

17: Medieval Monastic Life *Boundary Maintenance*

Insiders, Outsiders, System Boundaries

Most organized human groups (social systems) make a clear distinction between “insiders” (members) and “outsiders.” The boundary between the two—sometimes just a difference in ideas, sometimes a way of dressing or other action pattern, sometimes a physical barrier of some sort (or all three)—is carefully maintained by the group.

The boundaries between “inside” and “outside” are rarely completely closed. Groups will usually interact with other groups, and there will be ways of varying difficulty for outsiders to join and become insiders or group members.

To make sure boundaries are respected, each member is pressured (with rewards and punishments) to fit in with the group’s ways of acting and its values and beliefs.

Understanding any social system requires an understanding of the group’s boundary-maintaining actions and social controls.

Overview

A century or two after the Christian church formed, some believers chose to give up the possibility of marriage and family, and dedicated themselves to religious lives of prayer and worship. Men became monks or “brothers,” and women became nuns or “sisters.” Most lived in communities, the men in monasteries or abbeys, the women in separate abbeys, nunneries or convents. Their ways of life also usually included study, physical labor of some kind, and service to others in their group or to outsiders in need of help.

Insider and outsider—a medieval monk buying parchment: ►

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Manuscript_culture



Investigation: Boundary Maintenance in a Medieval Monastery

Living in an organized community requires rules. Most Catholic monasteries and convents still follow a set of rules set out about 530 CE by St. Benedict of Nursia. Benedict founded monasteries in what's now Italy, most notably the abbey at Monte Cassino on a hilltop between Rome and Naples. Several important parts of the *Rule of St. Benedict* are included below and on following pages.¹

Working with others, identify and list (1) differences between outsiders and insiders, (2) kinds of boundaries at the monastery and the ways they are maintained, and (3) steps in converting an outsider to an insider. (Note that boundaries can be ways of thinking, ways of acting, and/or physical barriers.)

Prologue:

... We are beginning a school to serve the Lord [*God*]. We don't want rules that are severe or a burden. Some of them may seem difficult, but are intended to help those who might have been acting wrongly or selfishly. Those men should not be afraid and run away, because this is a path that will save them...

Chapter 2. What the abbot [*monastery leader*] should be like:

[*The word "abbot" comes from "abba," the word for "father" in Aramaic, the language spoken by Jesus.*] The abbot should not teach, or decree, or order, anything except the commandments of the Lord [*God*]...

When any one receives the name of abbot, he ought to rule over his followers with a double teaching; that is, let him show all good and holy things by deeds more than by words.

He shall treat every person in the monastery equally. One person shall not be more valued than another, unless it is one whom he finds excelling in good works or in obedience. A free-born man shall not be preferred to one coming from slavery... for whether we be bond or free, we are all one in Christ; and, under one God, we perform an equal service...

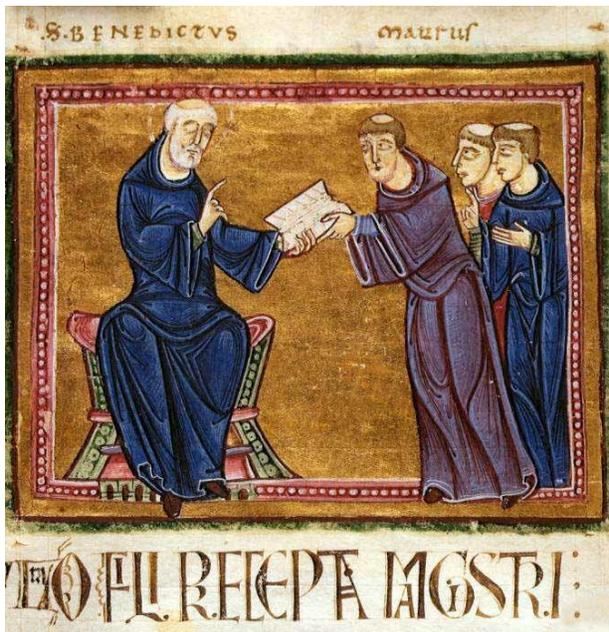
...let the abbot display the feeling of a severe yet devoted master. In other words, he should rebuke more severely the unruly and the troublemakers. On the other hand, he should encourage the obedient, gentle and patient ones, so they may progress to higher things. The negligent and scorners should be reprimanded and scolded...

