

Minsters in the pre-Viking period, c. 650-800

The first Anglo-Saxon minsters were founded by kings as a means of supporting and furthering the conversion of their people. Bede's 'Ecclesiastical History' is an excellent source for this process (particularly the conversion of Northumbria, Bede's home and main area of interest). Minsters served a number of important purposes in the later seventh and early eighth centuries (the main period of conversion for the various English kingdoms). Minster churches were places of prayer, where the community would pray for the well-being of their patrons, both in life and in death.

Minsters were homes for communities of clergy, and therefore bases from which Christianity could be spread to the surrounding countryside. Minsters were places of learning, where books could be copied and where men and women could learn the essence of Christian life which they could then teach to others. Minsters were places of spiritual power, housing relics of the many saints known in Anglo-Saxon England – often the holy men and women who had founded or lived in the minster in days past. Minsters were places of wealth and economic power, often with very generous estates and landed property, but also centres of craft-production, trade and industry. Minsters were bastions of permanence in an uncertain and changing world, where the community would live on despite the death of individual members, symbolised in the need for written documentation to prove the minster's land-ownership, as grants were made not for short lifetimes, but in perpetuity to an undying institution. Minsters were places of family power, where aristocratic families (and royal dynasties were no different to any others) could reinforce their political strength through the spiritual power of family members given over to a holy life (particularly women) and provide a holy place to be buried.

Minsters were therefore important for a wide variety of reasons. Their political importance should not be underestimated in the turbulent world of family power-struggles as competing noble kindreds vied for the thrones of the major kingdoms. 'Spare' women from aristocratic families frequently entered religious communities (in the early seventh century many went to royal nunneries in northern Gaul, particularly Chelles and Moutier-en-Brie). Religious life was a powerful alternative to marriage (with the dangers of childbirth) which could still further the interests of a dynasty. A significant number of aristocratic women 'retired' to minster communities after an active life (particularly former queens in the seventh and eighth centuries), often assuming the leadership of the church they joined. Bede's 'Letter to Ecgberht', bishop of York, c. 731 criticises the many aristocratic minsters in Northumbria, with the concern that they contribute nothing to the benefit of the kingdom – neither men for military service nor prayer for divine favour. However, the phenomenon of aristocratic religious houses lamented by Bede was an essential part of religious and political life both in Anglo-Saxon England and Frankish Gaul.

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