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# THE ABBOTS AND PRIORS

## of Late Medieval and Reformation England

MARTIN HEALE

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OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Great Clarendon Street, Oxford, OX2 6DP,
United Kingdom

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.
It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship,
and education by publishing worldwide. Oxford is a registered trade mark of
Oxford University Press in the UK and in certain other countries



First Edition published in 2016

Impression: 1



Published in the United States of America by Oxford University Press
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016, United States of America

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
Data available

Library of Congress Control Number: 2016932105

ISBN 978–0–19–870253–5

Printed in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

For Jonathan and Beth

# *Acknowledgements*

This book has been a long time in the making. It originated as my postdoctoral project and has been the focus of my attention—on and off—for fifteen years. It is fair to say that writing a book about abbots has been a rather more challenging task than I anticipated when I first came up with the idea as a Ph.D. student. Without the help, guidance, and support that I have received from numerous people and institutions along the way, it would have taken me much longer to complete this book, and its shortcomings and imperfections would have been all the greater.

My greatest debt is to the British Academy, which has supported my project from the very outset. My research on abbots began during a BA postdoctoral fellowship at the University of York. After I moved to Liverpool, the Academy awarded me a small research grant to purchase microfilms of several unpublished abbots' and priors' registers, which greatly assisted my work. Finally, the bulk of the writing of this book was completed during an extended period of research leave funded by a British Academy Research Development Award.

I have also benefited from a fellowship at the Huntington Library and from an Author Publication Grant from the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, both of which are acknowledged with gratitude. The ongoing financial and practical support I have received from the University of Liverpool has likewise much facilitated my research.

I began this project under the mentoring of David Smith, and have profited enormously from his scholarship, advice, generosity, and friendship over the past fifteen years. My book self-evidently rests on the foundations of his remarkable work on the *Heads of Religious Houses* series; and prior to the publication of the final *HRH* volume in 2008, he very kindly shared the fruits of his research with me. I have consulted the *HRH* volumes constantly while researching and writing this book, and my admiration for them has grown ever deeper as my work progressed.

Many other scholars, colleagues, and friends have shared their ideas and knowledge with me, suggested new avenues of research, and offered helpful criticism. The three anonymous reviewers for Oxford University Press provided thought-provoking and perceptive guidance, which I have tried to take on board. I am also grateful to everyone who has commented on conference and seminar papers, passed on references, discussed ideas with me, or helped me in some other way—including Frances Andrews, Caroline Barron, George Bernard, Paul Booth, Paul Botley, Harald Braun, Janet Burton, Michael Carter, Peter Clarke, Marios Costambeys, Godfried Croenen, James Davis, Gwilym Dodd, Hugh Doherty, Judy Frost, Chris Given-Wilson, Joan Greatrex, Anselm Gribbin, David Griffith, Matt Houlbrook, Emilia Jamroziak, Maureen Jurkowski, Julian Luxford, Diarmaid MacCulloch, Edward Meek, Veronica O'Mara, Nicholas Orme, Mark Ormrod, Nigel Ramsay, Daniel Scroop, Pauline Stafford, Christian Steer, Karen Stöber, Ted Westervelt, and Cindy Wood. I would also like to thank all of the speakers at the 2011 Liverpool conference on the late

medieval prelate, whose papers provided much stimulation for my work. I first began research on the monastic superior under the supervision of Barrie Dobson, who sadly passed away before the culmination of this project. It owes a great deal to his guidance and encouragement.

I am very grateful to all the staff at Oxford University Press—and especially Stephanie Ireland and Cathryn Steele—for their expert guidance and assistance throughout the production of this volume. I also acknowledge with gratitude the help provided by the librarians and archivists in the numerous repositories in which I have worked while carrying out my research for this book.

To my family, who have lived with abbots and priors for longer than they can remember, I offer my heartfelt thanks. Mel's unstinting support, and her tolerance for all those times when I (or my mind) was elsewhere, has been heroic. I have been working on this book for all, or most, of Jonathan's and Beth's lives, and during that time they may have visited a few more medieval monasteries and churches than they would independently have chosen. They have been a source of joy, fun, and welcome distraction over the years in which I have been engaged in this project, and I dedicate the end project to them with love.

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# *Abbreviations*

| | |
|---|---|
| ASV | Archivio Segreto Vaticano, Vatican City |
| BAACT | British Archaeological Association Conference Transactions |
| BIA | Borthwick Institute of Archives, York |
| BL | The British Library, London |
| C&Y Soc. | Canterbury and York Society |
| CUL | Cambridge University Library, Cambridge |
| DCM | Durham Cathedral Muniments, Durham |
| EETS | Early English Text Society |
| *EHR* | *English Historical Review* |
| HBS | Henry Bradshaw Society |
| HHC | Hull History Centre |
| HL | Huntington Library, San Marino, California |
| *HMC* | *Historical Manuscripts Commission* |
| *JEH* | *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* |
| JRL | John Rylands Library, Manchester |
| *ODNB* | *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, online edition (Oxford, 2004–) |
| *RCHME* | *Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England* |
| RS | Rolls Series |
| TNA | The National Archives, London |
| *TRHS* | *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* |
| WAM | Westminster Abbey Muniments, London |

For the other abbreviations used in the references, the reader is directed to the bibliography.

# *Note about Names*

For ease of cross reference with the indispensable *Heads of Religious Houses: England and Wales* volumes, I have adopted the spelling of abbots' and priors' names given in that publication. When discussing the post-Dissolution era, I have given both the monastic and family names of superiors, again using the form of names cited in *HRH*.

# Introduction

*Let him realise also how difficult and arduous a task he has undertaken . . .*

(The Rule of Benedict[1])

The importance of the medieval abbot needs no particular emphasis. The monastic superiors of late medieval England ruled over thousands of monks and canons, who swore to them vows of obedience; they held responsibility for upholding standards of religious observance in their communities; they were notable patrons of learning and the arts; they were prominent figures in the government of both the Church and the realm, with thirty of their number (by the early sixteenth century) sitting in the House of Lords; they presided over institutions that exercised considerable local influence, as landlords, consumers, employers, and focal points for lay piety; and collectively they managed temporal and spiritual property worth around double the Crown's annual ordinary income. Abbots and priors—the heads, respectively, of monasteries designated abbeys and priories[2]—combined responsibility for the spiritual and material welfare of their communities with a vital role as interface between their religious houses and the wider world. The large majority of monastic superiors in late medieval England, moreover, were theoretically elected to their office for life, affording them the opportunity to exert a lasting influence on the observance, solvency, and external reputation of their communities. Indeed, the centrality of the head of house's influence—and the lasting damage that could be caused by an unworthy abbot or prior—was a truism in the Middle Ages. 'The state of churches and the rigour of monastic discipline', wrote Pope Innocent III in 1198, 'for the most part depends on their prelates, inasmuch as they form their subjects by an example of probity or corrupt them with an example of depravity.'[3]

The fundamental importance of the superior to the well-being of his monastery was also axiomatic in the sixth-century Benedictine Rule. Benedict of Nursia's interpretation of the monastic life has been described with good reason as 'the

[1] *RB*, ch. 2.

[2] All monasteries of the Cistercian and Premonstratensian orders were abbeys, while Cluniac, Carthusian, and Gilbertine houses had the status of priories. The situation was more complex for communities of Benedictine monks and Augustinian canons. As a general (but by no means infallible) rule, the larger monasteries of both orders were abbeys and the smaller houses priories. The most obvious exceptions to this rule were those major monastic communities that served as cathedral chapters (the 'cathedral priories').

[3] *PL* ccxiv. 168.

abbatial system', as his Rule placed great responsibility in the hands of the abbot.[4] He was to be the father (*abbas*) of the community, and a pastor guiding his flock to sanctity of life and salvation. He was called to instruct the monks by both word and example, never deviating from the teachings of the Gospel and the precepts of the Rule. The abbot ought to show no favouritism, but like a wise physician adapt his approach according to the particular needs and characters of his brethren. He should discipline his monks firmly, where necessary using physical chastisement, in order to recall them to the right path; yet he was to strive to be loved rather than feared, ruling with mercy and consideration.[5] In return, the brethren were to obey their superior without question or hesitation, as the representative of Christ in the monastery, 'not living by their own will . . . but walking by another's judgement and orders'. As well as renouncing their self-will to the abbot, the brethren surrendered their worldly cares and possessions to him. He was accordingly to take personal charge of the administration of the monastery's goods, overseeing and directing the work of the monk appointed as cellarer.[6] Furthermore, every facet of the community's daily life—including its worship, work, study, diet, clothing, and sleep—was to come under the superior's direct supervision. And, although the abbot was expected to take advice before making any important decision, the final judgement was always to be his alone.[7] It is abundantly clear that the whole success of the monastic enterprise, in this scheme, depended on the fitness and faithfulness of the superior. Accordingly, the Benedictine Rule repeatedly reminded the abbot that he would have to give an account of his stewardship before God on the Day of Judgement.

The Benedictine Rule was observed by all orders of monks in late medieval England, while the Augustinian and Premonstratensian canons adopted the fourth-century Rule of Augustine. The Augustinian Rule devoted less attention to the role and leadership of the superior (*praepositus*), placing its main emphasis on the monastic community's search for God.[8] Nevertheless, its stipulations concerning the head of house—situated at the end of the text—had a good deal of common ground with the Benedictine Rule. The superior was Christ's representative in the monastery, who should be obeyed and honoured like a father; he was to ensure that the Rule was observed and to correct all faults, presiding over his brethren with love and humility; he supervised and administered the goods of the community; and it was again emphasized that he would be called to render an account of his actions before God.[9] These monastic rules remained the most powerful influence on superiors' understanding of their office and responsibilities throughout the Middle

[4] Butler, *Benedictine Monachism*, esp. 184–99. For perceptive discussions of the abbot in the Benedictine Rule, see A. de Vogüé, *Community and Abbot in the Rule of St Benedict*, Cistercian Studies Series 5/1 (Kalamazoo, 1979); G. M. Oury, 'L'Abbé selon Saint Benoît', in D.-M. Dauzet and M. Plouvier (eds), *Abbatiat et abbés dans l'ordre de Prémontré* (Turnhout, 2005), 23–37.

[5] *RB*, chs 2, 64. [6] Ibid., chs 5, 31. [7] Ibid., ch. 3.

[8] *RA* 74–103; B. Ardura, 'Du *Praepositus* de Saint Augustin à l'abbé dans la tradition Prémontrée jusqu'à la fin de l'Ancien Régime', in D.-M. Dauzet and M. Plouvier (eds), *Abbatiat et abbés dans l'ordre de Prémontré* (Turnhout, 2005), 39–90.

[9] *RA* 100–3.

