

INTRODUCTION

LIVING AND DYING IN THE CLOISTER.
MONASTIC LIFE FROM THE 5TH TO THE 11TH CENTURY

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The monastic life investigated through monk's vision, and I dare say, analyzed from the inside, is the perspective of the XXIII International Research Center for late Antiquity and Middle Ages (IRCLAMA) Symposium, that took place in Zadar University, Croatia, from May 28th to June 4th, 2016. The meeting was organized by the department of History of Art of Zadar University in collaboration with the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore (Milano, Italy) and Centro Studi Longobardi (Milano, Italy).

The meeting intended to approach deeply, through the study of space and time of monastic life, the development of medieval society between East and West, which thanks to IRCLAMA series has been significantly observed, even on an international level, for at least twenty five years with the commitment of Professor Miljenko Jurković.

History, art, architecture and archaeology are the primary tools through which, with the words spoken and written by the monks, the places of prayer, of everyday life and activities, the images and material constructions (church, cloister, chapter, refectory, kitchen, library, scriptorium, dormitory, sick-room, garden, storehouse, guesthouse, etc.), to the last burial places in the monastic graveyards, the forms of the monastic abbey complexes and their uses, from late antiquity to the majestic naissance of Cluny, such archetypes of Christian Europe in the Middle Ages, are examined. This is a prospective system that, although in the shadow of the religious affair of *societas christiana*, touches one of the structures that has marked its growth and still impregnates some ideal, cultural, and social expressions.

Space and time in the monastic life include wide topics. Starting from the eastern Byzantine society to the western barbarian one, ascetism has met, for centuries, many different types, experiences and communities, not only because the various monasteries had different rules and customs but also because, after the Reform of Aachen, the monks in their cloisters performed in a new way the dictates of the Rule, adapting them to the historical moment, but always within the roots of Benedictine tradition. In the *libri consuetudinum*, there is a careful and ordered description of the dispositions about every hour of day and night. But what they do not reveal is the real discipline, the life of brothers and sisters, who in the silence of cloisters have spent their lives searching for their redemption and the redemption of mankind. The topic is open to historical research and to the changes of institutions, where much depends on the place, the Superior and his ability of government, while the need to have a general view of the question is mostly a requirement of the modern research and not the actual reality of the facts.

Moreover, due to their nature, traditions risk to communicate a misleading impression of peaceful and undisturbed *routine*, which for certain periods certainly corresponds to the truth. Indeed, everyday practice is a mirror for space and time circumstances, which are known to be an important aspect to observe the rule. The growth of anchoritism and

single abbeys shows the alternation between periods of strict observance and periods with less spiritual strain, that the appeal of a holy ascetic or of a reformed community changes with time and that not always the monastic spiritual renewal has been fully supported. On the other hand, in large monasteries, with tens or hundreds of monks, disciplinary practice was generally more ordered and it did not encounter the same problems of small or rural monasteries, while it was impossible for foundations voted to solitude follow the rhythms of town abbeys.

Hermits and coenobites, however, felt the influence of local traditions, of the surroundings and the place they lived in. It is necessary to take this into account, though not always easy, in order not to ascribe the customs of foundations established in a determined geographical context to others completely freestanding. All the same, with regard to the different disciplines, one must be careful to use formal analogy and similarity criteria, because even though they are useful for a first approach, they are not enough without reliable sources to support research and deduction.

This is the purpose of the meeting organized by IRCLAMA in Zadar, whose works are part of this volume and introduced by who is writing. The first of the five sessions is dedicated to "Structures of Monastic Life and liturgical Places" in which essays by Carmelina Urso, Fadia Abou Sekeh, Jorge López Quiroga, Cesare Alzati, Paul Tombeur, Laura de Castellet, Jordina Sales-Carbonell, Marta Sancho i Planas, Roberto Cassanelli, Francesca Stroppa, Massimo De Paoli, Fabrizio Bisconti and Carla Bino have highlighted different kinds of monasticism, from Antiquity to Middle Ages, with different perspectives, from a solitary to a community way of life, from rural to urban contexts, from East to West, male and female communities, together with the aspect of the prayer, liturgy, sacred representations and rituals.