¹ Adapted from <http://legacy.fordham.edu/Halsall/source/rul-benedict.asp> and <https://www.ewtn.com/library/PRIESTS/BENRULE.HTM>

Chapter 3. About calling in the monks for council:

Whenever something unusual and important is to be done in the monastery, the abbot shall call together the whole community, and shall explain the problem to be solved. Once he has heard the advice of the brothers, he shall think it over by himself, and shall do what he considers most helpful.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rule_of_Saint_Benedict#/media/File:St._Benedict_delivering_his_rule_to_the_monks_of_his_order.jpg (below)



◀ St. Benedict delivering his rule to the monks of his order, illustration from Monastery of St. Gilles, Nimes, France, 1129.

In northern England (Yorkshire) are the well-preserved ruins of Fountains Abbey, founded in 1132 CE. It was in use until 1539, when King Henry VIII ordered that all monasteries under his rule be dissolved, as part of his dispute with the Church in Rome. A plan and drawing of this monastery are on the next two pages.

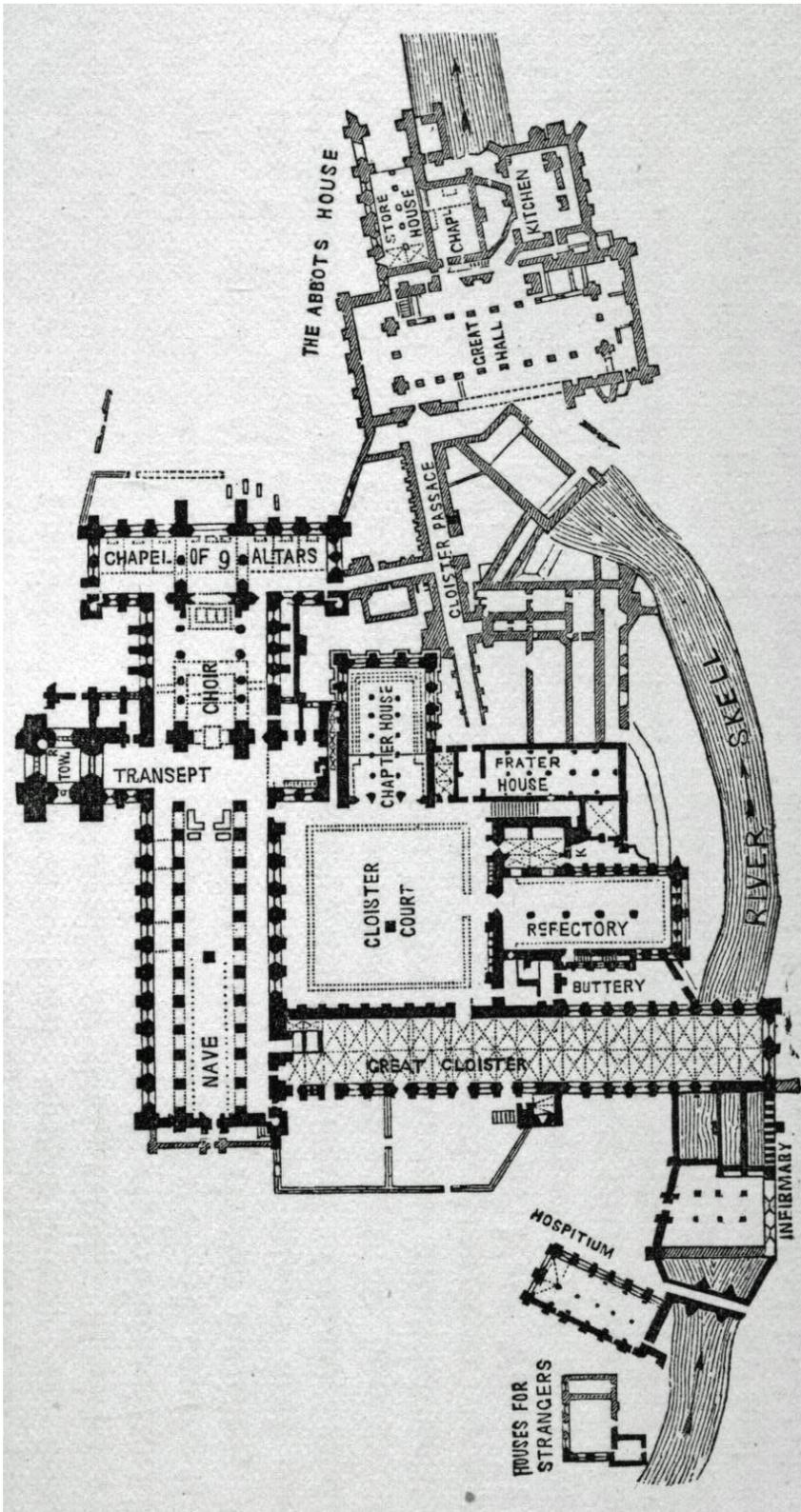
Identify and list relationships between the setting and the description of monastic life (action patterns and shared ideas) described by St.

