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Assertions of Monastic Identity and Power in the Cloister and Nave of St. Gall

John D. Treat

In *Purity and Danger*, anthropologist Mary Douglas famously defined dirt as “matter out of place,” meaning that one person or object could contaminate another should they enter into contact outside of appropriate cultural context.¹ For monks of the ninth century, laity within the monastic enclosure constituted just such matter out of place. As monasteries of the Carolingian world became increasingly important economic, educational, and pilgrimage centers, what the Rule of St. Benedict had called “a school for the Lord’s service” found itself in uncomfortable proximity to the world. Laymen of the period were, to be sure, coreligionists, but represented an ever-present danger of pollution as the Rule made clear in its elaborate proscriptions for monks leaving and reentering the enclosure.² The Carolingian monastery lived in an unresolved tension between the purity of separation from the world and the benefits to be gained from secular engagement.

To confront this dilemma, the parts of the monastery received new layers of symbolic meaning, opening some spaces to lay penetration while shielding others more securely. Here I will examine the monastic cloister and the nave of the abbey church as instances of these two ten-

¹ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Psychology Press, 2003), 41.

² See Prologue and Chapter 67, Saint Benedict, *RB 1980: The Rule of St. Benedict in Latin and English with Notes*, ed. and trans. Timothy Fry (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1981), 288–9.

dencies. In the words of French sociologist Henri Lefebvre, two pieces of what had been vernacular spatial practice became propagandistic representational spaces formed by ever more codified liturgical gestures and localized symbol systems, and finally entered the dialectic of lived space in which monastics and the different classes of the laity and secular clergy contested their power roles.³

Using the plan of the Abbey of St. Gall (ca. 830), various commentaries upon the plan, and the liturgical texts of the period used by the monks, I propose that in the Carolingian era, the nave, formerly a much less status differentiated place in the church declined in status while the cloister, originally a functional secular space rose to a status arguably higher than that of the church itself. The cloister increasingly became a masculine fortress and foretaste of heaven for the elect while the nave became a feminized containment zone for the weakness of the laity as monks sought to clarify both the spaces and hierarchical relationship of the lay and clerical spheres.

Art historian Paul Meyvaert saw cloisters as idyllic spaces for contemplation interspersed with the rhythms of daily life.⁴ Carolingian historian Richard Sullivan, surveying the idealized plan of the Abbey of St. Gall, saw a synthesis of the spirit of the desert and the demands and opportunities of the wider society. Sullivan saw the plan as “a pioneering statement ... addressing the relationship between the cloister and the world,” recognizing the desire for separation represented by the cloister, but failing to recognize both the depth of monastic anxiety contained in this transition and also the hierarchical judgment represented by the plan.⁵ While monks from the time of the desert fathers and mothers had always interacted with the larger society, that interaction had previously been rooted in the periphery with the monk and monastery placing themselves at the edge of the desert. In the Carolingian era, the monastery sought to maintain its claim to apartness by now asserting that it stood between heaven and earth with the monastic community claiming the right to mediate between the society and God and the saints. The old horizontal axis of distance became a vertical axis of sanctity. To create this Jacob’s Ladder, where heaven touched

³ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 32–33, 38–39.

⁴ Paul Meyvaert, “The Medieval Monastic Claustrom,” *Gesta* 12, nos. 1/2 (1973): 58.

⁵ Richard Sullivan, “What Was Carolingian Monasticism? The Plan of St. Gall and the History of Monasticism,” in *After Rome’s Fall: Narrators and Sources of Early Medieval History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 283.

earth with monks ascending and descending between, Benedictines reshaped existing architectural forms.⁶

Henri Lefebvre might have characterized these new spaces and the tensions they represent as artifacts of a battle between central and peripheral spaces. In Lefebvre's taxonomy, the cloister, as the locus of monastic identity and power claims, is a central space which "organises what is around it, arranging and hierarchising the peripheries," while the nave is a peripheral space for the dominated.⁷ The center/periphery dichotomy neatly encapsulates monastic anxiety about pollution and status. For Lefebvre, the "centre attracts those elements which constitute it...but which soon saturate it... It excludes those elements which it dominates (the 'governed', 'subjects' and 'objects') but which threaten it."⁸ The periphery remains a dangerous, active part in the dialectic which may overwhelm the center.⁹ In contrast to the first monastic communities, which had critiqued society from the periphery of the desert, Carolingian monks made a bid to define themselves at the social center.

