

# Report Reichenau conference Konstanzer Arbeitskreis (08-11 October 2024)

- Title: Zwischen Experiment und Institution. Askese und Klöster im Frühmittelalter (Jubiläumstagung 1300 Jahre Kloster Reichenau)
- Organisation: Steffen Patzold for the Konstanzer Arbeitskreis für mittelalterliche Geschichte e.V.
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In October 2024, the biannual Reichenau conference of the *Konstanzer Arbeitskreis* was dedicated to the early history of monasticism in the Latin West. In his introduction, STEFFEN PATZOLD (Tübingen) explained that the conference's subject was prompted by the 1300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Reichenau monastery on the island in Lake Constance as well as recent scholarly debate about the foundation of monasteries in a larger European context. The conference's main question was simply: How were monastic communities founded? Using the *Vita Sturmi*, Patzold demonstrated that for the foundation of Fulda in 744 several conditions at play could influence whether a monastic foundation would succeed or not. Grants of land, the possibility of building a monastery church, the choice (and adjustment) of a monastic rule, accessibility of saintly relics, and, lastly, also the support of a king or the pope were all key factors. Still, these factors were not decisive and a lot of variety can be observed in the period before 800. For that reason, he referred to foundations in the period as 'monastic experiments', where the characteristics that later became typical for Western monasticism were still in flux. Before the order imposed by the Carolingians, communities were more flexible in the way they organised themselves and often relied on several sources to shape their daily monastic life. A clear picture of the early diversity of monastic forms of life is only possible, stated Patzold, by considering more than one perspective and thinking about the legal, social, economic, and political contexts in which ascetic zeal was slowly institutionalised. It is crucial to trace these processes using the widest possible range of sources to avoid oversimplifying early medieval monasticism and to leave room for less successful and even failed experiments.

CONRAD LEYSER (Oxford) tackled the question of whether it was possible to say anything about the institutional importance of the monastic movement before the seventh century. Leyser did so by looking at monastic life for women and the handling of monastic property. Regardless of their leading role in early Christian communities, women tend to be overlooked when it comes to monastic foundations. Melania the Younger is such an example, who through generous donations established both a

female and male community. It is important to note that the underlying structure that enabled these early monastic foundations was the joint ownership of property, made possible by Roman law. Several monastic rules from before the ninth century deal with property and collective ownership in particular, such as Augustine's Rule which addresses both coenobitic and eremitic monasticism. By contrast, the Rule of Benedict avoids collective property entirely. According to Leyser, medieval monasticism appeared when the issue of collective property had been resolved.

CHARLES MÉRIAUX (Lille) spoke about hagiographic material that provided insights into foundations in Gaul during the seventh and eighth centuries and then showed that the function of these texts changed as the foundation grew older. Early monastic communities benefited mostly from material that concentrated on the ascetic ways and saintly nature of their founders ('modèle ascétique'). As time passed, however, particularly during the monastic policies introduced during the reign of Queen Balthild, this appeared to be no longer essential. Instead, new texts emphasised the saints venerated at the monastery, whose relics became increasingly important for the community's ability to attract pilgrims and secure financial stability ('modèle cultuel'). For some monasteries, this meant that they had multiple origin stories. Hagiography can thus show how the role of monasteries changed from a community of ascetics imitating their founder to a community of keepers of land and venerators of relics and navigated between these two points in different ways.

Like hagiographic texts, also privileges played a significant role in the foundation of monastic communities and their further success. Using these sources, SEBASTIAN SCHOLZ (Zürich) pointed out that both male and female monasteries struggled with episcopal influence over their everyday life. He highlighted three aspects for which privileges were important during this period. Firstly, the rights of bishops over monastic life became limited to the liturgy and clerics that were involved in the Masses celebrated by the community. Also, for the election of an abbot or abbess not only the approval of the bishop or ruler were needed, the monks or nuns themselves obtained a vote as well. Lastly, privileges often provided monasteries with protection from external powers. Specifically, the influence of royal actors, who became increasingly interested in securing salvation for themselves and their families during the sixth century.

