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The Regular Canons in the Medieval British Isles

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This impressive collection has its origins in 2007 when the editors organized a conference on the regular canons in the British Isles, to shine a light on current research on this form of regular life. Scholarship on the regular canons has been rather overshadowed by that on the Benedictines and Cistercians, but this multidisciplinary publication does much to redress the balance. It combines local, regional and national studies, and includes case studies of individual houses. Whilst most of the 22 chapters are on the Augustinian canons one contributor looks at the Premonstratensians and two focus on the Gilbertines (Order of Sempringham), the only English order to emerge in the Middle Ages. A wide range of topics is covered but the question of identity emerges as a key theme, in particular the interplay between the canons' role as agents of reform and their continuity with the past, for a number of their houses were founded on sites of former religious and cult significance. The chapters are arranged in four groups: 'Origins and organization, and regional developments'; 'Community life'; 'Social contexts'; and 'Cultural contexts'. This represents the vibrancy of current scholarly activity and is a testimony to the diverse nature of the canons' involvement in the British Isles. There is an extensive bibliography, a useful list of all of the houses of regular canons in the British Isles and individual maps of England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales showing the location of the various abbeys and priories in each country.

Part one is the largest section and comprises eight chapters. It discusses aspects of the canons' organization and regional developments, and opens with Sheila Sweetinburgh's (pp. 19–40) case study of St Gregory's Priory, Canterbury, where Augustinian canons replaced secular clerks in 1133 and took on their claim to possess relics of the Anglo-Saxons saints, Eadburg and Mildred. The revival of these cults was lucrative but as Sweetinburgh argues it also provided a way for the canons to create an identity through 'remembered

origins' (p. 40). The focus shifts northwards as Janet Burton (pp. 41–57) considers the influence of the episcopate – and in particular Thomas II, archbishop of York (1109–14), and his successor, Thurstan (1114–40) – in promoting the regular canons in the north of England. She speculates whether the canons' role as priests made them an attractive option to the archbishops given that they could help 'at grass roots level' (p. 57). It is difficult to determine the precise nature of the canons' involvement in pastoral care and whether this was markedly different to their monastic counterparts, a point that is raised by several contributors. Anne Mathers-Lawrence (pp. 59–78) explores the perception and self-identity of the Augustinians in 12th-century Northumbria. She suggests that the apparent lack of rivalry amongst the religious orders may indicate that they had different roles and were not in competition, with the Augustinian canons as the 'academic wing' of the new monasticism in Northumbria. Andrew Abram's (pp. 79–95) detailed study of the Augustinian canons in the diocese of Coventry and Lichfield returns to the matter of cults and the canons' continuity with the past. Whereas most of the Benedictine monasteries in the diocese were established on new sites, a third of the Augustinian houses were founded on pre-existing churches or cult centres and commonly retained the former cult. This, he argues, was 'a significant feature of the devotional and political landscape' in the diocese (p. 93).

Three national studies follow. Karen Stöber (pp. 97–113) assesses the role of the regular canons in Wales and through case studies of two rather modest priories (Penmon and Beddgelert) demonstrate that 'size doesn't always matter' (p. 107). She argues that houses for which there are scant remains and little surviving evidence should not be dismissed, for they were often of considerable spiritual, social, political and cultural importance within the locality. Andrew Smith and Garrett Ratcliff (pp.115–44) analyze relations amongst the Augustinian houses in Scotland before 1215 and undermine the assumption that the order lacked unity and organization. They argue that there was homogeneity which had much to do with David I who gave them a common economic policy, and Bishop Robert of St Andrews who had himself been an Augustinian and united the houses through his patronage and by engaging them as his advisors. Miriam Clyne's (pp. 145–72) chapter on the founders and patrons of Premonstratensian houses (White Canons) in Anglo-Norman Ulster and Gaelic Connacht is the sole contribution on this order. Clyne explains that these houses were generally founded in areas that were undergoing change, whether conquest, colonization or conversion, and that those in Ulster and Connacht remained independent of each other. Whereas the Ulster houses were founded for political reasons and settled by canons from Dryburgh in Scotland, those in Connacht were founded as part of the process of ecclesiastical reform and colonized by canons from Prémontré, France. The final chapter in this section turns to the Gilbertines, an order that comprised nuns, canons, lay sisters and lay brothers. Jane Sorrentino (pp. 173–89) looks at the significance of Augustinian identity to the Gilbertine canons through analysis of their capitular office. She argues that the inclusion of incipits from the Rule of St Augustine suggests that the Gilbertine chapter office reinforced these canons' Augustinian identity to a greater extent than previously thought.