The origins of the cloister are obscure. Some have seen it as rising from the courtyard of the late Roman villa, while others have seen parallels in the construction of Roman forts. The villa gives us the example of an arcaded interior space. The fort evokes a foursquare space with controlled points of entry. Both types of structures provided shelter to early monasteries and, as monks adapted these existing structures to their purposes, they no doubt brought the villa into dialogue with the fort, synthesizing the two to meet practical needs as community life evolved and adapted itself to various locales.¹⁰ The first "fully-developed" cloisters do not appear until the early ninth century at the

⁶ Saint Benedict, *RB 1980: The Rule of St. Benedict*, Chapter 7, 193 uses the image of Jacob's ladder in just this way. The image of the monastic ladder was further popularized in the 12th century by Guigo II of the Grande Chartreuse in "The Ladder of Monks."

⁷ Henri Lefebvre, *The Survival of Capitalism: Reproduction of the Relations of Production* (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 1976), 17.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁹ In his discussion of the periphery and the center, Lefebvre is speaking of capitalist societies, but says that this relationship is a product "of the previous struggles of classes and peoples," so it seems fair to apply it to social relationships in the Carolingian era. *ibid.*, 17.

¹⁰ This historical overview of the cloister's antecedents is drawn from Charles McClendon, *The Origins of Medieval Architecture: Building in Europe, A.D. 600-900* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), 150-52.

abbeys of Reichenau and Lorsch, and even here, it is uncertain how they were used.¹¹ Lefebvre would say that even contemporary planners “cannot produce a space with a perfectly clear understanding of cause, effect, motive, and implication.”¹²

However the spatial practice of linking principal buildings with covered arcades took shape as a monastic form, the text of the sixth-century Rule of St. Benedict provided material with which to construct layers of meaning to contextualize the space for the complex interaction of the lay and clerical spheres in the ninth century. The Rule is an anonymous document that had existed for more than 200 years as one rule among many in the West until being decreed the official rule for monasteries by the Carolingians.¹³ The language of the Rule balances the tensions between the ideal of monastic humility and withdrawal with the idea of monks as an elite fighting force, as seen in the prologue’s image of the monk armed, “armed with the strong and noble weapons of obedience to do battle for the true King, Christ the Lord.”¹⁴ However the author of the Rule had intended for this martial language to be heard, in the Carolingian era, this sense of the monks as an elite, disciplined force in a lax world would find particular resonance. The monastery would become a camp for spiritual warriors who battled flesh and the devil and the cloister would represent both the heart of their earthly encampment and also a realized piece of the kingdom for which they fought, as when the monk who has ascended the 12th step of humility is cleansed of sin and lives in “love for Christ, good habit and delight in virtue.”¹⁵ These two forceful images are balanced by the fact that the cloister was also a fortress under siege, central and yet vulnerable to the periphery as more and more parts of the monastery were invaded by growing lay traffic.¹⁶ This sense of siege and of an inner sanctum for the elite also speaks to internal tensions and fears. The cloister was a

¹¹ McClendon, *The Origins of Medieval Architecture*, 152.

¹² Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 37.

