

History of Anglo-Saxon Minsters

The organisation of the Anglo-Saxon Church was very much in line with the rest of early medieval Europe. Before c. 900 the concept of a 'parish' church as we know it – a relatively small church served by one priest dedicated to the pastoral care of a village or other small territorial unit – did not exist. Such a 'parish' model began to emerge in Anglo-Saxon England during the tenth century and was firmly in place by the Conquest – at Domesday it could be assumed that each village would have a priest who could lead the jury which attested to the landholding in the area.

If the later medieval parish was at best in its infancy in the earlier Anglo-Saxon period, how was the Church organised? During the fifth, sixth and seventh centuries there is compelling evidence in Frankish Gaul for the establishment of a network of churches throughout the countryside. This system was created and administered by the bishops who had their episcopal seats in the semi-urban *civitates* (to describe them as 'towns' or 'cities' would push the evidence too far). These churches in the *vici* were served by a number of priests who lived on the site and were led by an archpriest. Aside from their duty to perform regular daily services and pray these groups of priests were responsible for pastoral care in the area – preaching, teaching and seeing to the spiritual needs of the *parochia* assigned to their church. This must have been a full-time occupation, as late Roman Christianity was largely confined to the urban *civitates*; the countryside (*pagus*) was occupied by rustics (*pagani*) whose understanding of – and interest in – Christianity may be questioned. Though it may be excessive to suggest that Frankish bishops in the fifth to seventh centuries had to convert the countryside to Christianity, a great deal of effort went into ending or modifying the folk-rituals and beliefs of the *pagani*. Inevitably the urbane Christian theology had to give a little, and the Church tied itself into rural life, with activities such as liturgical processions to bless crops and fields becoming acceptable Christian practices.

With this context in mind we should consider Anglo-Saxon 'minsters'. 'Minster' is the modern scholarly translation of the Old English word *mynster* and its Latin equivalent *monasterium*. The most comprehensive definition is provided by John Blair in his introduction to The Church in Anglo-Saxon Society (OUP 2005):

"A complex ecclesiastical settlement which is headed by an abbeys, abbot or man in priest's orders; which contains nuns, monks, priests, or laity in a variety of possible combination, and is united to a greater or lesser extent by their liturgy and devotions; which may perform or supervise pastoral care to the laity, perhaps receiving dues and exerting parochial authority; and which may sometimes act as a bishop's seat, while not depending for its existence or importance on that function."

This definition is extremely broad, and could potentially include a huge range of different institutions. This breadth and inclusiveness is a considerable asset, as our evidence suggests that 'minsters' could be very diverse places indeed.

The terminology of 'minsters' is remarkably consistent through the Anglo-Saxon period. However, the tendency of scholars to translate the Latin *monasterium* directly as 'monastery' has rather distorted the picture of Anglo-Saxon religious life, making the wholly anachronistic suggestion that monasticism (particularly Benedictine monasticism) was the norm. The scholarly debate which has revolutionised our understanding of minsters has only evolved from the late 1980s, and thus many otherwise excellent translations of texts (particularly Bede's 'Ecclesiastical History') still use the older terminology.

One characteristic of Anglo-Saxon minsters which should be stressed is their collegiate lifestyle. Minsters were occupied by communities, which could be as small as one or two priests and as large as the 'six hundred monks' described by Bede as inhabiting Monkwearmouth-Jarrow at the end of Ceolfrid's abbacy. It is worth noting that the lay tenants and workers at a minster may have been considered as much part of the community as its clergy.

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