

# THE USE OF THE CLOISTER IN MONASTIC LIFE

REPORT 1

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## Abstract

In the medieval age's cathedrals, monasteries, libraries and universities were established. The plans of monasteries were developed from the rule and the rituals of the monk's daily life. A cloister was designed to accompany this daily life but also to make the monastery more secluded. The cloister was and still is the place where monks meditate, contemplate, read and write. Therefore libraries were made in the cloister and later schools were erected. This academic report will give a more insight in the history of monasteries and cloisters, the way monks lived in their monasteries and at last how libraries and universities were established out of this notion.

## Keywords:

Architecture

Monastery

Cloister

University

Library

Rituals

Time

Space



In a word, there is a general correspondence in the plans of all great monastic, cathedral, collegiate and librarian establishments. The church and the cathedral can be seen as the start of Monastery establishments, subsequently the Monastery could be seen as the start of the library and the schools. The next paragraphs will provide a better understanding of this evolution. It starts at the beginning of the monastery, the daily rituals of the monks, the cloister and its use and how the library and university developed in the cloister by the daily routine of the Monk. The Roosenberg Abbey in Waasmunster, by Dom Hans van der Laan, will be used as a modern variant of the cloister to see how the cloister type developed in its use.

#### History of the monastery

The history of monasteries starts with one of the first Christian monasteries which were founded in Egypt in the 4th century by St Pachomius. Monks from Egypt travelled to Italy where they founded similar monastic settlements in Rome. In 525 St. Benedict founded a monastery at Monte Cassino in Italy and he drew up a rule, which stated how monasteries should be run. Monks were expected to pray, work and to be obedient.<sup>1</sup>

From the 6th century the Benedictine abbots attempted to shape their monasteries into perfect instruments for the realization of the Rule for instance the 66th chapter of the *Regula Sancti Benedicti*. In this rule there is stated that a monastery should *"be so arranged that all necessary things, such as water, mill, garden and various crafts may be within the enclosure"*.<sup>2</sup> As the monastery came structurally to resemble a large manorial estate, monastic integrity demanded the creation of an inner enclosure that would isolate the brothers from the serfs and the laymen, and at the same time, make it possible to the latter to live as close to the brothers as their tasks required everything to be done communal.<sup>3</sup> The monks sleep, pray, read and eat together and wherever possible they work together. A cloister answered to this problem. It established a monastery within the monastery.<sup>4</sup> Moreover in meeting the complex needs of monastic living and created an architectural scheme that would enhance the Benedictine communal living.

Since the perfect life called for the perfect monastery, the architecture of the monastery should be functional. Monks lived according to a precisely fixed daily routine. The daily rituals of a Monk differ from one another, nevertheless they do have similarities. St Augustine's rule for instance allocated definite prayers to the prescribed offices.<sup>5</sup> However St. Benedict went a step further by dividing the whole course of the day into hours of prayer, reading, work, eating, meditation and sleep. In his rule many of these activities were allotted distinct buildings. Therefore the Benedictine layout grew out of the desire to keep the course as short as possible. In order to achieve this we must take a look at the life within the monastery. The organization of the day in time correspond its organization by place around the cloister, and the perfect monastery could only emerge from their complete agreement. The cloister is the monastic enclosure with functions for each activity, which was to be used for no other purpose, whether this was sleeping, eating, working, meditating, washing, or even speaking.

#### The Daily Routine of the Monk

The day of a monk starts in winter approximately at 3:15 a.m. and finishes around 6:30 p.m. while in summer it starts around 1:30 a.m. and ends at 8:30 p.m. In accordance with the psalmist's *"At midnight will I rise to give thanks unto Thee" and "Seven times a day will I praise Thee"* the rule ordained that they would come together at stated times for the seven canonical hours: Matins and lauds, prime, terce, sext, none, vespers, and compline. In addition there was the important Mass at the High Alter and a number of early masses.

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1 Braunfels 1972: 13-14

2 Benediccti regula, No. 1 chap. 66

3 Horn 1973: 40

4 Horn 1973: 13

5 Braunfels 1972: 9-12 5

The first night office Matins was sung between midnight and 2 a.m. Shortly before the appointed hour the sacristy would lighten up the candles in the choir. The monks were woken up by the prior by ringing a small hand bell as he passed between the beds. When the church bell rang they would make their way to the choir. Matins and lauds lasted 1,5 hour or 2 hours. At the conclusion of the night offices the brethren returned to their beds before the first office, prime, would start at 6 a.m.