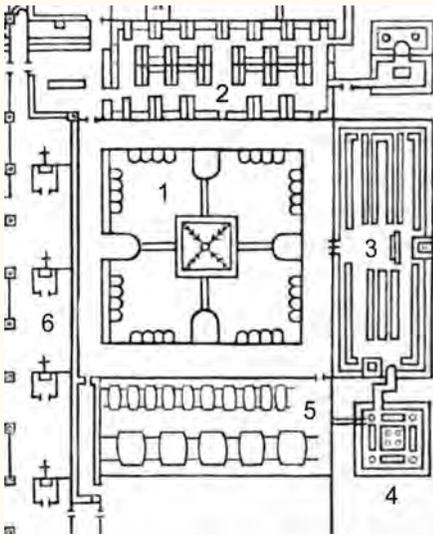
¹³ Saint Benedict, *RB 1980: The Rule of St. Benedict*, 73–9, 121–4.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, see Chapter 7, 191–203 and the opening of the Prologue, 156–7.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, Chapter 7, IX, 203.

¹⁶ For a complete description of the buildings surrounding the cloister, see Walter W. Horn and Ernest Born, *The Plan of St. Gall: A Study of the Architecture & Economy of & Life in a Paradigmatic Carolingian Monastery* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1979), I, 241 (accessed September 29, 2012, http://www.stgallplan.org/horn_born/index.htm).

space for monks in their prime, with boys, novices, and the infirm occupying their own spaces. This new emphasis on the martial aspects of the Rule should be read as much as a counterstrategy for anxiety as of growing confidence. One sees this conundrum in the layout of the cloister. In Figure 1 of the Cloister of St. Gall, the dormitory, refectory, stores and all of the basics of the monks' life are contracted around this space with entrances only from the narrow parlor at the lodge of the master of the hospice and from the church's chapel of St. Andrew, which lay out of bounds for the laity.¹⁷



1. Cloister.
2. Warming room and dormitory.
3. Refectory and vestiary.
4. Kitchen.
5. Cellar and larder.
6. South aisle of the church.

Figure 1: The cloister of the Abbey of St. Gall, after James Fergusson's *The Illustrated Handbook of Architecture*, 1859.¹⁸

If the cloister was a redoubt in a period of encroachment, it was also a foretaste of paradise. About the year 1000, St. Romuald would advise his followers to "Sit in the cell as in paradise. ... place yourself in the presence of God ... like someone who stands in the sight of the emperor."¹⁹ The cloister becomes the place par excellence of *otium*, holy

¹⁷ *ibid.* For a diagram showing restrictions on the flow of of lay movement in the Church, see *ibid.*, I, 130.

¹⁸ James Fergusson, *The Illustrated Handbook of Architecture: Being a Concise and Popular Account of the Different Styles of Architecture Prevailing in All Ages and All Countries*, 2nd ed. (London: J. Murray, 1859).

¹⁹ Romuald is quoting an older desert tradition, but his quote shows the transmission of the idea to the West; Camaldolese Hermits of MonteCorona, "St. Ro-

leisure that opens the self to the contemplation of God in reading and mental prayer and the opposite of *negotium*, business and busyness, no doubt a growing anxiety represented by the monastery's growing economic complexity.²⁰ With the low parapets between its columns separating the garth from the space under the arcades, the strolling monk looked not merely upon a relic or even the consecrated Host, but into heaven itself in the central garden.²¹ In the paths that often intersected in its center at a fountain or well, he saw the rivers dividing the heavenly city of Revelation 21:2. In the case of St. Gall, where the plan specifies a Savin tree, a medicinal evergreen, in the center of the courtyard, we return to the New Jerusalem of Revelation 22:2 where, beside the rivers, "stood the tree of life ... And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations."²² In the cloister's 100 by 102 foot perimeter, one sees the same vision's "city foursquare" echoing both the early Christian image and the Roman idea of *quadrari*, meaning both four-squareness and uprightness.²³

In one of his most beautiful passages, Lefebvre himself comments on the cloister as a "gestural space [that] has succeeded in mooring a mental space ... to earth."²⁴ To examine a particular instance of Lefebvre's insight that the cloister "connects a finite and determinate locality ... to a theology of the infinite,"²⁵ one need only look at how the Carolingian cloister becomes a place of enactment through liturgical procession. In festal processions, the monks walking in formation around the cloister act out their realized eschatology, imitating the heavenly host in the praise of God. In penitential processions, they draw on martial imagery, fighting back the devil and his disorder in the chanting of the litanies. Processions to the altars in the abbey church revolved

muald's Brief Rule," accessed October 3, 2012, <http://www.camaldolese.org/pages.php?pageid=4>.