The second section, 'Community life', comprises five chapters, and topics range from corrodies and education to diet and office-holding. Allison Fizzard's (pp. 193–211) essay represents part of a larger project on corrodies in English and Welsh houses during the reigns of Henry VII and Henry VIII. Here she focuses on the regular canons in England in the later Middle Ages and concludes that they granted relatively few corrodies and mostly to folk they knew. Like the other orders, they might however be obliged to award corrodies to royal servants although these often amounted to cash payments and did not involve residency. The canons' participation in a wider monastic culture is similarly noted by Nicholas Orme (pp. 213–32) who considers the importance of education to the Augustinians, especially from the 14th century. Orme looks at study both within the cloister and at the universities when education was formalised. Like the Benedictines and Cistercians the Augustinians established a university college, albeit at a rather later date. The Augustinians also made a contribution to the education of others through patronage of public schools and by teaching and housing almonry boys who in turn might be expected to help in the church or sing in the choir. However, as Orme explains, there was nothing distinctive or consistent about the Augustinians' education policy and they probably did much the same as their Benedictine and Cistercian counterparts. Dave Postles (pp. 233–249) explores the practical and symbolic importance of food to the canons and, significantly, how this was used to cement relationships – the canons received gifts of food and awarded it to others. Analysis

centres on the period c. 1200–1350 given that there is little surviving evidence before the 13th century and that the mendicants dominate from the second half of the 14th century.

The final two chapters in this section are case studies and focus on office-holding and leadership. Judith Frost (pp. 251–66) draws on a 16th-century chronicle of Thornton Abbey, Lincolnshire, to examine the claustral careers of its canons. She focuses on Thomas Greetham who presided over Thornton in the late 14th century. Frost concludes that age or seniority as well as previous experience were important factors in securing election to the abbacy. Greetham's comparatively swift rise was likely a consequence of the Black Death when juniors were promoted to seniors more quickly to compensate for the loss of manpower. Martin Heale's (pp. 267–87) case study of Abbot Henry Honor of Missenden (1462–c. 1506) continues the theme of office-holding in Augustinian life and, like Stöber, he gives prominence to a more modest house. Heale draws on Honor's register to assess the role and duties of an abbot of a middling house of canons. This rather personal and informal work includes miscellaneous entries such as medical recipes, weights and star signs in addition to leases, and reveals that Honor was an effective administrator and was actively involved with the local community.

The third part of this collection comprises five essays on 'Social contexts' and discusses aspects of the canons' contacts with the world such as patronage and their involvement with parish churches. The section opens with Glyn Coppack's (pp. 291–311) study of Gilbertine architecture which represents a work in progress and makes the case, based on Watton Priory, for a reinterpretation of the prototype Gilbertine plan. Coppack examines the phasing of the groundplan of Sempringham, which was the motherhouse of the order, to better understand how Gilbertine houses were planned, developed and modified, in particular how they were adapted to accommodate the Augustinian canons who were introduced at Sempringham and Haverholme in 1148 (p. 293). Aerial photography, excavations and especially a recent topographical survey indicate that the canons' cloister at Sempringham was simply attached to the pre-existing design and that the church was modified to accommodate the canons.

The self-identity of the Augustinian canons is addressed by Nick Nichols (pp. 313–37). He draws on statistical analysis and historical narratives relating to the Augustinians in the Worcester diocese to argue that the possession, exploitation and protection of parish churches was a hallmark of the order. Not only was a significant proportion of their income from spiritualities but they actively sought to acquire parish churches, even swapping lands for them, and went to great lengths to reclaim lost churches.

Patronage of the Augustinian canons is the subject of the next two chapters. Graham St John (pp. 339–61) considers why the order drew such tremendous support from members of the nobility and gentry in 14th-century England. He identifies subtle differences that marked out the Augustinian canons from their monastic counterparts and which made an enormous difference to would-be founders and patrons. St John concludes that the canons' prayers were more important to founders than their pastoral work and the fact that each canon was a priest and could celebrate mass was a particular draw. Moreover, the flexibility of the Augustinian rule meant that the canons could offer a more personalized form of commemoration and accommodate special requests from their patrons such as extra masses. Not least the fact that relatively little financial outlay was required to found an Augustinian house would have appealed, especially as most of these founders were men on the rise; the canons thus offered 'atonement on a budget' (p. 360). Emma Cavell's (pp. 363–85) detailed analysis of Wombridge Priory in Shropshire explores kinship, locality and benefaction amongst the lesser nobility through analysis of a local knightly family, the Mussons of Uppington, who were renowned for their predominant female line. Following the death of Sir Roger Musson, c. 1191, patronage of Wombridge passed to his widow and nine daughters. Cavell draws on a series of over 200 charters relating to the patronage of Wombridge by the Mussons and explores the relationship between the priory and members of the family, and how each side sought to fully exploit its spiritual and temporal gains. She notes that the charters reveal how patronage of Wombridge enabled a relatively modest family with limited resources to imitate the greater aristocracy and effectively establish a family mausoleum at the priory.