Benedict. Identify features of the setting related to boundary maintenance

(Note that excerpts from the *Rule of St. Benedict* continue. See page 6 and beyond.)

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fountains_Abbey





Fountains Abbey: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fountains_Abbey

Nave: Main section of a church or cathedral, with seating or standing space for public worshippers

Choir: Area of the church with seating for priests, monks, and singers

Transept: Section of the church building, at right angle to nave axis

Chapter house: Meeting hall for monks

Cloister: Secluded covered walk, sometimes open on one side to an interior courtyard

Frater house: Dining hall for monks

Hospitium: Guest house

Refectory: Main dining hall, used when guests were present (Room marked "K" was Kitchen)

Buttery: Storeroom, primarily for wine (not used for dairy products)

Infirmary: Place for caring for sick people

Great Cloister: Covered walkway with dormitory for one class of monks ("lay brothers") above, storerooms below.

Latrines: (Not marked) Area east of the Frater House, near the river.

<http://www.heritage-explorer.co.uk/web/he/searchdetail.aspx?id=9229&large=1>



Chapter 4. Rules for doing good:

1. First of all, love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength. 2. Then, love your neighbor as yourself. ... 9. Don't do to another person what you wouldn't do to yourself.

10. Avoid selfishness so you can follow Christ. 11. Discipline your body. 12. Don't seek after luxuries. 13. Love fasting [*i.e. doing without food for a period of time*]. 14. Help the poor. 15. Clothe the naked. 16. Visit the sick. 17. Bury the dead. ... 19. Console the sorrowing.

21. Prefer nothing except love for Christ. 22. Don't act from urges of anger. 23. Don't seek revenge...

28. Utter the truth with heart and lips. 29. Don't give back evil for evil. 30. Do no wrong to anyone, but bear patiently any wrong done to yourself. 31. Love your enemies.

32. If someone says bad things about you, don't say bad things about them in return, but instead speak well of them. 33. Suffer persecution for justice' sake. 34. Don't be proud. 35. Don't be a lover of wine. 36. Don't be a glutton. 37. Don't be a lover of sleep. 38. Don't be lazy. 39. Don't be a gossip. 40. Don't be disrespectful of others.

41. Put your trust in God. 42. Credit any good you see in yourself to God and not to yourself. 43. But always admit that the evil in you is your own, and blame it on yourself.

44. Fear the days of [*God's final*] judgment. 45. Be terrified of hell. 46. Desire everlasting life with all spiritual longing.

51. Keep your mouth from speech that is wicked or sneaky. 52. Don't love to talk. 53. Don't speak words that are boastful or cause laughter. 54. Don't love long or loud laughter.