Ages. Heads of houses regularly cited their rule in defence of their actions, and commentaries on the Benedictine Rule, such as that of Abbot Smaragdus of Saint-Mihiel, continued to be widely used by late medieval superiors.[10]

If the moral, spiritual, and practical guidance of the Benedictine and Augustinian Rules constituted the primary directory for abbots and priors in late medieval England, monastic superiors' understanding and exercise of their office was also conditioned by more recent productions. The ecclesiastical and monastic authorities generated a wide body of legislation relating to heads of religious houses, which was carefully codified over the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The developing corpus of canon law established the legal basis for abbatial elections, the absolution of their brethren's faults by heads of houses, and the administration of a monastery's endowment.[11] By the early thirteenth century, moreover, every monastic superior in England and Wales was subject to a general or provincial chapter of his order, which issued its own legislation delineating abbatial authority. The customaries of monastic orders and individual religious houses also laid down detailed instructions concerning the responsibilities of abbots and priors, including but by no means confined to their liturgical functions. These various requirements were monitored and (at least in theory) enforced through regular systems of episcopal and chapter visitation, with the resulting injunctions also shaping the ways in which late medieval superiors discharged their office.[12]

It would be unwise, however, to assume that the normative legislation of the monastic and ecclesiastical authorities was always the dominant influence on late medieval superiors' performance of their role. Abbots and priors needed also to be responsive to local customs and to the tastes and wishes of their houses' patrons and benefactors.[13] Even more pressing, particularly for the heads of Benedictine and Augustinian monasteries with their traditions of autonomous rule,[14] were the institutional expectations of their communities. These expectations were articulated, above all, through the genre of monastic writing known as *Gesta abbatum* (deeds of the abbots). The compilation of (often brief) narrative accounts of individual superiors' rule and achievements was a long-standing monastic practice, and remained widespread in late medieval English communities.[15] The tenacity of this tradition, at a time when other forms of monastic history-writing were on the wane, was directly related to its practical functions. Descriptions of abbatial deeds were used by convents in their commemoration of former heads, but they also

[10] Clark, 'Abbot and his Books', 112–13; Smaragdus, *Commentary*, 25–7. For examples of late medieval commentaries on the Benedictine Rule written by monastic superiors, see Ch. 2, p. 89. Brann, *Abbot Trithemius*, 134–7.

[11] For a helpful summary of the application of canon law to the monastic superior, see J. Hourlier, *L'Âge classique 1140–1378: Les Religieux* (Paris, 1973), 315–30.

[12] These themes are more fully discussed in Chs 2 and 3.

[13] For local influences on monastic liturgies, see Ch, 2, pp. 80–1.

[14] In contrast to 'centralized' orders, such as the Cistercians, Premonstratensians, Carthusians, and Gilbertines.

[15] See M. Sot, *Gesta episcoporum, gesta abbatum* (Turnhout, 1981), for the earlier development of this literary genre; and for a detailed account of a late medieval English example, Luxford, '*Nichil ornatus*', 237–60.

served as useful exemplars for future superiors to follow. Thus the Evesham chronicler concluded his lengthy panegyric of John of Brockhampton (1282–1316) by remarking that this abbot did many other good things 'but these will suffice at present as an example to his successors'; and the outstanding deeds of John Wysbech of Crowland (1470–6) were set down in the abbey chronicle 'to be a remembrance and an example'.[16] Criticisms of abbots and priors, although less regularly recorded, might serve a similar function. The St Albans *Gesta* concluded its account of every superior with a section on his 'negligences', inserted, we are told, 'for the notice and caution of future generations'.[17]

The *Gesta abbatum* tradition, therefore, provided a series of stylized 'biographies' that modelled good—and sometimes bad—abbatial rule, and encouraged monastic heads to identify with and emulate their predecessors in office. New superiors can have been in little doubt that they would be evaluated by these same criteria, and that the best way to ensure fulsome commemoration by their convents was to follow the template of monastic leadership set before them. Indeed, the attributes and behaviours for which heads of houses were lauded in the numerous surviving *Gesta* from late medieval England are remarkably uniform, and offer a helpful indication of communities' expectations of their superiors. Abbots and priors were routinely praised for their piety and commitment to monastic observance, and for acting towards their brethren with kindness—for example, in providing for their material needs or the gentle correction of their faults. The ability to maintain friendly relations with influential neighbours, including by generous hospitality, was highly valued; and heads were also celebrated for their uncompromising defence of the monastery's properties and privileges, where necessary in the law courts. The bulk of the content in the majority of late medieval *Gesta abbatum*, however, was devoted to each superior's contribution to the material endowment and surroundings of his monastery. This included their acquisition of new property and the appropriation of parish churches; the securing or safeguarding of privileges and exemptions; building and repair work carried out in the monastic precinct or on its estates; and the adornment of the monastery and its worship through the provision of vestments, plate, or service books.[18] Conversely, any superior who alienated the house's property or who was considered to have been remiss in the defence of its rights and possessions was subject to harsh criticism or even the withdrawal of commemoration.[19]

Monastic superiors were, therefore, subject to a number of influences, which combined in various configurations to shape their understanding of the abbatial office. They were called upon to live up to the elevated spiritual counsels of the Rules of Benedict or Augustine, as fathers and pastors responsible for the souls of

[16] *Chron. Evesham*, 289; *Chron. Crowland*, 140–1.

[17] *GASA* ii. 369–71, iii. 415–16, 457.

[18] See, e.g., the accounts relating to the late medieval abbots of Evesham and Glastonbury: *Chron. Evesham*, 284–340; *John of Glastonbury*, ii. 309–36; Luxford, *'Nichil ornatus'*, 237–60.

[19] e.g. *Chron. Melsa*, iii. 93–111; *Mem. Fountains*, i. 139–40. I intend to discuss late medieval *Gesta abbatum* in more detail in another publication.

their brethren and as teachers 'learned in the divine law',[20] guiding their brethren towards holiness of life. They were urged to act as vigilant stewards of their monastery's possessions and privileges, and to be mindful of their legacy by making a lasting contribution to its lands, buildings, and treasures. They were expected to uphold the customs and traditions of their own monastic order and community, while remaining sensitive to the views and needs of lay benefactors. The heads of larger houses, moreover, might be summoned regularly to perform important services on behalf of their order, the Papacy, or the Crown. The wide variety of functions and competencies required of medieval abbots and priors—combining the all-encompassing spiritual responsibilities outlined in the Benedictine Rule with a range of complex administrative, legal, and public activities never envisaged by Benedict of Nursia; and blending authority with humility, the active with the contemplative life, and the role of father with mother—rendered the successful exercise of the abbatial office no simple matter.[21]

If the role of medieval monastic superior was a highly challenging undertaking, the same might be said—*mutatis mutandis*—of any historical endeavour to survey and elucidate the full range of abbatial functions in this period. Dominique-Marie Dauzet and Martine Plouvier have remarked that in order to do justice to this topic the historian would also need the skills of a theologian, canonist, statistician, sociologist, ethnologist, political scientist, economist, and art historian;[22] and to this list might be added liturgist, bibliographer, and literary critic. The sheer breadth and bulk of the extant evidence relating to the abbots and priors of late medieval England are equally daunting. There survives a myriad of monastic chronicles, customaries, registers, financial accounts, visitation records, library books and catalogues, liturgical texts, and general chapter statutes, together with a great body of material evidence, all casting considerable light on the activities of heads of houses. Abbots and priors also appear very frequently in non-monastic documentation, including records generated by the Papacy, the episcopate, the Crown, the secular and ecclesiastical courts, aristocratic households, and religious guilds, as well as manifold and miscellaneous letters, treatises, and works of literature. There is also substantial post-Dissolution material to absorb, including the records of the Court of Augmentations and the extant wills of a significant number of ex-superiors. A good deal of this evidence is in print, but much—and in particular a large proportion of the surviving abbatial registers and financial accounts—remains unedited and little studied. To digest fully all of the available

[20] *RB*, ch. 64.

[21] For these dichotomies as applied to medieval superiors, see *Bec Treatises* 14–19; C. Sanok, 'John of Bridlington, Mitred Prior and Model of the Mixed Life', in P. Cullum and K. Lewis (eds), *Religious Men and Masculine Identity in the Middle Ages* (Woodbridge, 2013), 143–59, at 152–3; C. Walker Bynum, 'Jesus as Mother and Abbot as Mother: Some Themes in Twelfth-Century Cistercian Writing', in Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1982), 110–69.

[22] D.-M. Dauzet and M. Plouvier, 'Introduction', in Dauzet and Plouvier (eds), *Abbatiat et abbés dans l'ordre de Prémontré* (Turnhout, 2005), 7.

materials pertaining to the several thousand abbots and priors of late medieval and Reformation England would be the work of a lifetime.

These difficulties perhaps help to explain why no overview of the monastic superior in medieval England has yet been produced, despite the obvious interest of the topic. Those seeking a general treatment of the subject for any phase of the Middle Ages must rely principally on the short but insightful chapters on the abbot in Dom David Knowles's magisterial survey of the religious orders in England from Dunstan to the Dissolution.[23] Knowles identified a number of key trends in the development of the abbatial office over this long period, including the retreat of the superior from common life and the evolving balance of power between head and community. He also produced several vivid and virtuoso pen portraits of individual superiors, chosen to be illustrative of the monastic life of their era.[24] Aside from a brief article by Henry Loyn on the abbots of post-Conquest England, there are no other general treatments of English monastic superiors in print.[25] Indeed, the only extended academic study of the subject is the unpublished 1992 doctoral thesis of Andrew West on 'The Major English Monastic Superiors 1215–1350', which surveys the background, elections, and activities of the heads of the twenty wealthiest Benedictine monasteries in thirteenth- and fourteenth-century England. More recently, the contributions addressing monastic superiors in the collection *The Prelate in England and Europe, 1300–1560* have helped to illuminate several aspects of abbatial life and activity in the later Middle Ages.[26]

Scholarly overviews addressing the monastic superiors of medieval Europe are also relatively scarce. Dom Pierre Salmon's *L'Abbé dans la tradition monastique* provides a succinct survey of the evolving constitutional position of the abbot during the Middle Ages and beyond; and Dauzet and Plouvier's collection of studies on the abbacy and abbots in the Premonstratensian order includes a number of interesting contributions on the medieval period.[27] The chapters by Franz J. Felten, Ludolf Kuchenbuch, and Dieter Hägermann in a volume of essays on *Herrschaft und Kirche* present valuable treatments of the changing theory and practice of the abbatial office in the early Middle Ages. For the high medieval period, Hubertus Seibert has explored the process of elevation to abbacies in Swabia between the 1020s and 1120s; and Véronique Gazeau's prosopographical survey of Benedictine abbots in Normandy from 918 to 1130 provides a wide-ranging account of the monastic superiors of that region.[28] Giles Constable has also written perceptively on abbatial authority in the high Middle Ages; and, most recently,

[23] Knowles, *MO* 395–410; Knowles, *RO* i. 270–9, ii. 248–54, 298–308.

[24] Knowles, *RO* i. 49–54, ii. 39–56, 185–97, iii. 87–99, 108–26.