²⁰ The concepts of "otium" and "negotium" can be traced at least as far as the writings of Cicero, but are transformed via ascetic practice into the active and contemplative life.

²¹ Description of garth and parapet from Horn and Born, *The Plan of St. Gall*, I, 248–9.

²² *Ibid.*, I, 246–8.

²³ Concept of *quadrari* from Lynda Coon, *Dark Age Bodies: Gender and Monastic Practice in the Early Medieval West* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 216–46; Cloister measurements from Horn and Born, *The Plan of St. Gall*, I, 246.

²⁴ Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 217.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

around paying honor to the saints, whose altars were stational stops. The church processions might be thought of as mere social calls when compared to the claustral processions in which the monks acted out both the warrior band and heaven, two images dear to the monastic heart.²⁶ The anthropologist Victor Turner might well call the cloister an example of liminal space, where the specially prepared initiate is removed from the normal bounds of culture and time and enters into *communitas* with his fellow initiates under the supervision of a master.²⁷

Contemporary cosmology and humor theory come into play in the dialectic creating this complex representation of space. The screened off monk's choir of the church is a hot and dry masculine space for the fire of the church's principal lights and the air of sacred speech, while the cloister, walled off from even the gaze of the laity, is open to the sun and wind. The nave is a cold and wet feminine space, housing women saints, murdered infants of ambiguous soteriological status, and the watery font with its perils and attendant anxieties.²⁸ Above all, the nave is a place of silence unless a voice descends from a more privileged area to speak on behalf of those who present themselves there.

In earlier Christian basilicas, an apse held the altar, the bishop's throne and possibly semicircular benches for the presbyters with the hall of the nave for the community. In the newly conceived monastic church, the monk's choir interposes itself between altar and nave, arguably becoming the new nave of the monastic community while the nave of the laity is screened away from the sacred action. The features of the nave in the Plan of St. Gall show it to be an ambiguous space, fraught with peril for the monastic community, a textbook example of the dangerous periphery.

In a monastic church, the font is a sign of contradiction. In what should be garrison of those who have given themselves to the celibate life, the font's very association with the baptism of infants can be read as a symbol of the unregenerate in the midst of the monastery. Unlike a

²⁶ Processions of the Blessed Sacrament, the processional *ne plus ultra*, were a much later development.

²⁷ Victor Turner, "Liminality and *Communitas*," in *A Reader in the Anthropology of Religion* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008), 326–39.

²⁸ For a succinct overview of the mapping of humor theory onto male and female bodies from Aristotle to Isidore of Seville, see Thomas W. Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 34–41.

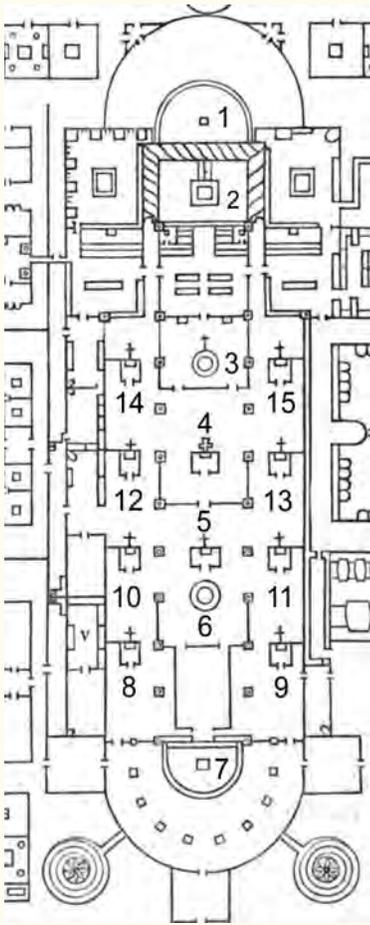
cloister well or fountain, evoking the waters that flow beside the throne of God, the prayers associated with the font evoke images of the primordial chaos of the waters of creation, the flood, the womb, and lurking devils.²⁹ In the plan of St. Gall, the font sits outside of the holy places just as the bronze laver for the purification of the priests did in the Hebrew temple. By being a place where one is made pure, it signals that it sits in a place that is open to those who are impure.