After dressing themselves they descended to the east cloister-walk and entered the church by the eastern portal. After Prime they would wash themselves on weekdays at the lavatorium in the cloister. Work begins at 8:00 a.m. and in most monasteries lasts four to six hours, six days a week. The remaining time is spent taking care of various physical needs and religious reading, meditation and prayer. Before the next office, called chapter mass, they would have a light breakfast known as mixtum. Chapter mass, also called Lady mass, was being celebrated at the altar in the Lady Chapel. This was followed by the short office of terce.

While monks would continue on their task the abbot and the obedientiaries would have a walk of the cloister, on matters concerning the cloister. This meeting was called the parliament. The most important service of the day was the celebration of the high mass which started at 10 a.m. At 11 a.m. dinner was served. Before entering the frater all the monks should wash their hands in the lavatorium, which you could access in the cloister. During the whole meal there was silence. At the end of the meal the prior gave the signal for the collection of the remnants of food on the tables by two junior brethren, who later handed over the baskets to the poor at the gate of the monastery. On leaving the frater they washed their hands. Some monks would go in procession to the cemetery which they reached from the cloister by the slype in the sub-dorter. In summer months, vespers and supper being an hour later than in winter, they would retire to the dorter for an hour rest before the next office.

In the afternoon until 4 or 6 o'clock they would study in the cloister, writing in the scriptorium or was reserved for labour. At the end of the afternoon the bell rang for vespers in the choir and immediately afterwards they would go to the lavatorium in preparation for supper in the frater. Having given thanks in the church for the meal they would return to the cloister for the evening collation in the south walk. A final bell would call to compline. At the end of the last office the monks retired to the dorter where silence was to be maintained. <sup>6</sup>

The functions of the monastery and their position with the cloister.

Since these offices in the church were the overruling activity of the day, the church had to be the largest, richest and indeed the dominant building in the composition of the monastery. To the southern flank of the church the cloister was attached.

The cloister consist of a large square yard entirely surrounded by a covered walk, and enclosed on the three other sides by a solid range of large comprises, in addition to the dormitory and refectory of the monks, a warmer room, a cellar, a larder, a storeroom for the monks clothing, a various smaller dependencies, such as a privy, a lavatory, a kitchen and a bake and brew house. <sup>7</sup>

After the 11th century most monasteries had a chapter house, it takes its name from the chapters of the rule that were read there.