The second Session "Cloistered Forms and Religious Symbols" examined the monastic spaces and their distribution, with particular regard to the centrality of the cloister and its architectural and decorative varieties. The essays by Roberta Cerone, Gerardo Boto Varela, Imma Lorés, Xavier Costa Badia, Artemio Manuel Martínez Tejera, Marcello Rotili, Maria Cristina Rossi, Margherita Tabanelli, Milagros Guardia, Ivan Josipović, Ivana Tomas and Gian Pietro Brogiolo describe these places without neglecting the territorial differences and the building characteristics that founders, donors, monks and abbots have impressed to the place where they lived, over the time, in each region.

The third part is entitled "Building and working in the Monastic World" and is devoted to manual and intellectual activities of monks, to their possessions and building materials of each coenobium (stone, iron, wood). The essays by Pietro Dalena, Fabio Redi, Paolo De Vingo, Alessandro Di Muro, Antonio Macchione, Nicolas Reveyron, Paola Galetti, Vasco La Salvia, Simona Gavinelli and Mattia Cosimo Chiriatti deal with late medieval monastic Europe,

with particular regard to both small and large local communities, to the more isolated rocky establishments and better organized carolingian coenobiums, to their cultural engagement, the creation of studying and learning centres, copying activities and book distribution.

In the fourth Session “Asceticism of the Food, Attendance and Charity”, the debated issue of nutrition for monks, in the essays of Antoni Riera i Melis, Roberto Bellini, Roberto Greci, Giuliana Albini, Mia Rizner, Maria Soler Sala, Alessia Frisetti and Nicola Busino becomes the interpretative key of Christianity itself. In this context, food becomes a charity and fraternal tool, a drug to treat the *infirmity* of men and women, afflicted in body and soul. It’s a gift by the divine providence, that after having been blessed, is carefully dispensed by the Superior and its abuse is severely punished by canonical laws.

The fifth and last session is entitled “With the Glimpse beyond Time”. Here, the essays by Daniel Lemeni, Giuseppe Motta, Simona Moretti, Jorge Rodrigues, Rutger Kramer, Veronika Wieser, Daniele Ferraiuolo, Meta Niederkorn, Paola Novara and Debora Ferreri are concerned with the eschatological perspective of monks’ path on this earth. Awaited, feared or invoked, death is, in the monastery too, the ultimate outcome of every existence and the last mansion destined for its members. In the naked land or in a monumental burial, it becomes a memorial for those who walk along the same paths of religious perfection. Indeed, the thought of dying with the harsh warning of the poor remains ransacked in the cemetery of each coenobium, is a constant in cloistral reflection: it attends the evening prayer of the brothers, devotion to the worship of the cross, liturgical functions, hagiographic patterns and sacred images. If hope in the Risen Lord is the ultimate horizon, however, it can happen that faith does not lift its eyes to heaven for the less virtuous, whose weaknesses are manifested in attachment to earthly things and their material expressions.

The time for God and the space of choral and personal prayer, is thus modulated through the experience of hermits

and coenobites, which is documented by written sources, material remains, building survivals, painted or sculptured walls of churches and caves, through the seasons of life and its occupations. It emerges a reality of an existence open to the inner needs of the cloisters, but not indifferent to the flow of external events, careful in managing material interests of quite often substantial patrimoniums appetites, but always orientated for spiritual purposes. The path to perfection therefore appears mediated by fraternal confrontation, material and intellectual work, generous welcome to the poor and pilgrims, bodily nutrition coupled with the ritual of the spiritual one, the ways of the educational activity of the small oblates and charity, toward the weaker brothers, to those gestures of religious piety that with death open the doors of eternity to the brothers.

The choice of the monastic asceticism, in its anchoritic and community declinations, naturally leads to real worlds and soul landscapes very different among them, and not always entirely codifiable, offering a wealth of ascetic experiences that, from this point of view, are not attributable to necessarily unitary models, nor would it be right to do so. This also applies to the material structures that, for a long time, have responded more to the contingent needs of individual communities than to pre-established schemes, with the risk of creating, looking for in vain, architectural models, building schemes and ideal systems never really existed. Of course, in this unity of spiritual intentions in the variety of concrete forms of implementation, many are the common characteristics – obedience, humility, silence, prayer, song, work, study, moderation, abstinence, fasting, charity, etc. – but they are personal, mysterious, and almost unfathomable ways, as the *Prologo* of the Benedictine Rule recalls: *obscura, o fili, praecepta magistri*.

Forgetting it, does not make a good service to historical research and prevent us from understanding the very essence of Christian monasticism that goes beyond things, buildings, and even religious choices and individual expectations.