55. Listen willingly to holy reading. 56. Pray often. 57. Every day, with tears and sighs, confess your sins to God in prayer, and avoid these evils in the future. 58. Don't fulfill the desires of the body. 59. Hate your own will. 60. Obey in all things the commands of the Abbot...

64. Hate no man. 65. Have no jealousy or envy. 66. Don't love conflict.

68. Revere your seniors. 69. Love your juniors. 70. Pray for your enemies in the love of Christ. 71. Make peace with those with whom you are upset or angry before the sun sets. 72. And never doubt God's mercy.

Note: Verses 1 and 2, above are “the greatest commandments” stated by Jesus (Matthew 22:36-40). Verse 9 is the “golden rule” which appears, in some form, in many “wisdom” documents from many cultures.

Chapter 23. Excommunication [*excluding a person from the community*] **for faults:**

If any brother is found to resist authority, or is disobedient, or proud, or a gossip, or in any way opposed to the Holy Rule and the orders of his seniors, or is disrespectful, let him, according to our Lord's commandment, be scolded once or twice privately by his seniors. If he does not change his ways, let him be rebuked in public in front of everyone. But if even then he does not correct himself, let him be subjected to excommunication, if he understands the nature of that punishment. If excommunication will not be effective, subject him to corporal [*bodily, physical*] punishment. [*Chapters that follow indicate that excommunication was usually temporary, and included punishment such as being made to eat alone, and not allowing others to speak to the excommunicated person.*]

Chapter 33. Whether the monks should have anything of their own:

This evil must be completely eliminated from the monastery: no one should try to give or receive anything without the order of the abbot, or should have anything of his own. A monk should have absolutely nothing: neither a book, nor tablets, nor a pen—nothing at all.

For indeed the monks are not allowed to have their own bodies or wills in their own power. All things necessary they must expect from the Father of the monastery... All things shall be common to all... But if anyone is discovered delighting in this most evil practice: being warned once and again, if he does not correct his wrong, let him be subjected to punishment.

Chapter 48. Concerning daily manual labor:

Idleness is the enemy of the soul. And therefore, at fixed times, the brothers ought to be occupied in manual labor; and again, at fixed times, in sacred reading. ... one or two elders shall be appointed, who shall go round the monastery at the hours in which the brothers are busy in reading, and see to it that no troublesome brother is doing nothing or is doing something trivial instead of concentrating on his reading. Such a brother is useless to himself, and be a bad influence on others.

The procedures for becoming an insider in a social system is sometimes called a “rite of passage” by social scientists. The rite of passage for monks is described in the next section of the *Rule of St. Benedict*.

Chapter 58. The method for receiving brothers:

When any newcomer applies for conversion [*to become a monk*], do not give him an easy entrance. As the apostle [*John*] says, "Try the spirits to see if they be of God." Before he is allowed to enter, he must keep knocking at the gate, and for four or five days must patiently endure the insults inflicted upon him. He must endure the difficulty of coming in, and persist in his demand.

He shall then remain for a few days in the cell of the guests. After this, he shall be in the cell of the novices [*beginners*], where he shall meditate and eat and sleep. An elder shall be assigned to him who shall be capable of saving souls, who watches over him intently, and makes sure he reverently seeks God, is eager in serving God, is obedient, and suffers shame. All the harshness and roughness of the procedures for approaching God [*becoming a monk*] shall be told him in advance.

If he promises to persist in his dedication, after two months this Rule [*of St. Benedict*] shall be read to him in order, and he shall be told, "Behold the law under which you wish to serve; if you agree to follow it willingly, enter; but if you cannot, depart freely." If he has stood firm so far, then he shall be led once more into a cell of the novices; and again be proven with all patience.

After six months, the Rule shall be read to him again; so he may know what he is joining. If he stands firm so far, after four more months the same Rule shall again be re-read to him. And if, having thinking it over, he shall promise to follow the Rule, and to obey all the commands that are laid upon him, then he shall be received in the congregation. He must understand that it is decreed, by the law of the Rule, that from that day he shall not be allowed to leave the monastery. He cannot shake his neck free from the yoke of the Rule, which, after such extended deliberation, he was free either to refuse or accept.