[25] Loyn, 'Abbots', 95–103.

[26] West, 'Major Superiors'; M. Heale (ed.), *The Prelate in England and Europe, 1300–1560* (York, 2014).

[27] Salmon, *L'Abbé*; D.-M. Dauzet and M. Plouvier (eds), *Abbatiat et abbés dans l'ordre de Prémontré*, (Turnhout, 2005).

[28] F. Prinz (ed.), *Herrschaft und Kirche: Beiträge zur Entstehung und Wirkungsweise Episkopaler und Monasticscher Organizationsformen* (Stuttgart, 1988); H. Seibert, *Abtserhebungen zwischen Rechtsnorm und Rechtswirklichkeit. Formen der Nachfolgergelung in Lothringischen und Schwäbischen Klöstern der Salierzeit (1024–1125)* (Mainz, 1995); Gazeau, *Normannia monastica*.

a series of publications by Steven Vanderputten has begun to re-evaluate monastic leadership in the reform movements of eleventh- and twelfth-century western Europe.[29] The abbots and priors of late medieval Europe, however, have not yet attracted comparable attention.

Despite the lack of broader treatments of the subject, there have been numerous studies of individual monastic superiors in medieval England and Europe. The majority of these works have focused on celebrated abbots of the early and high Middle Ages, such as Aelfric of Eynsham, Abbo of Fleury, Desiderius of Montecassino, Anselm of Bec, Suger of Saint-Denis, Rupert of Deutz, the early heads of Cluny, Bernard of Clairvaux, and Ailred of Rievaulx.[30] Detailed studies of individual superiors of the late medieval period are considerably less common, although biographies of a small number of monastic heads involved in the Observant reforms of the later Middle Ages have been produced.[31] The only extended treatments of late medieval English superiors in print are John North's study of the career and scholarship of Richard of Wallingford, abbot of St Albans (1327–36), and E. H. Pearce's older monographs on two abbots of Westminster, Walter of Wenlock (1283–1307) and William Colchester (1386–1420).[32] However, numerous articles on individual superiors are available, including a growing body of entries in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*; and for the Dissolution period there continues to be a flourishing tradition of 'last abbot' studies.[33] There are also several major works on individual monasteries—such as Barrie Dobson's investigation of Durham Cathedral Priory in the first half of the fifteenth century, and Antonia Gransden's volumes on Bury St Edmunds between 1182 and 1301—which contain valuable treatments of the careers and functions of monastic superiors.[34]

[29] Constable, 'Authority of Superiors', 189–210; S. Vanderputten, *Monastic Reform as Process: Realities and Representations in Medieval Flanders, 900–1100* (Ithaca, NY, 2013), with references to a number of important articles by the same author.

[30] e.g. H. Magennis and M. Swan (eds), *A Companion to Aelfric* (Leiden, 2009); E. Dachowski, *First among Abbots. The Career of Abbot of Fleury* (Washington, 2008); H. Cowdrey, *The Age of Abbot Desiderius: Montecassino, the Papacy and the Normans in the Eleventh and Early Twelfth Centuries* (Oxford, 1983); R. Southern, *Saint Anselm: A Portrait in a Landscape* (Cambridge, 1990); L. Grant, *Abbot Suger of St-Denis: Church and State in Early Twelfth-Century France* (Harlow, 1998); J. Van Engen, *Rupert of Deutz* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1983); J. Hourlier, *Saint Odilon, abbé de Cluny* (Louvain, 1964); *Saint Mayeul et son temps: Millénaire de la mort de saint Mayeul 4^e^ abbé de Cluny, 994–1994* (Digne-les-Bains, 1997); J.-P. Torrell and D. Bouthillier (eds), *Pierre la Vénérable et sa vision du monde: Sa Vie, son œuvre, l'homme et le démon* (Louvain, 1986); B. P. McGuire (ed.), *A Companion to Bernard of Clairvaux* (Leiden, 2011); P.-A. Burton, *Aelred de Rievaulx (1110–1167): De l'homme éclaté à l'être unifié. Essai de biographie existentielle et spirituelle* (Paris, 2010).

[31] e.g. I. Tassi, *Ludovico Barbo (1381–1453)* (Rome, 1952); Brann, *Abbot Trithemius*.

[32] North, *God's Clockmaker*; Pearce, *Walter de Wenlok*; E. Pearce, *William de Colchester, Abbot of Westminster* (London, 1915). A small number of Ph.D. theses focusing on individual monastic superiors in late medieval England have also been written: e.g. C. Hodge, 'The Abbey of St Albans under John of Whethamstede', unpublished University of Manchester Ph.D. dissertation (1933); Elston, 'William Curteys'; J. Moon, 'Managing Jurisdictions at Canterbury Cathedral Priory in the High Middle Ages 1285–1331', unpublished University of Kent Ph.D. dissertation (2012).

[33] *ODNB*, *passim*. For notable examples of recent work on the last heads of particular monasteries, see Orme, 'Abbot of Buckfast', 97–107; Bell, 'Tudor Chameleon', 283–319.

[34] Dobson, *Durham Priory*; Gransden, *Bury St Edmunds 1182–1256*; A. Gransden, *A History of the Abbey of Bury St Edmunds, 1257–1301: Simon of Luton and John of Northwold* (Woodbridge, 2015). See also M. Still, *The Abbot and the Rule: Religious Life at St Albans, 1290–1349* (Aldershot, 2002).

The recent revival of interest in the religious orders in late medieval England has also served to enhance our understanding of various facets of abbatial activity, including notable contributions from (among others) Michael Carter, James Clark, Claire Cross, and Julian Luxford.[35]

Knowledge of late medieval monastic superiors has also been greatly advanced by the remarkable prosopographical studies of English religious houses produced over the last twenty years. Joan Greatrex and Alan Piper have compiled meticulous biographical registers for the English cathedral priories, detailing the well-recorded lives, careers, and intellectual activities of the monks (including the heads) of those houses.[36] David Smith's two later medieval volumes of the *Heads of Religious Houses* series, meanwhile, provide a wonderful resource of high-quality scholarship and an indispensable starting point for anyone working on medieval abbots and priors.[37] Not only is Smith's work invaluable for establishing securely, where possible, the dates of office of English and Welsh superiors; his entries also include a wealth of additional information about the careers of individual heads, and supply a trove of bibliographical and archival references for further research.

Building on this existing scholarship—and mindful of the absence of any overview of the subject—I have set out to provide a general survey of the heads of religious houses in late medieval and Reformation England and Wales.[38] In order to convey the sheer breadth of abbatial activity in late medieval England, I have endeavoured to cover heads of monasteries of all sizes and orders. However, any general treatment of this kind must acknowledge the problem that far more evidence survives for greater religious houses than for lesser ones, and for some monastic orders than others. As a result, certain sections of what follows effectively comprise a study of the heads of medium and larger monasteries alone. I have also sought to survey an extended period of time—nearly 300 years, from the early fourteenth century to the death of the last 'medieval' abbot in the 1580s—in order to trace the important developments of the monastic superior's role over this period.

It has nevertheless proved necessary to establish some parameters for the work. This is a study of the heads of monastic houses only: the superiors of the mendicant and military orders are not included. Priors ruling over dependent monasteries, who were effectively obedientiaries of their mother house, have also been omitted, as have (for obvious reasons) those claustral priors who served as the second-in-command in an abbey.[39] I also abandoned, with some regret, my original plan to address both male and female superiors. Not only would this have greatly extended

[35] See the works by these authors cited in the Bibliography.

[36] Greatrex, *BRECP*; Piper, 'Biographical Register', 129–436.

[37] *HRH* ii, iii. The only comparable works for other regions of medieval Europe are rather more restricted in scope: see Gazeau, *Normannia monastica*, ii; D. Watt and N. Shead (eds), *The Heads of Religious Houses in Scotland from Twelfth to Sixteenth Centuries*, Scottish Record Society, NS 24 (2001).

[38] The use of 'England' alone in many places of the book, including the title, refers to the late medieval realm of the kings of England (comprising England and Wales). To add the words 'and Wales' or 'and Welsh' at every juncture would be unwieldy, but I have followed this practice where the analysis pertains specifically to Welsh monasteries.

[39] For these groups, see in particular Phillips, *Knights Hospitaller*; G. O'Malley, *The Knights Hospitaller of the English Langue 1460–1565* (Oxford, 2005); S. Tugwell, 'The Evolution of

the size of an already lengthy book, but it risked downplaying key themes in the lives and careers of abbesses and prioresses in the search for common ground with male superiors. As recent studies have shown, the exercise, delineation, and representation of female authority in the monastic orders is a rich subject that requires discrete and detailed study.[40] The appearance at an early stage of my project of Valerie Spear's *Leadership in Medieval English Nunneries*, with its focus on the later Middle Ages, helped to reconcile me to this decision.[41] I have, nonetheless, attempted to signal some notable similarities and differences between male and female superiors in the notes of this work, in the hope of assisting in a small way any future research of a comparative nature. Owing to considerations of word length, it has also proved necessary to omit a chapter on the retirement, death, and commemoration of monastic superiors, which I hope to publish in shorter instalments elsewhere. I have otherwise attempted to explore the full range of abbatial activity in late medieval and Reformation England.

Chapter 1 focuses on the elections of abbots and priors in late medieval England, considering both the process of appointing a superior and the choices made by convents when selecting a new head. An abbatial vacancy was a difficult and expensive moment for any monastic community, with a number of pitfalls to negotiate. Yet, in stark contrast to religious houses in late medieval Scotland and many regions of western Europe, English and Welsh monasteries seem to have enjoyed considerable freedom from royal, patronal, and papal intervention in electing their superiors throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries: a valued privilege that allowed monastic communities to remain to a large extent masters of their own affairs. When appointing a new head, convents were painfully aware of the dangers of disunity in prolonging the vacancy and inviting outside intervention, and for that reason serious election disputes were relatively rare. Judging from the candidates elected, administrative experience and expertise were the qualities most highly valued in a superior by monastic communities. University-educated brethren were not infrequently advanced as head, but were perhaps more likely to be appointed by bishops than elected internally. Monks of high social status were not particularly favoured by convents, not least because they were relatively rare figures in late medieval English monasteries. In the early sixteenth century, however, there were clear signs that the long-cherished freedom of English monastic communities to appoint their abbots and priors without external intervention was coming under challenge from the Crown.

Chapter 2 explores the role of the late medieval superior in his community. The abbot of the Benedictine Rule was to be the spiritual father of his monks, but by the later Middle Ages the interactions between heads and their communities had become more irregular and formalized. Abbots and priors might spend considerable

Dominican Structures of Government, IV: Election, Confirmation and "Absolution" of Superiors', *Archivum Fratrum Praedicatorum*, 72 (2002), 26–159; Heale, *Dependent Priories*.