ALBRECHT DIEM (Syracuse, NY) proposed a new periodization for the origin of monasticism in the Latin West by examining the intertextual connections between early monastic rules. He demonstrated that connections are not easily established, as these early rules, such as those found in John Cassian's *Institutiones*, or written by Aurelian of Arles and Ferréol of Uzès, or the anonymous *Regula Tarnatensis*, all answered central questions about monastic life differently, for example, how to obtain salvation. It is important, therefore, if we want to spot similarities between the different monasticisms

at the time, to watch the language used by the rules' authors. Diem then proceeded by discussing rules that appeared in two generations in sixth-century southern Gaul around Arles and all used the language of Cassian's *Institutiones* to describe their version of monasticism. Understanding monasticism early developed means that we must study how rules were composed and examine their interdependency.

JOHANNA JEBE (Tübingen) addressed the importance of written work in general for monastic foundations. She demonstrated that books were indeed part of the standard equipment of monastic founders, even if they hardly ever appear in founding narratives, through the analysis of the few examples mentioned in hagiography and a couple of booklists from the eighth century. These texts show us how monks understood themselves and, more specifically, how they acquired and ordered knowledge. Contrary to older research, Jebe noted that these lists were not exhaustive catalogues but rather devices that were intended for practical use. Through the lists, but also manuscripts presumably used by the first generations of monks in St. Gallen and a few female monasteries, we can observe the contours of early monastic networks of exchange which stipulate the crucial role of written work for the success of communities.

MARCO STOFELLA (Verona) discussed the foundation of monasteries in the Lombard Kingdom during the later eighth century under Frankish influence and how these contributed to political consolidation on the Italian Peninsula. Stofella focussed primarily on the economic aspects that made new foundations successful. One aspect that was key to the success of a monastic community, was the participation of local aristocratic families in foundations and their subsequent gifts, which often limited the influence bishops had over said community and - most importantly - over its streams of revenue. Additionally, the geographical location of a monastery was also vital to its continued existence. Being located alongside roads or waterways provided the benefit of housing generous pilgrims but also obtaining the rights to levy tolls or collect trading fees, which provided the financial stability a community needed.

ANNE-MARIE HELVÉTIUS (Paris) examined the different ways in which monasteries were founded in the Frankish realm and how monasticism transformed through the reunification of the kingdom and the rise of the Pippinids. Contrary to the common narrative, there was not always a charismatic founder at the start, sometimes monasteries were the result of (often female) aristocratic endowments, gathering spots for pilgrims or *loca sancta* that turned into convents over time. Defining monasticism as communal life under an abbot and a rule is therefore too rigid for this period. Rulers such as Clothar II, Dagobert and Balhild were able to influence how monasteries functioned in attempts to secure their salvation and that of their families, by appointing them as places for royal burial or making donations to support the *laus perennis*. Yet, Helvétius stressed that there was still a high tolerance for different monastic models.

The function of a monastery could be broad, and its success depended largely on how this was integrated into communal life.

PETER ERHART (St. Gallen) gave a brief overview of the stages of the initial development of the monastery of St. Gallen and discussed the various forms of communal life he observed, often far from the narrowly defined 'monasterium'. Much of our knowledge is based on the *vitae* of St. Gallus written by the monks Wetti of Reichenau and Walahfrid Strabo. If we look closely, these texts reflect something of the everyday issues within a monastery that their authors were familiar with. Miracles in the *vitae*, for instance, depict the saint safeguarding the monastery's property against greedy laymen and defending innocent travellers in the surrounding woods against all kinds of violence. Evidently, the community felt that it needed protection from external actors. St. Gallen eventually obtained royal protection, was able to elect its own abbot and received immunity under Charlemagne and once again under Louis the Pious. Erhart emphasised that the development of St. Gallen from a hermitage in the woods to a royal monastery was slow and gradual.