In the final chapter of this section Claire Cross (pp. 387–400) considers how the Augustinian canons of

Yorkshire responded to the prospect of dissolution and adapted to life after the suppression. Whereas a number of canons remained in their priory's livings or acquired them as benefices after they had passed to the Crown, some, whose priories had run schools, continued to teach to boost their income. Cross argues that, whilst few former canons committed themselves fully to Protestantism, what distinguished these men was their ability to exploit their contacts and 'soldier on' (p. 400).

The final section, 'Cultural contexts', comprises four chapters on the Augustinian canons and explores their influence on art, architecture and literature. James Clark (pp. 403–16) challenges the contention that Latin learning was obsolete amongst the Augustinian canons of late medieval England and finds evidence for an intellectual culture in surviving book collections and library catalogues. These suggest an interest in innovation – in the *studia litterarum* and *ars scribendi* – and a similarity to the Augustinian friars on mainland Europe. Julian Luxford (pp. 417–42) considers retrospection in Augustinian art in the later Middle Ages and explores how communities evoked their institutional history both by retaining or collecting together old objects such as ancient furnishings and tombs, and commissioning new retrospective objects. A striking example is the series of seven painted panels at Hexham depicting bishops of the cathedral. This was commissioned in the late 15th century and may have replaced an earlier series. Luxford concludes that, whilst there was nothing distinctive about the Augustinians' visual retrospection (other orders were doing the same), the canons made a significant contribution to this in medieval England. The penultimate chapter turns to Thurgarton Priory, Nottinghamshire, which was founded in the 12th century and was the largest and wealthiest Augustinian house in the county. Jennifer Alexander (pp. 443–67) seeks to 'reconstruct' the former priory and demonstrates what can be revealed through analysis of the few standing remains and surviving fragments in the village, in addition to 18th-century illustrations and depictions of the ruins. She draws comparisons with surviving architectural features from other religious buildings and concludes that Thurgarton reflected regional design, displaying similar styles to other Augustinian houses in the country as well as to major buildings such as Lincoln Cathedral.

The final chapter returns to Ireland as Tadhg O'Keeffe (pp. 469–84) explores the architecture, history and identity of the Augustinian canons here in the 12th and 13th centuries. The order was introduced to Ireland by Malachy (d. 1148), bishop of Down and archbishop of Armagh, prior to the Anglo-Norman conquest of Ireland in 1169; in contrast to the Cistercians the Augustinians initially recruited from the native population. The order was patronized by both the native Irish and the foreign settlers but O'Keefe stresses that these men were first and foremost Augustinians rather than Irish or Anglo-Norman. Similarities emerge between the Augustinians in Ireland and elsewhere in the British Isles. O'Keefe, like other contributors, argues that the flexibility of the Augustinian rule and the fact their houses needed less land outside the precinct made them attractive to patrons. He also notes their continuity with the past, for all Augustinian houses in Ireland were founded on sites of former Christian significance, and he suggests that their architecture was influenced by regional design – the canons did not really exhibit a distinctive Augustinian style. O'Keefe concludes by raising several areas that require further consideration, in particular the matter of ethnicity. He argues that analysis of the Augustinians could be especially fruitful in this respect since the order was present in Ireland before and after the conquest and was patronized by both natives and Anglo-Normans.

The editors are to be congratulated for bringing together a rich and multidisciplinary work that reflects the wealth and diversity of recent and ongoing research in the field. It conveys the breadth of influence that the regular canons had throughout the British Isles and stimulates important questions about the identity not only of the regular canons but of the religious orders *per se* – what made them distinctive; in what ways did they share a common monastic culture and to what extent were they influenced by regional developments? This collection will make a significant contribution to our understanding of the order and will hopefully spur on further research into the regular canons.

The editors are happy to accept this review, and do not wish to comment further.

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