[40] N. Warren, *Spiritual Economies: Female Monasticism in Later Medieval England* (Philadelphia, PA, 2001); Oliva, *Convent and Community*; P. Johnson, *Equal in Monastic Profession* (Chicago, 1991).

[41] Spear, *Leadership*.

time out of the precinct, attending to the monastery's business, performing public functions, and dwelling in their manor houses. However, the internal pastoral function of the monastic superior was by no means obsolete in the later Middle Ages. Heads of houses dealt personally with more serious breaches of discipline, and also played an important role in key moments of their brethren's careers, such as their recruitment, profession, education, promotion to administrative office, and death. It is clear, moreover, that many superiors took their liturgical responsibilities seriously, participating fully in the community's worship on important feast days and investing heavily in vestments and apparatus for the dignified performance of the *opus dei*. Similarly, abbots and priors oversaw the intellectual activities of their communities, even if they were often unable to devote considerable time to personal study. Above all, the monastic superior was expected to be an example to his brethren, and the conduct of the head of the house remained a vitally important determinant of any monastery's spiritual health. But, if abbots and priors were not wholly detached from their communities, nor were they fully integrated into the brethren's daily lives and routines. In particular, the status afforded to the quondam—ensuring that heads of houses would never return to the life of the cloister, even on the relinquishment of their office—may well have enhanced the psychological distance between superior and convent in late medieval English monasteries.

Chapter 3 investigates the role of the head in the administration of his house. The abbot was accorded almost absolute power over monastic affairs in the Benedictine Rule, and the effective and prudent management of the monastery's endowment was always considered one of the most important functions of any superior. The twelfth and thirteenth centuries witnessed concerted attempts to circumscribe the administrative powers of the abbot, in order to reduce the potential for mismanagement. The new monastic orders and the reformed Papacy erected novel checks and balances on abbatial authority, and the communities of several large Benedictine abbeys launched internal 'democratic movements' against their heads. These initiatives, however, lost impetus over time and the later Middle Ages saw the gradual return of abbatial primacy in monastic administration. Late medieval abbots and priors increasingly sought and acquired additional sources of independent revenue, in particular through papal indults to hold one or more parochial benefices alongside their monastic office. Moreover, fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century superiors brought a growing proportion of their monasteries' income under their direct management, often taking several conventual obediences into their own hands. This centralization of monastic finances might promote greater administrative efficiency and could even be conceived of (and presented) as a reforming measure, in line with the precepts of the Benedictine Rule. Yet this concentration of power, which continued to intensify in the early decades of the sixteenth century, also increased the dependency of monastic communities on their superiors.

As Chapter 4 illustrates, the growing control of abbots and priors over monastic finances provided further opportunities for spending on their own office. Over the course of the later Middle Ages, increasingly large sums were devoted to the

superior's needs and activities, and to the projection of abbatial dignity and status. This period witnessed a notable growth in the size of abbots' households, along with enhanced expenditure on superiors' residences within and without the monastic precinct—a trend that reached a crescendo in the early Tudor years, in terms of both the scale and the style of building. Late medieval abbots and priors also increasingly adopted personalized forms of display—including initials, rebuses, and even personal coats of arms—in order to advertise their high-status artistic and architectural patronage. In short, monastic superiors were becoming more prelatical over this period, adopting the bishop as their model—an inclination that manifested itself in various ways, including abbatial dress (with the widespread acquisition of the *pontificalia* by late medieval heads), building campaigns, acts of educational patronage, and a greater interest in public service. This increased emphasis on the dignity of the abbatial office should not be equated with 'worldliness', but was rather the expression of an ecclesiastical magnificence thought appropriate for princes of the Church—even if this pursuit did not always sit comfortably with traditional monastic ideals.

Chapter 5 examines the public role of late medieval superiors, which heads of religious houses of any size were inevitably required to fulfil. In tracing these activities at various levels—one's own religious order, diocesan administration, high ecclesiastical office, and service of the Crown on the local, national, and international stage—this chapter argues that abbots and priors continued to play an important, valued, and varied public function in late medieval England. Indeed, the public role of heads of houses was clearly on the rise in the century prior to the Dissolution. These decades saw significant growth in the number of monastic superiors promoted to diocesan or suffragan bishoprics, as well as the regular appointment of abbots and priors as Justices of the Peace, and markedly improved abbatial attendance in Parliament. It also appears that the external ritual role of monastic superiors was growing at this time, as the heads of greater houses were increasingly called upon to contribute to royal ceremonial splendour. The upturn in the public role of superiors in later fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century England can be attributed in part to changes in ecclesiastical and secular government in this period, but also seems to be connected to the growing emphasis on abbatial dignity within the monastic order, and to the increased prominence and visibility of monks and canons in the universities.

Chapter 6 discusses the external relations and reputation of the late medieval superior. Abbots and priors were expected to champion and uphold their monasteries' wider interests in whatever ways they could. They took care to cultivate close relationships with powerful lay neighbours—for example, offering generous hospitality, acting as godfathers to their children, and joining urban guilds. They were also required to defend their house's properties and rights, and many monastic heads seem to have fulfilled this function zealously in the law courts. This determined defence of institutional interests, however, risked forfeiting the good will of at least some of their neighbours. It is striking that late medieval literary representations of abbots and priors repeatedly portrayed them as merciless litigators, who cultivated the friendship of the rich while neglecting or actively harming the

interests of the poor. Monastic superiors were also frequently criticized in late medieval literature for their luxurious living. The extent to which these stereotypes reflected conscious anticlericalism might be questioned, but it is significant that both Lollard and early English Protestant writers adopted the same critiques of abbots and priors as part of their wider attacks on the religious orders. Indeed, sixteenth-century evangelical writings frequently grouped monastic superiors alongside bishops as proud prelates, wholly alien in life and spirit from the religion of the New Testament—an equation that suggests that the growing emphasis on abbatial display could be a source of vulnerability as well as of strength for the monastic order. The same might be said of late medieval superiors' close identification with, and reliance on, the secular elites.

With this background in mind, the final three chapters investigate the position and fate of monastic superiors during the ecclesiastical turbulence of the sixteenth century. Chapter 7 explores the evolving relationship between heads of houses and the Crown in early Tudor England. The changes to the abbatial office taking place over the later Middle Ages—with greater power concentrated in the hands of superiors, a stronger emphasis on the dignity of their office, and their growing prominence in public life—promoted a grander style of monastic leadership in early sixteenth-century England. However, these years also saw the adoption of a more interventionist approach towards the Church by the early Tudor regime. This tendency manifested itself in the monastic sphere in particular by increased government interference in abbatial elections, first by Cardinal Wolsey and then by Thomas Cromwell. Indeed, by 1534 the latter was exercising a powerful influence in almost every abbatial election of consequence. Cromwell was generally happy to advance candidates brought to his attention by local worthies, and the new superiors thus favoured found themselves subject to heavy financial charges and uncomfortable claims on their patronage. Henry VIII's vicegerent took a close interest in the internal affairs of all the realm's monasteries, pressing heads of houses for leases and presentations in their gift, and encouraging monks and canons to inform against their superiors. By these means and others, Cromwell had succeeded in establishing some mastery over English monasteries by the later 1530s. Monastic communities found themselves significantly weakened by these developments, as the headship of houses became subject to fierce competition, and internal discipline and solvency were undermined.

Chapter 8 examines the actions and attitudes of superiors during the Dissolution. There was some resistance to the closure of their monasteries by heads of houses, but this was not as widespread or as determined as might have been expected. The abbots represented in Parliament did not protest at the dissolution of the lesser monasteries in 1536. A number of superiors took part in the Pilgrimage of Grace, but apparently with some reluctance, and others actively avoided involvement or even contributed to the rebellion's suppression. Similarly, when they were called upon to surrender their houses to the Crown in 1537–40, the large majority of abbots and priors gave way with little overt opposition. Their response was partly the product of the regime's strong-arm tactics, with a number of superiors subjected to harsh exemplary punishment during the second half of the 1530s. However, this

relative lack of resistance can also be attributed to other factors, including the instinctive loyalism of abbots and priors, many of whom were active in royal service; the growing dependence of monastic superiors on the Henrician regime, a significant number of whom now owed their office directly to government patronage; the internal destabilization that Cromwell's interventionism had promoted; and an absence of secular support for opposing the Dissolution. The ultimate conformity of monastic superiors was also encouraged by the generous pensions offered by the regime, which were considerably larger than those traditionally accorded to retiring heads. It is also striking that a significant minority of abbots and priors were willing to take up important offices in the post-Dissolution Henrician Church, as bishops, suffragans, deans, and cathedral dignitaries. By no means all displaced monastic heads were able to come to terms with the new religious settlement so readily, but their collective compliance eased the process of Dissolution, as they modelled conformity to their own communities—conditioned to obey their superiors—and to lay observers alike.

The book concludes with an exploration of the subsequent careers and fortunes of ex-monastic superiors in Reformation England. A significant number of former abbots and priors attained capacities to serve as parish priests, but this route was far from universal. Many ex-heads of larger houses were content to retire quietly with their pensions, while those who had ruled over lesser monasteries found that the acquisition of parochial benefices was by no means a formality. There is no doubt that the majority of former superiors were able to enjoy some prosperity as a result of their sizeable pensions, dwelling in comfortable residences with their personal attendants, and continuing to occupy a position of local standing. However, we should not assume that they all settled comfortably into their new way of life. Several heads were elderly men at the time of the Dissolution, and extant abbatial wills of the late 1530s and 1540s display evidence of dislocation and a concern to preserve some measure of continuity with the past. Testamentary records, moreover, indicate that many former superiors continued to hold traditional religious views. Even those ex-abbots and priors who occupied senior positions in the new Henrician Church of England were largely conservative in their religious tastes, although a minority were more enthusiastic supporters of Protestant reform. The accession of Mary was accordingly welcomed by many surviving ex-superiors, and the modest restoration of religious houses during that reign seems to have prompted a renewal of monastic identity among several former abbots and priors. This evidence casts doubt on the alleged 'idyllic fate' enjoyed by heads of houses after the Dissolution, and suggests that a good number sincerely regretted (or came to regret) the loss of their vocation and office.

It is a central contention of this study that a detailed appreciation of the (evolving) role, activities, and reputation of the monastic superior is essential to our understanding of the religious orders in late medieval and Reformation England. The study of abbots and priors cannot illuminate every dimension of monastic life. Indeed, many of the core activities of a medieval monastery—its daily services and masses, the spiritual and intellectual activities of the monks, or the various religious and social services provided by the community to its lay neighbours—appear

only sporadically in what follows.[42] Nevertheless, the plane on which the monastic superior operated cannot be ignored or downplayed in any balanced assessment of late medieval religious life. A significant, and growing, proportion of many monasteries' income was devoted to the needs and activities of their heads, inevitably channelling resources away from other priorities. The close relations and identification of monastic superiors with powerful lay and clerical neighbours underscored the position of (at least the more sizeable) religious houses in elite society. Abbots and priors were the external and public representatives of their monasteries, and their own standing was an important determinant of the wider reputation of individual houses and the monastic order more generally. The extent to which the morale, spiritual temperature, and material welfare of a religious house depended on its superior, moreover, cannot be underestimated; and we can also learn much about late medieval monastic ideals from conventual expectations of their superiors. Nor is it possible to make sense of the Dissolution and the relative ease with which religious communities collapsed in the later 1530s, without recourse to facile explanations about monastic decline and Tudor despotism, unless we understand the self-image, background, and compromised position of the superiors who surrendered their monasteries to the Crown. In all these ways, and more, the abbots and priors of late medieval and Reformation England helped to shape the fortunes, the reputation, and the ultimate fate of the monastic communities over which they presided. They fully merit our attention.