STEFAN ESDERS (Berlin) delivered the final paper of the conference in a public lecture. He discussed the founding of the monastery on the island in the year 724, which is often portrayed as a humble beginning far from the civilised world. The political context in which this took place did influence the foundation, however, as well as several external actors. Key to the analysis was the interpretation of the founding narrative of Reichenau where Pirmin drives all snakes from the island. Rather than taking it figuratively, the snakes, Esders argued, could represent those that followed the Three Chapter Schism, a church-wide controversy that was the result of an attempt to reconcile different views on the nature of Christ. A group of influential churchmen from the Latin West decided not to follow along and so caused a schism. In northern Italy in particular, this conflict was exploited by local bishops to halt Rome's influence. The appearance of the schismatics on the island would demonstrate the interconnectedness of northern Italy and the *Bodensee* region, where bishops also tried to withstand the pope. To combat such unorthodox views, monasteries in particular were essential institutions that produced well-educated monks who could eradicate heresies with theologically sound argumentation. Besides signalling Pirmin's orthodox beliefs, then, the Reichenau foundation narrative also shows us something of the politics and actors that affected the monastery's early medieval beginnings.

The conference was concluded with a summary by GORDON BLENNEMANN (Montréal). He began by saying that if we want to understand how monasteries were founded before the eighth century in the Latin West, it is crucial not to overstress overarching concepts. Who lived where and in what way was prone to change quickly over time and, on top of that, was highly diverse. Also, if we take this diversity of life forms seriously, it is

necessary not to isolate female convents from their male counterparts. Blennemann suggested that examining how property was obtained and retained by communities is likely a productive way to establish how monasteries were founded, as property determined to a great extent what constituted a 'monastery'. Examining the mobility of property, furthermore, might help us think about unsuccessful communities and what made them fail. It follows that networks of monasteries must be studied, through which resources and ideas were exchanged. Similarly important is the archaeological study of monastic convents, which we need to understand how they met their daily needs as well as chart the spheres of influence that might have impacted them.

During the fruitful discussion, a few issues came to the fore that called for further research. One of them was the problem of the Carolingian reception of documentary evidence for early medieval monastic foundations. Dubbed the 'Carolingian filter', this issue of reception must be understood for it might warp our perspective on earlier periods considerably. Another concerned a comparative perspective between the Latin West and the Greek East. There are major differences in the East, such as monasteries primarily being funded through taxes, a relative disinterest in securing salvation, a striking prominence of hermits, and the prevalence of cultural differences between communities (Greeks, Armenians, Syrians, etc.), that can still be explored and will likely result in fascinating new angles to further engage with early medieval monasticism.

#### Overview speakers:

- Steffen Patzold (Tübingen): Einführung in das Tagungsthema
- Conrad Leyser (Oxford): The Politics of Excellence: Generating Tradition in Western Monasticism, 400–600
- Charles Mériaux (Lille): Les hagiographes et les récits de fondation des monastères francs aux VIIe–VIIIe siècles: silences, lieux communs, originalités
- Sebastian Scholz (Zürich): Klosterprivilegien im Wandel der Zeit
- Albrecht Diem (Syracuse, NY): Regulierte Askese im frühmittelalterlichen Klosterwesen
- Johanna Jebe (Tübingen): Monastisches Leben zwischen Charisma und Kanon – Zur Handschriftenüberlieferung aus den ersten Klostergenerationen
- Marco Stoffella (Verona): Founding successful and unsuccessful monasteries in the Lombard Kingdom (7th–8th centuries)
- Anne-Marie Helvétius (Paris): Les fondations de monastères dans le monde franc (VIe-VIIIe siècle)
- Peter Erhart (St. Gallen): *Quieti vivere* – St. Gallens Weg von der Waldklausur zum Königskloster
- Stefan Esders (Berlin): Um 724: Die Gründung des Klosters Reichenau im europäischen Kontext
- Gordon Blennemann (Montréal): Zusammenfassung