Chapter 66. Porter of the monastery:

A wise brother of mature age shall be assigned to the gate of the monastery; one who is able to understand and reply in all matters, and one whose self-control will keep him from wandering. This porter is to have his cell near the gate, so anyone who comes there may always find someone present to respond. When anyone knocks or a poor person begs for charity, he shall answer, "Thanks be to God," or, "God bless you"; and then, with gentle respect for God, let him quickly respond in the spirit of charity. If the porter needs assistance, let him have with him one of the younger brothers.

The monastery, if it is possible, ought to be constructed so all things necessary—such as water, a mill, a garden, a bakery, and the various workshops—are contained within it, so there will be no need for the monks to go away, for this is not at all healthful for their souls.

We wish this Rule to be read frequently in the community, so none of the brothers may excuse himself, claiming ignorance.

Chapter 67. Brothers sent on a journey:

Let the brothers who are about to be sent on a journey be supported by the prayers of all the brothers or of the Abbot. At all times, at the end of the Divine Office [*period of prayer and worship; see "Canonical Hours" below*], all who are absent must be remembered in prayer.

Brothers that return from a journey shall, that same day, lie face down on the floor of the oratory [*meeting hall*] at the end of each of the Canonical Hours [*set times at three-hour intervals throughout the day and night for prayer and worship*] and beg the prayers of all for their sins, in case they may have seen or heard something evil, or may have fallen into idle talk on their journey. And let no one tell others what he may have seen or heard outside the monastery, for this is often a pitfall of destruction. If anyone does this, subject him to the regular penalty. Anyone who leaves the enclosure of the monastery or goes out anywhere or does anything, however small, without the permission of the Abbot, shall be similarly punished.

*Based on your study of monastic society, describe an abbey's boundaries in **setting** (physical boundaries), **action patterns**, and **shared ideas**. Which of the three kinds of boundaries is most important, in your opinion? Give reasons for your answer.*

How might the level of difficulty of a rite of passage affect the member's allegiance to the group? (Do you think a painful rite would make a new member less dedicated, or more dedicated to the group?)

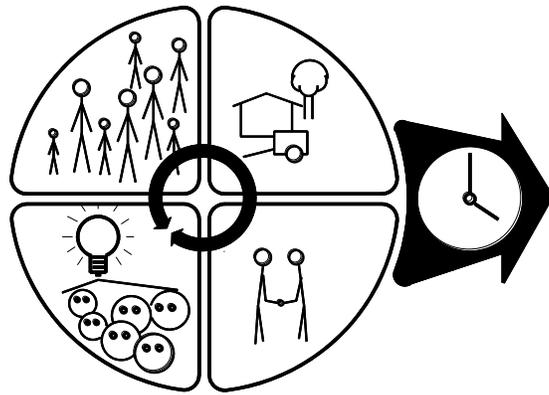
Describe the attitude of St. Benedict and the monks to the outside world, and the relationship of this attitude to the formation of monasteries.

Investigation: System Boundaries Here and Now

Becoming a new member of almost every group or society requires a rite of passage of some sort.

Identify and describe (in your journal) the rites of passage associated with (1) a local club or other organization for young people (2) a religious organization (3) your nation. Include in your description the ideas, rules, or action patterns related to maintaining boundaries between insiders and outsiders.

Describe experiences that might be considered rites of passage for young people to become adults in your own society.



For Teacher/Mentor—Overview:

This unit was first developed by Ignacio Carral as part of his Spanish-language world history course. A re-review (June 2016) of the primary sources he used here indicated their potential to show additional dynamics of social systems not previously investigated in this course.

Boundary maintenance is a crucial process in virtually all human groups. Groups require stability—i.e. resistance to destructive change—to survive, and the need drives the development of the group’s actions related to its boundary. From street gangs to nations, keeping the distinction between insiders and outsiders is an important dimension of social system members’ thoughts and actions.