[42] For these crucial facets of monastic life, see Heale, *Monasticism*, 1–74.

# 1

# Election and Selection

*Ye shall hastly procede to th'elitynge and chesing of a new Priour and governour of youre monastery . . . for therin lieth the wele, honour and goode publique of the said monastery.*

(Bishop William Dudley of Durham to the convent of his cathedral priory, 1478[1])

## ELECTING A SUPERIOR

The choice of a new superior was always a pivotal moment in the life of any religious community. The process was minutely recorded in monastic and episcopal registers, since procedural irregularities could mean the quashing of the election, and as a result the elections of abbots and priors are probably the best-recorded aspect of their careers. The process to be followed was clearly outlined in canon law.[2] Before a legal election could take place, three preliminaries were required. If the previous superior had died, he was to be buried before the community assembled to choose a successor. All monasteries that did not hold their property in free alms needed to receive formal permission—*congé d'élire*—from their patron before proceeding to elect.[3] Finally, any professed members of the monastic community who were dwelling outside the house—for example, at a dependent priory—should be summoned to be present on the appointed day of the election. The presence of the head of the monastery's parent house was also required for Cistercian and Premonstratensian elections (sometimes supported by other abbots of their order), while elections at Carthusian monasteries were supervised by two respected priors of nearby charterhouses.[4]

[1] *HDST*, p. ccclxi.

[2] For detailed accounts of election procedures, see R. B. Dobson, 'The Election of John Ousthorp as Abbot of Selby in 1436', *Yorkshire Archaeological Journal*, 42 (1967), 31–40; Dobson, *Durham Priory*, 83–9; Vaughan, 'Election', 1–12; R. Haines, 'The Appointment of a Prelate (a): The Election of an Abbot of Tewkesbury', in Haines, *Ecclesia Anglicana* (Toronto, 1989), 15–25; J. Burton, 'The Election of Joan Fletcher as Prioress of Baysdale, 1524', *Borthwick Institute Bulletin*, 1 (1975–8), 145–53.

[3] The new monastic orders of the twelfth century—Carthusians, Cistercians, Gilbertines, and Premonstratensians—held their possessions in free alms (frankalmoin), severely curtailing the rights of their patrons: see Wood, *English Monasteries*, 3–4, 13–14.

[4] *Statuts de Prémontré*, ii. 98–102; Colvin, *White Canons*, 242; Thompson, *Carthusian Order*, 111–12. According to early Cistercian practice, the abbots of the vacant monastery's daughter houses

On the day of the election, the monastic community assembled in the conventual church. Proceedings began with a mass of the Holy Spirit, after which all those with a right to a voice in the election retired to the chapter house. A sermon was preached (normally by a member of the convent) and the assembled community sang the hymn *Veni creator spiritus*, asking for divine guidance in their choice of superior. Having ensured that no one illicit was present, there was read aloud the decree *Quia propter*, which outlined the three different methods by which a legal election might be conducted, as laid down by the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215.[5] These were the way of scrutiny, by which each inmate voted confidentially for his preferred choice of head; the way of compromise, by which delegates (or 'compromittors') were appointed to make the choice of the new superior on behalf of the whole community; and the way of the Holy Spirit, by which the convent unanimously nominated its head by acclamation, 'as if by divine inspiration'. Should no spontaneous acclamation take place at this juncture, the convent would then consider which of the remaining two methods of election should be adopted. The way of compromise required that a number of compromittors were chosen, often seven or nine members of the community, who would discuss and agree the choice of the house's head in private. For the way of scrutiny, some of the brethren would be nominated as scrutineers to receive the votes of each individual monk, conduct the count, and announce the results of the ballot. All of these proceedings were recorded by a notary, and witnessed by clerks, in order to ensure that everything was accomplished in accordance with the legal requirements.

Once the outcome of the election was known, the elect (if a member of the community and therefore present) was led or carried aloft to the high altar of the church, while the brethren sang the *Te Deum*. A prayer was said over the nominee, and the election announced publicly in English to the clergy and lay folk there present. The community then returned to the chapter house, where the elect was formally asked whether or not he consented to his nomination as superior.[6] At this point, the abbot-elect would generally retire to a private chamber or chapel to pray and deliberate. After a suitable interval, one of the brethren was sent to ask again whether the nominee would agree to take up the office of superior. It was customary for him to request more time as a sign of humility, and to give his consent (if he had resolved to do so) only at the third time of asking.

Before the abbot-elect could take up office, his election required formal confirmation from the necessary authorities. This could be a drawn-out process. Monastic elections at houses of centralized orders such as the Cistercians and Premonstratensians were to be confirmed by both the father abbot and the general chapter. Wherever the patron's licence had been needed for the election to take place—as was common for Benedictine and Augustinian houses—his or her subsequent assent to the proceedings was also required, for which the abbot-elect would normally have to apply in person. For those monasteries subject to their

were required to attend elections, but the right of those heads to a voice in the election of their father abbot was withdrawn in 1265: *Early Citeaux*, 381–8, 487–8; *DDC* iii. 787.

[5] *DEC* i. 246–7. [6] See, e.g., *GASA* iii. 424–31.

diocesan's authority, it was also necessary for the election to receive the bishop's confirmation. This entailed a detailed examination of both the electoral process, to ensure that canonical procedures had been correctly followed, and the person and character of the elect. According to ecclesiastical law, those elected as monastic superiors were to be of canonical age and legitimate birth, without physical impairment, sufficiently educated, not guilty of extreme immorality, and not excommunicate.[7] The bishop or his proctor would also publicly call for anyone who opposed the election to appear on a designated day to explain his or her objections. If all was found to be in order, the election would be formally confirmed, and at the earliest ensuing opportunity the elect would receive the bishop's benediction, swearing canonical obedience in return. Newly elected heads of Cistercian and Premonstratensian monasteries—although exempt from the diocesan's jurisdiction—also received the bishop's benediction in this way and swore canonical obedience to him, saving the rights of their order. The small number of English houses that were individually and directly subject to the Apostolic See, however, were required (unless they had received particular dispensation from this duty) to obtain consent and blessing at the papal curia.[8] Once the election had been confirmed by the ecclesiastical authorities, where necessary notification was sent to the monastery's patron requesting that the custody of the house, and its temporal possessions, be restored to the community. The new head would also swear an oath of fealty to the patron.[9]

The way was now clear for the installation of the new superior and his induction into corporal possession of the monastery, a ritual normally performed (for non-exempt houses) by an archdeacon or the diocesan official. Prior to this ceremony, the elect was not permitted to exercise any abbatial functions nor to dwell in any of the superior's residences, and he ordinarily spent the intervening period between his election and installation at one of the monastery's manors.[10] The latter occasion thus began with the abbot-elect riding to the monastery to be received ceremonially by his community. He would then be conducted barefoot to the high altar, where the prior prayed over the prostrate superior. The new head was then led to his stall in the choir and the *Te Deum* sung. All of the house's brethren in order of seniority would then come before the superior individually and swear obedience to him, kissing him and receiving his blessing.[11] The whole community then processed to the chapter house, where all the obedientiaries would lay down their keys before the new head, and be instructed (if it was his will) to take them up again and resume their offices.[12] The day's events ended with festivities, in the form of an installation

[7] Hourlier, *L'Âge classique*, 316. Clement V (1305–14) added the requirement that only those who had made profession in the religious order of the vacant house could be elected as superior there: *Clem.*, I. 3, c.1 (Friedburg, ii. 1135).

[8] See pp. 21–2.

[9] See, e.g., *Reg. Whethamstede*, ii. 160–1.

[10] e.g. *Cust. Cant. & West.* i. 69–70; HL, BA, vol. 29, fo. 238$^{r}$.

[11] *Cust. Cant. & West.* i. 71, ii. 8. Some late medieval records relate that the monks swore obedience to the new abbot in the chapter house: e.g. BL, Add. MS 14,848, fos 24$^{r–v}$.

[12] For descriptions of these installation rituals, see *inter alia*: *Cust. Cant. & West.* i. 71–3, ii. 6–9; *Officium Eveshamensis*, 154–6; *Chron. York*, 80–1; *Cust. Eynsham*, 130–1.

feast for the community and local worthies. The rule of the new superior could now begin.

These formal rituals and procedures, recorded in considerable detail in countless registers, however provide only a partial picture of what took place in religious houses at monastic elections. The appointment of a new abbot or prior was a time of considerable anxiety and expense for religious communities. Moreover, since every late medieval monastic superior was elected (at least in theory) for life, a good deal was at stake in the choice of a new head. This was true for the religious house as an institution, whose medium-term financial security could be threatened by a misguided or contested election; for the present community, whose everyday life and observance would be directed for the foreseeable future by the new appointment; and for the individual nominated for advancement, whose role and way of life would change beyond recognition on his election as head of the house. Every abbatial election was therefore a sober and momentous occasion in the life of a monastery. Fortunately, a good deal of evidence survives beyond the recording of formal electoral procedures, which allows a fuller understanding of what these periodic events meant to religious communities and how the issues, problems, and opportunities arising in the appointment of superiors were negotiated. Financial accounts, chronicles, and letters shed light on the concerns and costs of abbatial vacancies and elections; and, although it is very difficult to know what went on behind the scenes, occasional glimpses of the deliberations and attitudes of the participants offer some insight into the dynamics of these occasions. We can also draw some conclusions about what lay behind the choice of monastic superiors by studying what is known about the monks and canons selected as heads. Thanks to the tireless and expert researches of David Smith,[13] a firm foundation is now in place for the prospographical study of the monastic superiors of late medieval England, on which this chapter will attempt to build.

## ABBATIAL VACANCIES: PROBLEMS

An abbatial vacancy was inevitably a period of anxiety for a religious house. It was common for vacant monasteries to be described, and to describe themselves, as 'widowed' churches—a term employed in the canons of the Fourth Lateran Council, expressive not only of a community's close emotional attachment to the head of the house but also of the vulnerability of an institution temporarily deprived of its ruler and protector.[14] A vacancy brought both internal and external dangers. The Augustinian provincial chapter was moved in 1334 to legislate against conventual statutes issued during voidances that relaxed monastic observance, particularly in diet and clothing. The Benedictine chapter, meanwhile, laid down that abbots' servants should receive annual stipends so that convents were not

[13] *HRH* ii, iii.