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6 Cook 1961: 107-118

7 Hildemari exposition regulae; ed. Mittermuller, 1880, 613

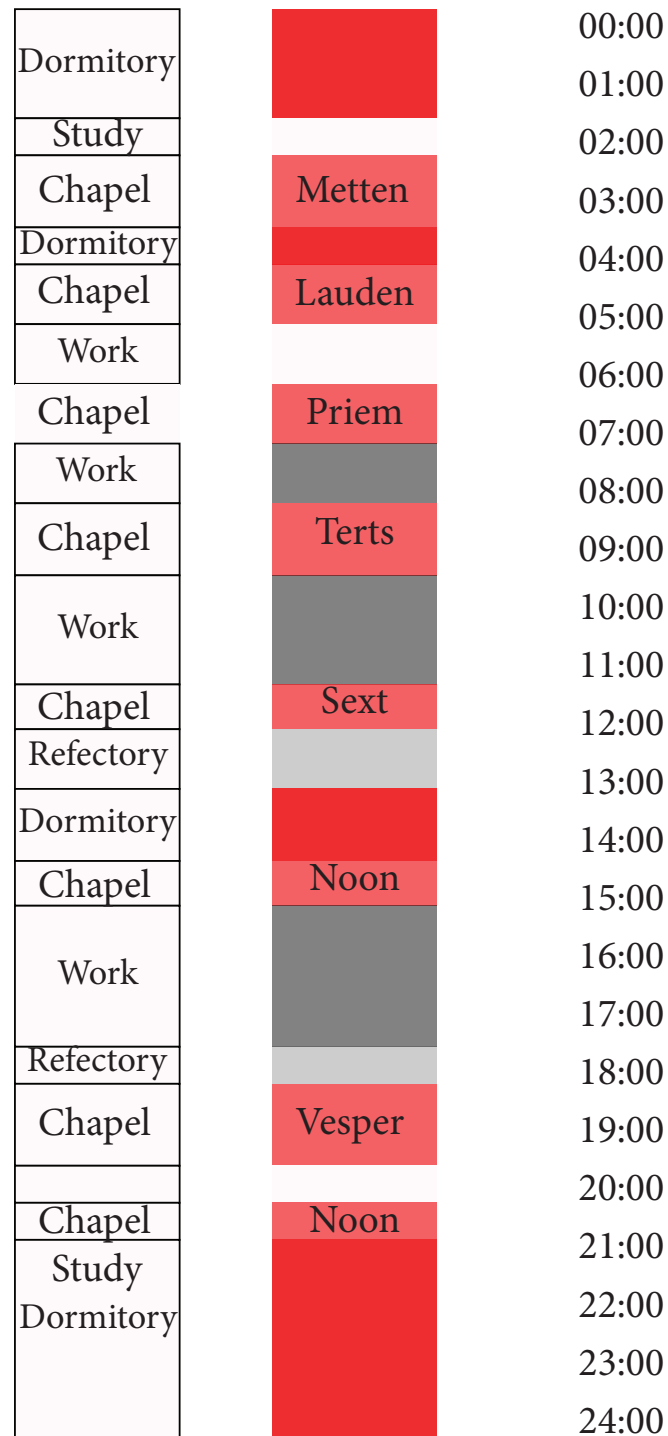


Figure 1:  
Daily Routine of the Monk

St Augustine had ordained: *“when ye go to table, so hearken till ye rise up from it to the wonted lessons without noise or disputation; for not merely with the mouth shall ye take your nourishment, but with your ears also shall ye hunger after the word of God. Therefor eating by itself became a symbol of spiritual processes.”* This suggested that the third place in the hierarchy should go the refectory. But even the fountains at which the monks washed, the cloister in which they meditated and read, and the dormitory, were buildings that could catch the eye with a holy message. Whoever reflects on the importance that was attributed in a good monastery to hospitality and care of the sick, will also comprehend why in the St. Gall plan or in Cluny the hostel and infirmary were exceptionally richly decorated.<sup>8</sup>

Over the years the planning and arrangement of the functions around the cloister in the monastery remained much the same. Nevertheless when extension was required gatehouses were either enlarged or rebuilt, hospitia were added and separate lodgings were erected for the abbot or the prior. But the chapter house, dorter, frater en cellarium occupied a standard position throughout the centuries of time. Also the cloister kept remained although it sometimes would change in size. Originally the cloister was squared, but when monks increased in the monastery, a larger cloister and frater would be needed. The cellarium and the adjoining walk of the cloister would be moved westwards and the frater would be lengthened in the same direction.<sup>9</sup>

To see how the cloister functions in a more modern type of cloister, the cloister of the Roosenberg abbey is used as an example of a monastery built in 1972-1975. The architectural style can be characterized as timeless modern architecture by its simplicity. This can be seen by the rigorous straightness and the absence of decoration. The application of a module principle, known as the plastic number studied by Dom Hans van der Laan, makes the building homogeneous and gives the experience of harmony inside and outside the premises of the building. This homogeneity can be seen in the cloister as well. As one steps inside the building, he would be guided to the cloister as Dom Hans van der Laan sees the cloister as the heart of the building. From the cloister the building and its functions will be revealed. Yet this straightness and simplistic architecture gives the cloister the feeling that it's only used as a routing space, nevertheless the benches specially designed for the abbey reveal that it has been used as more than just routing.<sup>11</sup>

#### Writing and exchanging knowledge in the cloister

In the early Middle Ages the larger community of the inhabitants was analphabetic. Only the clergy could read and write. Monasteries formed centres of knowledge and civilization. One of the work tasks of the monks was related to collecting and dissemination of knowledge. They were either reading or overwriting texts and books for their own use. This was done in the cloister and later when the demand asked for it in the scriptorium, also called the writing room. Therefor the scriptorium is connected to the cloister. The monks wrote manuscripts not only about the Christian religion but also copied ancient and classicism writings. Overwriting and decorating books required a lot of care and therefor it was very time consuming. Books were therefore a precious asset. Books were kept in wooden presses. These presses would usually stand against the inner wall of the cloister walk.

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8 Braunfels 1972: 12

9 Cook 1961: 78

10 Cook 1961: 60-61

11 inventaris.onroerendergoed.be



In time when monastic libraries increased in size, special chambers would build for this purpose and therefor libraries were established within the cloisters. For example at Tintern and Beaulieu the library occupied part of the vestry adjoining the transept. At Norwich the scriptorium was probably the chamber over the north walk of the cloister.<sup>10</sup>

There was also a need in exchanging knowledge between one another. The intellectual life was relegated to monastery schools and cathedral schools to train the clergy. The students were mostly sons and daughters of noble families, they were taught to read and write. Some of them remained as a novice, as a candidate priest in the monastery and eventually became a monk or nun. These good relations with the nobility acquired the order of Benedictine great wealth. Therefore some monasteries could grow and extend to enormous complexes.<sup>11</sup>

Learning became essential and the growing need of exchanging knowledge and the increasing growth and urbanization of European society during the 12th and 13th century, caused a demand for a university. The medieval university was a result of the cathedral schools that migrated to the large cities such as Bologna, Paris and Oxford.