The Gregorian Sacramentary (ca. 785) gives us important clues to these assumptions in its contrast of the blessing of the new fire and paschal candle and the blessing of the font in the Easter Vigil. Though the new fire is aspersed and censed, it is essentially welcomed and has its virtues extolled in the presbytery. The font, on the other hand, is treated much more elaborately in the ceremony known as the *fructificatio*, the making fruitful. In the blessing of the font, the paschal candle, with its imagery of the purity and industry of bees, is brought down from the presbytery. The celebrant exorcises the font by blowing on it four times as he chants an anaphora recalling how God has controlled and used the chaos and death of water, then thrusts the bottom end of the candle three times into the font. If the explicit sexual and fertility language and gestures of the rite touched on a key monastic anxiety, they also assured those present of the superiority of the male over the female, with the fire from the penetrations of the candle and the air in the insufflations of the priest each doing its work to subdue and transform the cold and the wet, the feminine and unregenerate, which would in turn wash away the original sin of children produced by lay concupiscence and cleanse the laity aspersed with it.³⁰

The altars of the nave, shown in Figure 2, also speak to its low status. At the westernmost and least honorable positions we find on the north side the altar of Ss. Lucy and Cecilia and, on the south side, Ss. Agatha and Agnes, the only altars in the church dedicated to women, other than that of the Virgin. These lesser virgins are placed as far as possible from the monks' choir. The opinion given them in the liturgy of the period is seen in the Gregorian Sacramentary's collect for the Mass of Virgins, which says, "O God in your miraculous power, you unite even

²⁹ Biblioteca apostolica vaticana. MS. (Reg. Lat. 337), *The Gregorian Sacramentary under Charles the Great*, trans. Henry A. Wilson (London: Henry Bradshaw Society, 1915), 56.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 56–7.



1. Altar of St. Paul
2. Altar of Ss. Mary and Gall
3. Ambo.
4. Altar of the Cross.
5. Altar of the Holy Innocents.
6. Font.
7. Altar of St. Peter.
8. Altar of Ss. Lucy and Cecilia.
9. Altar of Ss. Agatha and Agnes.
10. Altar of St. John.
11. Altar of St. Sebastian.
12. Altar of St. Martin.
13. Altar of St. Mauritius.
14. Altar of St. Stephen.
15. Altar of St. Laurence.

Figure 2: The church of the Abbey of St. Gall, after James Fergusson's *The Illustrated Handbook of Architecture*.

the fragile sex with the victory of martyrdom.”³¹ This stands in sharp contrast with the four altars at the easternmost portion of the nave, where we find altars dedicated to St. Martin on the north and St. Maurice on the south. Both of these are high status men who, though proven warriors, laid down their arms to battle for Christ. While these were certainly two popular saints, the position of their altars may be read not only as an indication of their superior status to that of the “fragile” virgins, but also as their forming a bulwark to protect the purity of the

³¹ *Ibid.*, 182.

monks, their metaphorical comrades who “fight under a rule.”³² Further east, at the entrance to the choir, we find the altars of Stephen and Lawrence, deacons who watched over the needs of the laity forming a final barrier. Only beyond this point do we find the altars of apostles and, tellingly, monks.

The placement of the Altar of the Holy Innocents in the center of the nave is a similarly ambivalent sign. While they came in plentiful supply, the Holy Innocents of Bethlehem were a troubling conundrum for the church in that their blood was shed during Herod’s hunt for the Christ child, but they were not baptized Christians or strictly martyrs, since they had not freely accepted death for the faith, thus complicating any attempt to claim for them baptism by blood. Like the laity, they exemplified an indeterminate and intermediate state.

