

Minsters – A Definition

In the Anglo-Saxon period (and more generally in early medieval Europe), churches were collegiate affairs – i.e. one or more places for prayer (oratories, churches, chapels, call them what you will) with a community engaged in group worship and communal life. Shared worship revolved around a cycle of daily prayer; communal life was based around ownership of land by the community – food and clothing were supplied from the corporately owned property.

In Anglo-Saxon England, such religious communities are referred to with two different words. The Latin term is *monasterium* (and sometimes *coenobium*) The Old English is *mynster*. These same terms crop up in Bede's 'Ecclesiastical History' and are in use all the way up to the Norman Conquest.

The problem lies in interpreting them! Bede used the same word – *monasterium* – to describe the 'double house' of men and women at Coldingham, where there was a reputation for improper behaviour, and Bede's own house at Monkwearmouth-Jarrow, where there was a very high standard of religious discipline.

The scholarly convention which has emerged in the last two decades is to refer to any Anglo-Saxon religious community as a 'minster'. This term avoids the anachronistic implications of calling a community a 'monastery'.

To recognise the very broad range of religious observance known in Anglo-Saxon England, a 'minster' could represent pretty much any kind of community. We must accept that it is unrealistic – and anachronistic – to even try to define or categorise the quality or type of minsters.

Until the 950s it was normal for a religious community to develop its own Rule. Benedict Biscop, founder of Monkwearmouth-Jarrow, spent nearly ten years in Gaul visiting different communities and learning from their practice, before creating his own Rule for his Northumbrian foundation – this was perfectly usual.

Anglo-Saxon minsters usually had a core of men serving them (as women could not be ordained priests). During the Viking Age, communities tended to concentrate on pastoral care and are frequently referred to as 'communities of priests'. In other periods, the more monastic aspects of communal life played a more significant role, and it would be fair to call them 'monks', particularly during/after the 'monastic reform' of the 950s-970s, where many communities adopted the Rule of Benedict. At other times, 'colleges of priests' might be more accurate. Some non-monastic communities followed Chrodegang of Metz's Rule for Canons (particularly in the eleventh century), but this was just a simplified version of the Rule of Benedict.

In the seventh and eighth centuries, 'double-houses' of men and women have been seen as an important feature of religious life; in practice, women might be attached to minsters on their own or as small groups. Religious women were referred to both as *mynnian* (cloistered nuns) and *nunnan* (vowesses). Cloistered nuns would be Regular nuns, subject to a rule and

in a female community under an abbess. 'Vowesses' were women who had taken religious vows (often as widows) and were living a holy life, sometimes but not necessarily attached to a minster. Vowesses crop up in quite a few charters as *religiosa feminae*.

Interestingly, it seems that the ordinary people who worked for a minster (working on the land, acting as servants, farmers, artisans etc) were considered to be part of the community. Bede implies on a number of occasions that unimportant people (e.g. Caedmon the herdsman) were part of the religious community. When the church at Waltham was founded, sixty-six men pledged themselves to serve the holy cross it contained, forming the nucleus of the settlement there – they were definitely separate from the two priests who performed the services.

In practice, 'minsters' represent a very broad church, with just about every form of religious observance somewhere!

A minster might closely follow the Rule of Benedict and Regularis Concordia and be (to all intents and purposes) a monastery.

A minster might be a group of priests serving a church and preaching, baptising and serving the spiritual needs of their area.

A minster might have one or more women who had taken religious vows living as part of the community.

A minster might have some clergy who had chosen to marry or live with women, and some who preferred to live a celibate life.

A minster might follow a Rule, but this could be a home-grown Rule or (from 950) the Rule of Benedict or (in the eleventh century) the Rule of Chrodegang.

Bishops' households were important in that they contained a number of clergy. Just as with any other minster, these clergy could be priests, clergy under instruction, monks or anything else. Many cathedrals were served by monks (Canterbury, Winchester) and the bishop doubled as the abbot (an arrangement unique to later Anglo-Saxon England). Some cathedrals had colleges of canons or other non-monastic clergy attached. Worcester had both – the bishop's non-monastic household, plus a monastery founded by Bishop Oswald in the 960s.

From c. 900, 'parish' churches as we understand them began to be founded by local landowners, thegns etc. These began to be served by priests who might live near the church, live in the household of their lord, or reside in the nearby minster. By the later eleventh century, priests living near their churches had become the norm for most small, parish churches. These priests could be of questionable literacy and Latinity (witness the writings of Bishop Wulfstan of Worcester/York and abbot Aelfric in the early 1000s) and could be married. The establishment of parish churches did diminish the larger minsters' importance, and particularly reduced their finances as tithes were siphoned off – though they fought hard to keep the right to burial payments. Having a graveyard was a very lucrative business!

This article is © 2005 members of 'The Vikings' Ecclesiastical team and October 25th 2005.

Copies of this document must not be sold or otherwise used for commercial gain, but free use and distribution is allowed for non-profit use. All other rights reserved by the authors.