

Monks with might

Michael Robson looks at the age of supreme Benedictine influence

The Benedictines in the Middle Ages

James G. Clark

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THE desire to reach the heart of the gospel and to live its message in a fulfilling way has inspired innumerable men and women to forsake their homes and share the cloistered life of penance, prayer, and contemplation.

Dr James G. Clark of the University of Bristol reflects on the part played by the Benedictine order in the Middle Ages in six chapters in which he explores the making of a European order, religious observance within the cloister, the monks'

relationship with society, the later Middle Ages, and the prelude to the Reformation.

While various monastic codes attracted disciples in the early Christian centuries, the authority of the Rule of St Benedict of Nursia (c.480-c.547) advanced steadily, gaining adherents and authority, and providing the inspiration for monastic observance. Clark applies the term "quasi-Benedictines" to monasteries of the seventh and eighth centuries, when different monastic observances co-existed, as in the Anglo-Saxon foundations. From the ninth century, the Benedictine Rule was firmly established as the principal monastic code in the Western Church.

Monasteries were centres for the preservation, study, and dissemination of classical and Christian culture. For example, English monks and nuns copied and dispatched texts for the missionaries in Germany during the later seventh and eighth centuries. Many monasteries were vibrant founts of renewal, and monks were prominent among the promoters of ecclesiastical renewal. One such was St Anselm, who circulated his philosophical reflections, prayers, and meditations among his monastic and aristocratic correspondents, to foster understanding and deepen personal piety. His examination of the principal questions of Christian theology made him a leading authority in the nascent universities, where he was hailed as a medieval successor to St Augustine of Hippo. As Archbishop of Canterbury (1093-1109), he pledged himself to the reform of the Church, whose independence he stoutly defended.

This attractive volume offers a broad survey of the Benedictines and their immense influence on the medieval Church.

The Revd Dr Michael Robson is Dean, Praelector, and Director of Studies in Theology at St Edmund's College, Cambridge.