[14] *DEC* i. 246. Monastic communities might also describe themselves as 'orphaned' during a vacancy: e.g. *Reg. Chichele*, i. 60.

troubled by financial demands from this quarter on the death of their superior.[15] Theft of the deceased head's property and cash was also a concern. A large sum of money went missing on the death of Abbot John Stoke of St Albans in 1451; and it was alleged that, on the deathbed of Abbot Richard Prehest of St Mary Graces in *c.*1515, the subprior of the house, John Palmer, 'toke the keyes of the said late abbott while he lay in dying', and 'opened a chest wherin was fyve hundred poundes st[erling]', before fleeing with £200.[16]

An abbatial vacancy also deprived a monastery of its legal protector against external opponents, since the superior alone could plead at common law.[17] This prompted concerns about 'the rapacious wolf' who might seek to take advantage of the absence of the community's shepherd, another common analogy used in ecclesiastical records to express the dangers of monastic voidances.[18] Religious houses might even themselves seek to profit from vacancies at other monasteries, as when the monks of Christ Church Canterbury built a new quay and house at Fordwich to the prejudice of neighbouring St Augustine's Canterbury during a voidance in the latter house in 1283.[19]

There was accordingly a natural concern that abbatial vacancies should be as short as possible, and the statutes of the Carthusian order even required that a new superior be elected within forty days of the death or resignation of his predecessor.[20] The length of a voidance, however, depended principally on the number and nature of the permissions and confirmations needed for the election of a new superior, which (as we have seen) varied considerably according to religious house and order. For monasteries of centralized orders, who invariably held their property in free alms and were exempt from episcopal authority, the role of patron and bishop was heavily reduced. Aside from obtaining the confirmation of the father abbot and general chapter to their election, new Cistercian and Premonstratensian superiors were required to do canonical obedience to the head of their order at the next general chapter they were able to attend. In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, this entailed a visit to France.[21] However, by the fifteenth century, when their general chapters' powers were partly delegated to commissary generals in England, the latter might be empowered to receive the obedience of new superiors. Abbatial voidances for monasteries of these orders, therefore, were relatively straightforward. In a revealing contrast to the late medieval chronicles of several Benedictine houses, the chronicle of the Cistercian Meaux Abbey has very little to say about vacancies and instead focuses principally on the abbatial elections themselves.[22]

[15] *CAC* 17–18; *CBM* i. 9, 16, 233.

[16] *Reg. Whethamstede*, i. 102–35; TNA: C 1/426/49. For similar episodes, see *Jocelin of Brakelond*, 7–11; *St Augustine's Cant.* iii. 1667–73.

[17] Pollock and Maitland, *History of English Law*, i. 504–5.

[18] e.g. *DEC* i. 246; Genesis 49:27.

[19] *CPR, 1281–1292*, p. 104.

[20] Thompson, *Carthusian Order*, 111–12.

[21] New Carthusian priors were likewise expected to travel to the Grande Chartreuse, where they swore obedience to the general chapter itself: Thompson, *Carthusian Order*, 112.

[22] e.g. *Chron. Melsa*, ii. 287, iii. 3, 77, 93–4, 113–16, 163, 171–2.

For Benedictine and Augustinian monasteries—the majority of which lacked the exemptions enjoyed by the centralized orders—the acquisition of the necessary licences and confirmations could prove a lengthy and arduous process. Much depended on the accessibility of their patron and diocesan. This might be particularly problematic for monasteries in royal patronage. Both John of Sawtry (abbot-elect of Ramsey) in 1286 and Alan of Ness (St Mary's York) in 1313 were required to travel to France to receive royal assent to their election and the return of the house's temporal property.[23] As the fourteenth century progressed, the king could more often be found in Westminster or London; but even a trip to the capital could consume considerable time and money, not least because two or three separate journeys might be required for the licence to elect, royal assent to the election, the new superior's fealty, and the restoration of the house's temporalities. In order to mitigate these difficulties, the Crown sometimes commissioned others to confirm elections, and local ecclesiastics were not infrequently appointed to take the fealty of new superiors;[24] but most vacancies required at least one expedition by the convent's delegates or the abbot-elect. Aristocratic patrons might be equally elusive, a problem exacerbated by the concentration of monastic advowsons in the hands of the nobility over the course of the later Middle Ages.[25]

In most cases the patron's licence and consent were obtained without obstruction, but where problems arose they could add considerably to the length and cost of the vacancy. The most common obstacle was a disputed advowson, where different parties contested who was the rightful patron of the monastery. In 1365, Edward III opposed the election of Thomas Doulyssh as prior of Plympton for having been made without his licence, the priory claiming to be in the patronage of the bishops of Exeter rather than the king. A jury upheld the Crown's claims to the advowson, and the Plympton canons were required to elect a new head.[26] Instances where a patron refused to confirm an abbot-elect were rare, but not unknown. In 1442, the patron of Hartland Abbey, Sir John Dinham, withheld his confirmation of the election of Richard Tawton, on the grounds that he (Dinham) had not granted his licence to elect; and the 1334 election of Simon of Walton as abbot of Bourne was opposed by the house's patron, Sir Thomas Wake, apparently for the same reason. In both cases, however, the elections were ultimately allowed to stand by the ecclesiastical authorities.[27]

The acquisition of episcopal confirmation was not normally so time-consuming, not least because diocesans were concerned that monasteries in their charge should not be without a head for longer than necessary.[28] Bishops therefore often delegated to a commissary their power to confirm elections and receive the elect's oath

[23] *Chron. Rames.* 344–5; *Chron. York*, 61–4.
[24] e.g. *CPR, 1467–1477*, pp. 15, 39, 266.
[25] Thompson, 'Monasteries and Patrons', 103–26.
[26] *CPR, 1364–1367*, pp. 120–1, 126, 214–15; *HRH* ii. 448. For late medieval disputes over the Plympton advowson, see A. Fizzard, *Plympton Priory: A House of Augustinian Canons in South-Western England in the Late Middle Ages* (Leiden, 2008), 219–33.
[27] *Reg. Lacy*, iii. 348–77; *CPL* II. 523. Cf. Oliver, *Monasticon*, 211–13.
[28] Cf. Dobson, *Durham Priory*, 82.

of obedience. Moreover, abbatial vacancies might be shortest at monasteries in episcopal patronage, since convents needed only to apply to their diocesan for all the necessary licences and confirmations. Thus at Wormsley Priory, an Augustinian house in the patronage of the bishop of Hereford, the election of John of Bruges in July 1307 was confirmed by the diocesan just eight days after the resignation of the previous prior; and the interval between John of Bruges's own resignation in May 1310 and the episcopal confirmation of John of Clehonger as his successor was a mere four days.[29]

But, if the diocesan was normally relatively accessible, his confirmation was by no means a formality. The Fourth Lateran Council laid down that any ecclesiastic who approved the election of 'a man of insufficient learning or dishonest life or unlawful age' should be deprived of the revenues of his office until he had been absolved.[30] Some bishops were especially rigorous in their examination of electoral procedures: Archbishop Melton of York (1317–40) and Bishop Bateman of Norwich (1344–55), for example, regularly quashed monastic elections for unspecified irregularities.[31] Others were more lenient, such as Simon of Sudbury, bishop of London (1361–75), about whom it was recorded that 'in business of this kind and in other things he showed himself generous to all and does not make himself very difficult'.[32] If a diocesan (of whatever temperament) uncovered irregularities in a monastic election, three courses of action were available to him. He could supply the defects of the election himself and allow it to stand; he could quash the election, but himself appoint the monastery's nominee; or he might nullify the election and appoint a monk of his own choosing as head of the house, particularly if the community's elect was deemed unsuitable. In practice, the second of these options was the most commonly adopted. A superior-elect accused of some moral offence might also be required to purge himself of the charge before receiving episcopal confirmation—a measure undertaken on his election as prior of St Germans in 1404 by John Piper, who had been defamed of adultery.[33]

The possibility of the diocesan overturning an election was therefore real. However, unquestionably the most time-consuming and problematic of all confirmations was that faced by those Benedictine and Augustinian monasteries that were immediately subject to the Apostolic See: that is, Bury St Edmunds, St Augustine's Canterbury, Evesham, Malmesbury, St Albans, Waltham, and Westminster (and intermittently Chester). Canon twenty-six of the Fourth Lateran Council required that all abbots-elect of such monasteries should appear personally before the pope to receive confirmation and blessing.[34] The anxiety thereby

[29] *HRH* ii. 489.

[30] *DEC* i. 247–8. This was not an empty threat: one of the charges raised against Hamo de Hethe, bishop of Rochester, by Archbishop Mepham of Canterbury in 1329 was that he had confirmed the election of a prior of Rochester knowing the nominee to be illegitimate: *Reg. Hethe*, i. 424–8.

[31] *Reg. Melton*, ii. 10–11, 20–1, 68–9, iv. 27, 41, 82; *Reg. Bateman*, i. 51, 88, 89, 101, 110, 117–18, 119, 127, 130, ii. 11, 58, 63, 66, 69, 79, 99.

[32] *Reg. Sudbiria*, i. 86. This comment was inserted at the head of the section on monastic elections in Sudbury's register.

[33] *HRH* iii. 516.