This subject, particularly the “rite of passage” aspect, is, of course, closely related to the process of socialization considered in Unit 10 (Sparta). Socialization creates boundaries, as do social controls and defensive actions. For a nation, boundary maintenance is far more complicated than merely controlling borders, guarding coasts, and processing aliens to make them citizens. It includes educating the young, conducting diplomacy, maintaining armed forces, and more—often at great cost or with great difficulty. **The objective of the unit is helping learners identify and understand the significance of actions and ideas related to maintaining social system boundaries.**

Investigation: Boundary Maintenance in a Medieval Monastery

The shared idea underlying the development of monasticism was the view that the “world” was corrupt and evil, that holy living required withdrawal from its influences, and constant guard to avoid evil, personified by Satan. (These ideas were reinforced with the spread of St. Augustine’s *The City of God*, written early in the 5th century.) Given this worldview, the medieval monastery becomes a superb vehicle to illustrate social system boundary maintenance. The monastic worldview, and its consequences for behavior, are illustrated clearly in the primary sources in this unit—the *Rule of St. Benedict* and the setting of Fountains Abbey in Yorkshire, England.

Wikipedia: “Beyond its religious influences, the *Rule of St Benedict* was one of the most important written works to shape medieval Europe, embodying the ideas of a written constitution and the rule of law. It also incorporated a degree of democracy in a non-democratic society, and dignified manual labor.”¹

To limit the amount of reading material in the unit, it was necessary to leave out many parts of the Benedictine *Rule* also related in one way or another to boundaries. Our intention is to give enough information to provide a “capsule” view of monastic life, as well as depicting its concern with boundary maintenance. As with similar amounts of data elsewhere, with some groups of younger learners, you may wish to divide the data between work groups so each group focuses on part of the data, then reports their conclusions to the entire group.

Entering search words “Fountains Abbey Yorkshire” into Google Earth® will provide an aerial view of the ruins, along with access to a hundred or so photos taken by visitors, if

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rule_of_Saint_Benedict

learners want to investigate this setting more completely. *Make sure learners keep the main categories of the Model in mind; the close relationship between setting and shared ideas is illustrated with great clarity in this site plan.*

One aspect of monastic life not made clear by the *Rule* is how the monks were provided food, clothing, and other commodities. In many or most cases, farmland owned by the abbey provided food, worked either by the monks themselves, by abbey-bound serfs, paid workers, or some combination of the three. (This subject was touched on in the previous unit.) Abbeys were often supported by wealthy benefactors, by taxes or fees paid by outsiders under abbey control or influence, or by the sale of abbey-produced surplus goods or materials. The first illustration in this unit, “Monk buying parchment,” illustrates a situation where interaction with an outsider was necessary to obtain a monastic commodity.

In later medieval years, “physical labor” of monks was sometimes replaced by tasks such as copying manuscripts, teaching, caring for the sick (often a prime duty of nuns), and similar tasks. However, the honoring of physical labor allowed monks to participate and excel in almost any endeavor, such as architecture and building cathedrals—a high point in medieval achievement. Advances in agriculture were also an outcome of Benedictine *Rule* related to labor.

The emphasis in the *Rule* on daily times for reading had a profound impact on the one type of monastic work. All that reading required reading material. Under medieval conditions before printing presses, this led to a huge effort hand-copying scriptures and religious texts, to supply the monastic library with adequate materials. The result was that monasteries were intellectual lights that glowed through the so-called “dark ages,” giving a foundation for later recovery of general intellectual life.

An interesting aspect of the subject of boundary maintenance worth discussing with thoughtful learners, particularly as applied to monasteries, is the question of adaptation to changing social conditions. The monastic social system was designed to avoid outside influences, and maintain stability—almost to an extreme. However, outside conditions such as famine, epidemic disease such as the “black death,” invasion by “barbarians,” and similar events often affected monasteries. Some survived adverse conditions, some didn’t.

For advanced learners, an interesting additional document:

<http://legacy.fordham.edu/Halsall/source/chart-cluny.asp>

Investigation: System Boundaries Here and Now

This should be a relatively-easy investigation, with some data from the learners’ own experience, and other data easily available.

(HLB) June 2016