The Altar of the Savior at the Cross, placed two-thirds of the way into the nave, gives its own clues. The same altar was placed in this location in abbeys of Centula, Fulda, and Corvey, so clearly this placement held some particular resonance.³³ Rather than being seen as giving the laity access to a particularly privileged altar, the location of the Altar of the Cross should be seen as a powerful boundary marker between the laity (and secular clergy for that matter) and the monks. Mary Rambaran-Olm has pointed out that the Anglo-Saxon poem, “The Dream of the Rood,” portrays both Christ and the cross as warriors in combat against evil.³⁴ Seen in this light, the Savior and the cross are warriors interposing themselves between nave and choir. Liturgically, this message is revealed in the *Improperia* at the veneration of the cross on Good Friday, when the cantor would sing “O my people, what have I done to you? ... With great strength I raised you up and you have hung me on the gibbet of the cross.”³⁵ The nave is a battleground where Christ yet contends for supremacy among the faithless, while beyond in the choir and cloister, the strife is past. The plan itself lends further evidence to this interpretation with its caption of “Altar of the Holy Saviour at the Cross/Pious Cross: Life, Health, and Redemption of the wretched

³² Saint Benedict, *RB 1980: The Rule of St. Benedict*, Chapter 1, 168–9.

³³ Horn and Born, *The Plan of St. Gall*, I, 136.

³⁴ Mary Rambaran-Olm, “Major Theme,” *The Dream of the Rood: An Electronic Edition*, accessed September 29, 2012, http://www.dreamofrood.co.uk/frame_start.htm. Lines 33–41 of the poem provide a sample of this language.

³⁵ Prosper Guéranger, *The Liturgical Year: Passiontide and Holy Week* (Dublin: James Duffy, 1870), 490–2.

world.”³⁶ The very schematics of the plan reinforce the cross as boundary between secular chaos and monastic sanctity in that the cross rises ten feet above the altar with a span of 7.5 feet.³⁷ Later eras would use screen surmounted by a cross to divide the choir from the nave; here the rood itself serves as screen.

Finally, watching over the nave, we have the ambo, a tower within the church raised on its parapet, where the abbot or preacher could both survey and instruct the laity. The ambo thrusts itself into the nave, staking a claim to the space, but its wall makes it a part of the choir. The two lecterns within the same enclosure would have been used at the monks’ night office and, possibly, for the gospel at solemn Masses at the high altar with the readers facing away from the nave.³⁸ These two places for speaking had nothing to say to laics beyond what they might overhear, while the ambo provided them with a voice from a higher realm with its mass and height representing not only the personal authority of the speaker, but also the authority of his state.

These monastic assertions in space would not go uncontested. The lesser nobility would use the tower with its halls and private audience chambers to create their own forms in which to enact rituals of courtly power. The aristocratic Gerald of Aurillac, if we are to believe Odo of Cluny, would make his own body that of a model monk and his court superior to a lax monastery.³⁹ The monks might have struck early with an unequalled coherence of space and gesture, but, by the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries, Camoldolese, Cistercian and Carthusian reformers would declare the battle lost and make a last stand by attempting to abolish a lay nave from their churches entirely, but even these reformers could not make the monastic center hold. In the end, the peripheral space of the nave and the classes it represented could not be withstood.

³⁶ Horn and Born, *The Plan of St. Gall*, I, 136.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ It would not likely have been lost on the monks that when the celebrant or deacon read the gospel facing the “heathen north,” he would be chanting directly toward the guesthouse and lay school at a Mass at the Altar of the Cross and at the Abbot’s house at Masses at the Altar of Ss. Mary and Gall.

³⁹ Pamela Marshall, “The Great Tower as Residence in the Territories of the Norman and Angevin Kings of England,” in *The Seigneurial Residence in Western Europe AD c. 800–1600* (British Archaeological Reports, 2002), 27–8, 34; Odo of Cluny, “The Life of St. Gerald of Aurillac,” in *Soldiers of Christ: Saints and Saints’ Lives from Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 1995), 293–362.