[34] *DEC* i. 247–8.

generated is evident in the lengthy accounts detailing the discharging of this obligation in the chronicles of the monasteries concerned.[35] The journey to Rome ordinarily entailed an absence of several months, as was the case with John of Berkhamsted, abbot of St Albans, in 1291. Avignon—the home of the Papacy between 1309 and 1378—was more convenient for English heads; but superiors travelling to Provence for their confirmation and blessing might still be absent for six months or more, like Ralph de Borne of St Augustine's Canterbury in 1310.[36] There was a particular concern at these exempt monasteries that nothing should be found irregular with their elections, since any such complications could cause significant delays and expense, and raise the possibility that the pope might provide his own candidate as abbot. In the event, however, where problems of this kind were discovered, they were usually resolved at the papal curia. When the paperwork for the election of Richard of Wallingford, abbot of St Albans (1327–36), was found wanting, he renounced his position and was provided to the abbacy by the pope; and the election of Thomas de Henle, abbot of Westminster (1333–44), was confirmed at the curia, even though he was judged to be insufficient in learning.[37]

It is not surprising that these monasteries keenly sought papal dispensation from the requirement that their abbots-elect should travel to the curia in person for their confirmation and blessing. This privilege was first obtained by Evesham in 1363, and subsequently by St Albans (1395), Bury St Edmunds (1398), Waltham (1399), Westminster (1478), and St Augustine's Canterbury (1494x5); and several indults of this kind were also granted to individual abbots during the fifteenth century.[38] Several Cluniac houses, when released from the jurisdiction of the abbot of Cluny and made directly subject to the Apostolic See in the late Middle Ages, were similarly freed from any obligation to receive papal confirmation and blessing in person.[39] By the later fifteenth century, therefore, very few superiors were required to travel abroad for the confirmation of their election, either to general chapters or to the papal curia—a development that considerably simplified matters for monastic communities. Whereas a number of abbatial vacancies at thirteenth- and early fourteenth-century Westminster endured for over twenty months, a voidance of fifty-six days at Bury St Edmunds in 1429—caused in part by a dispute over whether the king or the queen was entitled to custody of the monastery during a vacancy—was considered unduly long by Abbot William Curteys and his brethren.[40] Indeed, by the fifteenth century it was only where conflicts of some kind arose over a monastic election that a vacancy was likely to approach or exceed the canonical limit of three months, after which time ecclesiastical law required that

[35] e.g. *William Thorne*, 395–6, 654–70; *Chron. Westminster*, 196–7, 202–5; Vaughan, 'Election', 6–8.
[36] *GASA* ii. 8–19; *William Thorne*, 395–6. [37] *GASA* ii. 189–90; *CPL* II. 410–11.
[38] *CPL* IV. 32, 517–18, V. 152, 267, VI. 504, VII. 171, 178, XI. 35–6, XIII(i). 201–2, XV. 82, XVII(ii), pp. xciv–xcv; A. Sweet, 'The Apostolic See and the Heads of Religious Houses', *Speculum*, 28 (1953), 468–84.
[39] e.g. *CPL*, V. 196, XVII(ii), pp. lxxxviii–xc, 124–6.
[40] *John Flete*, 113, 120, 122; BL, Add. MS 14,848, fos 19$^{v}$–20$^{r}$, 26$^{v}$–29$^{r}$.

the diocesan or father abbot step in and appoint a superior.[41] This state of affairs was in stark contrast to the lengthy vacancies commonplace in Anglo-Norman England, or indeed to the situation in early sixteenth-century Scotland, where the king was permitted to delay abbatial elections for up to eight months before nominating a superior.[42]

## ABBATIAL VACANCIES: EXPENSES

Abbatial vacancies brought not only practical difficulties but also considerable expense. The death or new appointment of a monastic superior could trigger a variety of payments to king, patron, bishop, or mother house. Patrons might seek to extract a payment on the death or resignation of a superior, as a kind of heriot; and all Cluniac monasteries were required to make a gift of their deceased prior's palfrey, cope, and breviary to the head of their mother house.[43] On the election of a new superior, monasteries in royal patronage customarily received demands from the Crown for the grant of a corrody or benefice to a royal nominee. Religious houses in the diocese of York, moreover, were expected to provide a pension to a clerk of the archbishop's nomination whenever a new superior took office.[44] At late medieval Crowland, a palfrey was owed to the earl marshal on the installation of a new abbot, although the monastery had been freed by the pope from a similar offering to the archdeacon of Lincoln. The monks were also required to deliver to the chapter of Lincoln Cathedral the cope worn by the abbot on the day of his installation; and as a result the abbey chronicler advised that an ordinary cope should be used on that day, worth only five marks, 'as such a one will suit becomingness of appearance, and a heavy outlay cannot be caused to the monastery thereby'.[45] Monasteries might seek to pass on a part of these costs to others. The monks of Battle, for example, drew customary payments from the heads of their daughter houses and from the inhabitants of Battle and Blatchington at the installation of each new abbot.[46]

Alongside such customary payments, abbatial vacancies brought a series of additional financial burdens. These charges can be grouped into three main categories: income siphoned by patrons who had the right to the custody of the monastery's temporalities during voidances; the costs of obtaining the various licences, confirmations, and blessings that were required; and the expenses of the ceremonies of election and installation themselves, with the accompanying

[41] *Decretals*, I. 6, c.41 (Friedburg, ii. 88). This rule did not apply where there had been a 'just impediment' to completing the election within the prescribed time frame.

[42] L. Jared, 'English Ecclesiastical Vacancies during the Reigns of William II and Henry I', *JEH* 42 (1991), 362–93; Dilworth, 'Commendator System', 54; Cowan, *Scottish Reformation*, 29–30.

[43] Wood, *English Monasteries*, 88–9; Graham, 'Papal Schism', 47.

[44] e.g. *Reg. Melton*, ii. 33–4.

[45] *Chron. Ingulph*, 388–9. Cf. *Reg. Wykeham*, ii. 72–3.

[46] A. Evans, 'Battle Abbey at the Dissolution: Income', *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 4 (1941), 393–442, at 417.

festivities. The cost of vacancies did not fall evenly on all religious houses, and those monasteries that held their properties in free alms were burdened significantly less. For the larger Benedictine monasteries, however, about whom most information survives, the expense of a vacancy was considerable.

Some religious houses incurred significant costs as a result of their patron's right to custody of the house's temporal property during voidances, a feudal exaction analogous with the wardship of a minor.[47] Such an arrangement was open to abuse, and in the Anglo-Norman period both William II and Henry I were criticized for allowing monasteries to remain vacant for lengthy periods of time in order to profit from their revenues. Around this time, a number of Benedictine abbeys made formal divisions of their property between the abbot and convent, perhaps with the hope that only the former portion would come into the patron's hands during vacancies.[48] The inconvenience of losing control over a significant part of their endowment at times of voidance also led monasteries to seek alternative arrangements. By the second half of the thirteenth century it was becoming common for religious houses in royal patronage to request the Crown's permission to retain their temporalities at the next (or present) vacancy in return for a fine.[49] The sums charged varied greatly according to the wealth of the monastery: in 1263, for example, Osney paid 20 marks, Evesham 300 marks, and St Albans 600 marks for this privilege, whereas Westminster was charged 1,100 marks five years earlier.[50]

In the first decades of the fourteenth century, a number of monasteries in royal patronage succeeded in making these arrangements permanent, with a fixed rent to be paid to the Crown on every future vacancy in place of royal custody.[51] The majority of these grants entailed a significant payment at the start of the vacancy, with additional and proportionate sums to be delivered by the monastery should the voidance last beyond a specified time: usually three or four months, but a year in the case of monasteries directly subject to the Apostolic See. Although this privilege did not save religious houses from the cost of the vacancy, it did at least free them from interference in their property by the royal escheator and made it easier to plan for future expense. A handful of monasteries, including St Albans, St Augustine's Canterbury, and Bury, subsequently succeeded in acquiring a further privilege allowing them to spread the cost of vacancies over an extended period of time by paying a fixed annual sum to the Crown.[52] But, whatever payment plans they were able to establish, the cost of patronal custody to larger monasteries remained considerable.

The need to obtain permissions, confirmations, and blessings from the monastery's patron, father abbot, or diocesan at various stages of the election process

[47] Wood, *English Monasteries*, 75–100. [48] See Ch. 3, pp. 122–6.

[49] In these agreements, the king reserved to himself knights' fees, escheats, and appointments to benefices falling vacant during the voidance. The royal escheator was to take seisin of the monastery at the start of the vacancy in order to protect the king's right, and then immediately withdraw.

[50] *CPR, 1258–1266*, pp. 249, 256, 276; *CPR, 1247–1258*, p. 650.

[51] e.g. *CPR, 1292–1301*, p. 604; *CPR, 1301–1307*, pp. 137, 227, 362, 455, 486. Nunneries made similar provisions: Spear, *Leadership*, 72–4.

[52] *GASA* iii. 135–46; *William Thorne*, 673–4; *CPR, 1396–1399*, p. 21.

brought not only concerns and delays, but also financial costs. These outlays included significant travel and subsistence expenses for the monastery's brethren, servants, and delegates and for the superior-elect himself. For the election of Robert of Battle as abbot of Battle in 1350–1, a wide variety of costs were incurred, including payments to a messenger carrying Chancery letters concerning the previous vacancy at Battle to various locations; for Brother John de Brightwalton's unsuccessful eight-day visit to London to obtain the royal licence to elect; for Brother Nicholas de Sandwich's trip to London and then on to Calais to obtain this licence from the king; for the rector of Hawkhurst's journey to London to receive counsel for making the election and meeting the archbishop of Canterbury; for a messenger sent to Exeter to summon the prior of St Nicholas, the abbey's daughter house, to the election; for three men sent to Chichester to depose before the bishop concerning the abbot-elect's age; for John de Brightwalton's trip to London to fetch a lawyer, Master John Leche, and bring him to Battle for his assistance with the election, and also for Leche's expenses on his journey home; and finally for the costs of the abbot-elect himself travelling to London, to Apuldram, and then into the king's presence, before returning to Battle. In all, this cost the abbey over £15, a little more than half of which was consumed by the abbot-elect's own expenses in seeking royal assent.[53] This scenario was not at all unusual, and a similar set of journeys are recorded for two subsequent elections at Battle in 1383 and 1508, and for a number of elections at fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Peterborough Abbey.[54]

Even more expensive than these expeditions, however, were the necessary gifts and fees that accompanied them. At Battle in 1350–1, recorded payments were made to a Chancery clerk, the Lord Chancellor, Master Leche, the notary and his servants, and to the bishop of Chichester's servants, amounting in all to a little over £20. The Battle elections of 1383 and 1508 entailed an even wider range of payments to lawyers, diocesan officials, and government officers, the latter group alone receiving over £32 in 1508. Similarly, the election costs of William Marton of Bardney in 1507 included a payment of £20 to the king's minister, Edmund Dudley; gifts of £12 12*s*. to various royal officers, including the Chancellor and the Keeper of the Privy Seal; sums of £5 to the bishop of Lincoln at the time of the election and a further 20*s*. for the elect's confirmation; and more than £20 in payments to the bishop of Lincoln's officers, deputies, and servants, including his registrar and secretary, his suffragan for the abbot-elect's benediction (53*s*. 4*d*.) and the archdeacon of Lincoln for the installation (66*s*. 8*d*.).[55]

Yet even these expenses were slight compared with the outlays of those abbots who were required to travel to the papal curia for the confirmation of their election. The costs of such visits—combining the long journey to Avignon or Rome, several

[53] HL, BA 111.

[54] HL, BA 145, 272; A. Evans, 'Battle Abbey at the Dissolution: Expenses', *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 6 (1942), 53–101, at 100–1; J. Russell, 'Ordeal on Horseback: The Peterborough Abbatial Elections of 1321 & 1338', *Northamptonshire Past and Present*, 9 (1996), 221–6; *EHD, 1327–1485*, pp. 793–5.