The most iconic expression of the university towns are Oxford and Cambridge in England, since it was only England that teaching colleges, comprising a body of scholars living under the teaching and guidance of masters of arts. Students lived communally in a rented building presided over by a master. Beam hall was one such establishment in Oxford; surviving intact in Merton Street, it illustrates their inherently domestic character that made little imprint on the architecture of the town.

The college's financial independence meant that the colleges could build liberally and lavishly. The first colleges were founded in quick succession in the thirteenth century at Oxford: University College, Balliol and Merton. The buildings were irregularly placed around a quadrangle, a usually rectangular courtyard where the sides are occupied by large buildings.<sup>12</sup> It resembles the cloister in University campus and college buildings. The first buildings to be constructed were the dining hall, forming the south side of the quadrangle, the warden's house on the opposite side, and a chapel on the third side, residential accommodation for fellows occurred with the construction of mob quad, to the south of the chapel, begun in 1287-1289. Consisting of four ranges of roughly equal length and height, this was oxfords first collegiate quadrangle.

The enclosed quadrangle has proved enduring language of collegiate architecture at Oxford and Cambridge. Reminiscent of monastic cloisters, it recalled the tradition of monastic learning that the universities inherited. Indeed, several colleges were actually founded in, monastic structures such as Jesus and Emmanuel at Cambridge. The enclosed courtyard format also served as a defensive. Universities acquired academic quarters, comprising lecture theatres, assembly rooms, chapels, libraries and lodgings.<sup>13</sup>

To study at either Oxford or Cambridge monk-scholars were selected, as means of ensuring they had already reached a certain level of proficiency in grammar, logic and philosophy. Most likely these monks received a preparatory training as novices and juniors in the monastery itself. Some monks spent their first months at Oxford completing the training which otherwise would have been done in the cloister. Moreover, many Oxford monks only spent a small proportion of their time in residence at the university. The majority of monk-scholars remained in their colleges for only a fraction of time. Since those from smaller poorer houses were obliged to settle for shorter interrupted stays at the university and longer periods studying in their own cloister. Therefor many monks preferred to study at the university during vacations.<sup>14</sup>

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11 Catherijne Convent (z.d.): 2 Kloosterdag

12 "Quadrangle, n." Oxford English Dictionary.

13 Coulson:

14 Cook 1961: 56-69

When we look more closely to the plans of this medieval architecture of monasteries, libraries and universities a correspondence in architecture can be seen: the cloister. The cloister is the architectural space of the monastery which was designed to enhance and seclude the lives of the monks. The daily life was mostly spent in the cloister, where they read and scripted books. This is where the library started. They lived in a community where the hospitality was highly valued. Monks started schools to share and obtain knowledge between the brethren, monks and clergy from outside the walls. This is where the demand started to grow for universities and public libraries.

Could it be that the architectural feature of the cloister was the start of the library and the college? We could say that there is a correspondence in the plan between cloisters and colleges which include a quadrangle and for example libraries such as the Laurentian library of Michelangelo in Florence which also includes a cloister. However to really validate this, a deeper study must be made of the functions around these cloisters and quadrangles and the routines of the users. There also must be taken into account the time evolution for the demand of different spaces and the extension of these functional spaces.

Yet there could be concluded that the cloister had more than just a function for routing and connecting functions within the monastery. It was a place that functioned as a transition from the heart of the monastery to the spaces with a clear function as the church, the refectory and the dormitory. Next to that it also functioned for meetings about matters concerning the monastery and the cloister and the sins that monks made. Besides these meetings monks also walked around the cloister to contemplate and meditate. But it wasn't only a place where they walked, it was also the place where they read, scripted and stored their books to then exchange their knowledge to others. These facts we can obtain from books about monastic life, architectural plans, photographs and drawings. However when we look at the Roosenberg Abbey by Dom Hans van der Laan the architectural language is very clean and sober. Here the light and the views are the decoration of the cloister. The only elements that reveal an other function than just routing are the furniture pieces placed in the cloister. The question that arises is: How could we implement an architectural or interior design feature to the cloister that shows the multifunctionality of the cloister in a way that it reveals its history in education.



Figure 2: Cloister as multi functional corridor  
( Drawing by author)

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Figure 2: Drawing by author

