ecclesiastical institutions and religious ideas (Schulz *et al.*, 2019; Henrich, 2020; Møller and Doucette, 2022; Schulz, 2022; Grzymala-Busse, 2023). More specifically, they underline the importance of Western monasticism. The paradox is thrilling. Monasticism represented a retreat from the sinful world, but monks could not escape the world in two respects. First, sin constantly crept back in, and this became unbearable for many genuinely pious monks and friars who yearned for the asceticism of the early Christians. Second, the political and economic innovations that the consequent attempts to reform monasteries spurred time and again diffused to lay society.

But the argument I have presented about monastic innovation has wider implications. The medieval “invention of tradition” might have been most radical in reform-oriented monasteries, but it arguably characterized other medieval innovations. I have already mentioned the universities as milieus where authority was venerated because it was old and where the knowledge produced had already, preferably, been formulated by classical authors of high status, such as Aristotle. We misunderstand the universities if we do not factor in that intellectual pursuits did not aim to create anything new but to rediscover forgotten knowns. A hugely learned work in the eyes of contemporaries would, therefore, be one that revisited and rearranged knowledge, not an attempt to formulate new ideas. The ultimate ideal was to systematize all the knowledge that had ever existed, especially the knowledge of antiquity, much of which had been partially or fully lost.

But these ambitious endeavors to rearrange knowledge would often prove surprisingly dynamic and flexible, and they would carry the germ of innovation. The best

example of this dynamic flexibility is perhaps the rediscovery and startling reinterpretation of Roman law in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The university men studying Roman law believed that they were simply reviving it, but in reality, they “produced something quite new” (Berman, 1983, 149; see also Oakley, 2012, 149; Stasavage, 2016, 150–152; Møller, 2018).

Just as in the case of the monasteries, this dynamism and flexibility was enabled by the collapse of state power in the period from the mid-ninth to the early twelfth centuries. This weakening of royal power created a social order where rulers had to negotiate with strong social groups. It “helped to create political systems across Europe which allowed *engagement*” (Wickham, 2016, 256). One historian has compared it to the “social revolutions” Theda Skocpol (1979) analyzed in her work on the French, Russian, and Chinese revolutions (see Moore, 2000, 5). This absence of top-down authority was a scope condition of medieval innovation and perhaps what set it apart from many other great agrarian civilizations. To understand these processes properly, we must avoid reading history backward from the modern world where science and innovations are deliberately understood as the production of new knowledge and where state power is high.

Competing interests. None.

Notes

1. I am indebted to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this formulation.
2. A case in point is the revolutionary political practices of representation and consent, developed via a very creative interpretation of rediscovered Roman law in the twelfth century. These practices were based on the explicit wording in clauses such as *quod omnes tangit ab omnibus approbetur* (“that which affects all people must be approved by all people”) that had never been used in this way in Roman law before. They were first used in ecclesiastical courts where lawyers met as proctorial representatives, a way of committing the parties (say monasteries or cathedral chapters) in trials about ecclesiastical rights while having the court meet in faraway Rome. In the early thirteenth century, however, popes began to use them in a political way, for instance at the Fourth Lateran Council 1215 where representatives of cathedral chapters all over the Latin West met in order to be able to consent to taxation (Møller, 2018).
3. On the power of religious motivations in medieval society, see Riley-Smith (2005 [1987]).

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