[55] TNA: SC 6/HenVIII/1986, fo. 51$^{r}$.

months' living expenses, and the necessary payments to the pope, cardinals, and other curial officials for their services and good will—could be extremely heavy. The expenses incurred by John of Northwold, abbot of Bury, for his journey to Rome in 1279 amounted to 1,675 marks; and Abbot John de Maryns of St Albans reportedly spent over 2,500 marks in payments and gifts at the papal curia in 1302.[56] To meet costs of this magnitude, several abbots were compelled to contract large loans while at the curia.[57] The expense of the papal confirmation of an election could be considerable, even when the new superior was not required to travel to Rome or Avignon in person. On the provision of Michael de Pecham as abbot of St Augustine's Canterbury in 1375, the monastery paid over £180 for the privilege that the elect might be blessed in England, and £225 in 'common services' (a tax payable to the pope on any provision, amounting to one-third of the benefice's annual income). On top of these sums, almost £125 was spent by two emissaries of the abbey at Avignon in their expenses and the gifts they distributed, while the abbey disbursed a further £30 on messengers travelling to and from the curia on business concerning the confirmation.[58] Monasteries able to acquire an indult for future confirmations to be carried out in England, however, made valuable savings of both money and time. From the late fourteenth century, St Albans and Bury paid only 20 marks a year to the papal collector, in compensation for lost papal revenues.[59]

The final kind of expense from abbatial vacancies, common to all monasteries, was the cost of the election and installation proceedings for the new superior. The expenses of the day of election included the relatively modest stipend of the notaries and their servants. More costly for monasteries of the centralized orders were the expenses and entertainment of the father abbot and the other superiors called to the election. The Premonstratensian canons of Halesowen spent over £20 in food, gifts, and expenses for the abbots of Welbeck, Dale, and Croxton in 1366, although only around a third of this sum was disbursed at the abbey's next election in 1369.[60] The installation ceremony itself was inexpensive, but the accompanying feast required a greater outlay. This was the new superior's first opportunity to establish friendly relations with the local aristocracy and dignitaries, and there was clearly some expectation that superiors should entertain bountifully.[61] There were, however, concerns in some quarters that these occasions could be wasteful, coming as they did at the culmination of a period of considerable expense for the monastery. The 1290 statutes of the Premonstratensian order forbade new superiors from feasting with seculars after their episcopal blessing, although they stipulated that other abbots of the order should be invited to the day's celebrations; and, during the episcopal visitation of Canons Ashby in 1442, one canon complained that 'the prior at the time of his installation did spend twenty marks and more, and that to

[56] *Chron. Bury*, 70; *GASA* ii. 56–8.
[57] e.g. *CPL* III. 4, 176, 350.
[58] *William Thorne*, 606–7.
[59] *CPL* IV. 517–18, V. 152. Abbot Cratfield of Bury paid over £750 for this privilege: A. Gransden, 'Cratfield, William, Abbot of Bury (d. 1415)', *ODNB*.
[60] Colvin, *White Canons*, 246–7.
[61] e.g. *Jocelin of Brakelond*, 25; *Chron. Westminster*, 204–5; *Chron. York*, 43, 63.

no avail'.[62] Meanwhile, the installation feast given by Abbot Ralph de Borne of St Augustine's Canterbury in 1310 had become proverbial by the late fourteenth century, when William Thorne was writing his chronicle of the abbey. Abbot Borne was said to have entertained over 6,000 guests of various social degrees, at a cost of over £287. The chronicler, however, was at pains to state that he was recording this munificence as a sign of how times had changed, and 'not that those who are to come may imitate by rivalling it, but rather that they may admire it'. Thorne also praised Abbot Michael de Pecham for celebrating his installation in 1375 with the convent alone in the monastic refectory, in order to save money.[63]

It is fair to conclude that abbatial vacancies became progressively less troublesome and expensive as the later Middle Ages progressed. Voidances of over a year, which were relatively common for the great Benedictine abbeys in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, are encountered much more rarely thereafter. Privileges releasing monasteries from royal custody and attendance at the papal curia or general chapters also simplified matters considerably. As the length of vacancies shortened, so must their costs have diminished, although they remained far from negligible. Even without a journey to the curia for confirmation or an installation feast, St Augustine's Canterbury's total expenditure for the election of Abbot Pecham was calculated at over £1,000.[64] The great Benedictine abbeys directly subject to the Papacy were, of course, exceptional in this regard. The total cost of the election of Abbot William Marton of Bardney in 1507 (aside from the installation feast) was a little under £175, of which £100 was paid to the king for his assent and the return of the monastery's temporalities. At Battle, a monastery that was not subject to royal custody of its temporalities, the recorded expenditure on its 1383 election (not including the expenses of Abbot John Crane between his election and installation) amounted to around £83.[65] Without the expenses of episcopal and patronal confirmation or custody, the costs of vacancies to Carthusian, Cistercian, or Premonstratensian houses must have been rather less: a total outlay of between £20 and £50 was perhaps more typical.

## FREEDOM OF ELECTION

Notwithstanding the various problems and expenses that might accompany abbatial vacancies, the most important dimension of any election was, of course, the suitability of the candidate chosen for promotion. According to the Benedictine Rule, the choice of superior belonged to the monastic community, which was to appoint a candidate known 'for the merit of his life and his enlightened wisdom'. Only if the brethren elected an obviously unsuitable head should external

[62] *Statuts de Prémontré*, ii. 42n.; Colvin, *White Canons*, 244–5n.; *VRH* ii. 45.

[63] *William Thorne*, 396–7, 606–7. For the lavish installation feast of Abbess Emma la Blounde of Wilton in 1299, for which 800 dishes and bowls were purchased, see Spear, *Leadership*, 30.

[64] *William Thorne*, 608.

[65] TNA: SC 6/HenVIII/1986, fo. 51$^{r}$; HL, BA 145.

authorities—the bishop and 'neighbouring abbots or Christians'—intervene.[66] The extent to which religious houses were in practice able to select their own heads freely, however, varied considerably over the course of the Middle Ages. In certain circumstances, an ecclesiastical overseer—bishop, father abbot, or pope—might exercise the right of appointing a monastic superior. There also remained the possibility that the Crown or a lay patron could exert influence over monastic elections—a practice widespread in earlier centuries and by no means uncommon in late medieval Europe. There is good reason to believe, however, that the monasteries of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century England generally and ordinarily enjoyed the right of free election. Indeed, the ability of communities to choose their own heads, and to this extent to direct their own destiny, was one of the most important—and one of the most distinctive—characteristics of late medieval English monasticism.

## Ecclesiastical Intervention in Monastic Elections

The significant role in the election process played by bishops and (for the centralized orders) father abbots ensured that they always retained potential influence over the choice of new superiors. They were expected to scrutinize the electoral process and to judge the suitability of the convent's choice. If they deemed the election or the elect to be uncanonical, or if the community was divided or excessively dilatory, the bishop or father abbot was empowered to make the appointment himself. This eventuality was something that monastic communities were generally keen to avoid, but there were certain scenarios in which the intervention of the ecclesiastical overseer was welcomed. A community troubled by division (such as Winchcombe in 1360) or facing internal instability (as at Wellow in 1348, after the deposition of Abbot John de Houton) might willingly turn to its bishop for assistance in electing a new superior.[67] In 1449, the convent of Calwich invited its diocesan to appoint a prior on its behalf on account of the monastery's poverty and the insupportable costs of an election; and the following year, the Premonstratensian canons of Welbeck requested, 'for firm and reasonable causes', that the presiding abbots of Newhouse and Dale select their new head.[68]

Lesser monasteries might also turn to the bishop to make an election because their community was too small to do so itself. In post Black Death England, a significant minority of religious houses (particularly priories of Augustinian canons) routinely contained fewer than six inmates. In such communities it could prove difficult to find suitable and willing internal candidates for the headship of the house, in which case convents might ask the diocesan to appoint a superior from another monastery. This was not an unusual scenario in late medieval England: more than 200 examples of elections made in this way at houses of Augustinian canons have been recorded; and bishops can also be found making appointments to

[66] *RB*, ch. 64. [67] *CPR, 1358–1361*, p. 493; *CPR, 1348–1350*, p. 150.
[68] *Reg. W. Bothe,* 22; *CAP* iii. 169–71.

lesser Benedictine monasteries, such as Humberston, in the later Middle Ages.[69] Indeed, the identification of suitable inmates for promotion to struggling religious houses must have been an important facet of a late medieval bishop's supervision of the monasteries in his diocese.

In certain religious orders, the ecclesiastical overseer enjoyed the right to select the head of the house. The appointment of all Gilbertine priors belonged to the master of the order, and that of Cluniac heads to the prior of their mother house.[70] Since most of the larger Cluniac priories—including Bermondsey, Lenton, Lewes, Montacute, and Thetford—were directly subject either to Cluny or to La Charité-sur-Loire, their nominated heads were very often French monks of these houses.[71] With the exception of dative priors of alien dependencies (which fall outside the scope of this study),[72] these Cluniac heads were the only significant group of non-native monastic superiors in late medieval England. Relatively little is known of their experience or influence, although some served as diplomats or administrators on behalf of the English Crown or Papacy.[73] During the Great Schism (1378–1409), however, the power to nominate priors to Cluniac houses in England was exercised within the realm, and thereafter this right was normally devolved to an English superior of the order, appointed as vicar general of the abbot of Cluny. Moreover, from the later 1300s, a succession of Cluniac priories acquired charters of denization from the English Crown and/or papal grants of independence from Cluny, which accorded to them the right of free election of their heads.[74] As a result of these developments, the appointment of French priors to English Cluniac houses became increasingly rare after the late fourteenth century.

It is more difficult to draw conclusions about the influence of Cistercian and Premonstratensian father abbots over elections at houses of these orders, owing to the limited available evidence. Ordinarily their role was merely one of supervision, but the presence of two or three superiors at abbatial elections introduced a particular dynamic to the proceedings. Of nine elections at fourteenth-century Meaux described by the abbey chronicle, the supervising abbots were said to have played a significant part in just two. Having deposed Abbot William of Dringhoe in 1353, the abbots of Fountains and Louth Park quashed the monks' election of Thomas of Shirborne on the grounds of his defective vision and nominated John de Ryslay as abbot against the convent's will—an intervention the chronicler Thomas Burton attributed to bribery. Then, in the election of 1367, one of the superiors present, Abbot John Topcliff of Kirkstall, sought his own appointment as head after

[69] *HRH* ii. 327–490, 49, iii. 366–558, 47–8. For the comparable state of affairs in lesser nunneries, see C. Cross, 'Yorkshire Nunneries in the Early Tudor Period', in J. Clark (ed.), *The Religious Orders in Pre-Reformation England* (Woodbridge, 2002), 145–54, at 149.

[70] Golding, *Gilbertine Order*, 107 and n.; Knowles, *MO* 145–58. The priors of St Oswald's Gloucester were likewise selected by the archbishops of York throughout the later Middle Ages: A. H. Thompson, 'The Jurisdiction of the Archbishops of York in Gloucestershire', *Transactions of the Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society*, 43 (1922), 85–180.

[71] *HRH* ii. 219–54.

[72] 'Dative' priors were appointed and removed at the will of the head of their mother house.

[73] See Ch. 5, p. 204, for examples of Cluniac priors in royal service.

[74] Graham, 'Papal Schism', 46–61; Graham, 'English Province', 62–90.