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Medieval monasteries as total institutions

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Wojtek Jezierski, *Total St Gall: medieval monastery as a disciplinary institution*, Stockholm studies in history, 92 (Stockholm: Acta Universitatis Stockholmiensis 2010), 116 p. (+ articles of 16, 29, 22 and 26 p.)

The thesis consists of four articles, which have been published or are in print,¹ supplemented by a long introduction and a short conclusion. The theme of the thesis is power relations in monasteries, with St Gall within the Holy Roman Empire (today's Switzerland) as the main case. The focus is on how power was produced and reproduced through social practice within the orbit of a monastery. Two premises underlie the analysis: that monasteries can be studied as fairly "closed" units and that power relations can be studied as fairly regulated patterns. This does not imply that these aspects are taken for granted, or are envisioned as complete: in practice a monastery has a lot of interaction with the outside world, and power was not only reproduced, but also contested, within the intra-monastic sphere. The main source of the investigation is *Casus sancti Galli*, a chronicle of the monastery written by the monk Ekkehard IV around 1050 (he died in 1056). This is an unusually good historical source, partly because it is very direct in recounting past events, even when they ran contrary to what one should suppose were the dominant interests of the monastery, partly because the interest of the candidate is not in "what actually happened" in the past, but in how it was described.

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1. Wojtek Jezierski, "Monasterium panopticum: on surveillance in a medieval cloister – the case of St Gall", *Frühmittelalterliche Studien* 40 (2006) pp. 167–182; "Non similitudinem monachi, sed monachum ipsum: an investigation into the monastic category of the person – the case of St Gall", *Scandia* 73:1 (2008) pp. 7–35; "Paranoia sangallensis: a micro-study in the etiquette of monastic persecution", *Frühmittelalterliche Studien* 42 (2008) pp. 147–168; "Verba volant, scripta manent: limits of speech, power of silence and logic of practice in some monastic conflicts of the high middle ages", i Steven Vanderputten (red.), *Understanding monastic practices of oral communication* (Turnhout 2011; forthcoming) pp. 19–44.

The title *Total St Gall* is an allusion to the main theoretical inspiration of this thesis: Erving Goffman's *Asylums* from 1961, where he introduced the concept "total institution". Goffman analyzed several types of institutions from this point of view, such as modern prisons, mental hospitals, orphanages, boarding schools and cloisters. The definition of a total institution includes the following elements:²

- all aspects of life are conducted in the same place
- daily activity is carried on in the immediate company of a large batch of others
- all phases of the day's activities are tightly scheduled
- the various enforced activities are brought together into a single rational plan

The concept has been discussed widely among medieval historians. A majority have been fairly critical to using it in a medieval monastic context, because it presupposes a coercive dimension and a rigid divide between staff and inmates which is difficult to reconcile with the devotional and communitarian spirit of medieval monasteries. The candidate opposes this line of thought by referring to Michel Foucault's concept of power not as something which operates or shows up intermittently or variably, but as a property which is always present in all kinds of institutions or relationships – not in differing intensity but in differing "arrays" (p. 59). Moreover, focus should not be on the conscious intentions of the actors, but rather on the side-effects of the institutions in which they take part. Whereas the candidate welcomes criticism of the concept of total institution, both when it comes to degree of coercion and isolation,³ he defends it as a useful tool or "ideal type" to describe "social processes in closed milieus" (p. 74).

The first article focuses on mechanisms of social order as seen from a macro-perspective. Starting out with the norms of surveillance as described in the rule of St Benedict, the candidate discusses how surveillance was secured on a practical level (formal, informal and *ad hoc* control). He concludes that even if control in practice was more intermittent than in theory, it was still profound, justifying the use of the term "total institution" to describe St Gall. Having established the main mechanisms of internal surveillance

2. Erving Goffman, *Asylums: essays on the social situation of mental patients and other inmates* (Harmondsworth 1968) p. 17.

3. The candidate goes far in disclaiming voluntary entry, and more generally the devotional character of monastic life, as an expression of a monastic self-understanding, which in no way contradicts institutional coercion. A division between staff and inmates applies to monasteries in that they were led by abbots, supplemented by several other leaders and in big monasteries by a whole "elite". But whereas this divide structures Goffman's book on total institution, it is relatively seldom mentioned by the candidate, and when utilized, it is with somewhat different content in the different articles.

at St Gall, the three subsequent articles focus on dislocations – conflicts and tensions – within this system, not in order to obliterate it, but because it is through an analysis of such dislocations that the power of the normal functioning of the system emerges most clearly.

The next article focuses on the "possibilities of personhood" for monks, using Goffman's theory of roles in modern society as a point of departure. Roles offer opportunities for scope of action but also serve to limit action. How did the monk manoeuvre in this field? The case is simple in theory. In the rule of St Benedict, a monk is envisioned as having some kind of inner essence with a corresponding outer surface or appearance, and the monastery is conceived of as a refuge enclosed from the outside world. However, reality is more complex because of the incomplete nature of the boundary between the inner and outer sphere. On the one hand, transgressions are the product of emergencies, of contingencies and accidents where solutions have to be negotiated. On the other hand, interaction with the outside world was vital to the functioning of the monasteries themselves, as they were dependent on preserving a good reputation in the outside world in order to attract benefactors and gifts. This points towards a dynamic relationship between monasteries and the outside world and a flexible role for the monk.

The third article is a micro-study of how deviation is created and how deviants are persecuted, using the story of the inspector Sandrat as a concrete case. This fascinating story concerns an inspector who arrived at St Gall and by various measures lost his authority and ended up being viewed as a deviant, by others as well as by himself. In Goffman's terms, it demonstrates that identity is not something that a person "has" or "possesses", but that it is created in interaction with surrounding groups. In a total institution, both the strength and intensity of this process become very strong, as there are no "control mechanisms" for countering the pressure from the "in"-group. The result is the exclusion and persecution of the deviant, and the confirmation and strengthening of the group identity. The case also illustrates that it is by studying deviation that mechanisms of social control and conformity are most clearly revealed.

The final article takes us back to the uneasy relationship between the monastery and the outside world, where the threat of making public an internal conflict provides much of the dynamics of internal struggles. The conflicts arose when abbots used their power in a way that aroused suspicion and resistance within the monastery. Whereas elder monks adopted a pragmatic attitude, arguing that conflicts should be kept at an oral level and that they should be resolved within the confines of the cloister, younger monks rather wanted to confront the abbots more directly and did not hesitate to put their grudges in writing, thus lifting the conflict beyond the monastic

walls. A main conclusion from this article is that a monastery always has to be considered against some "outside" entity. The candidate uses this as a point of departure for discussing the philosopher Jürgen Habermas's concept of "Offentlichkeit", as well as the question of orality and literacy. The thesis ends with a short conclusion, summarizing the main findings of the articles, and pointing to the lack of focus on administrative, economic and theological themes in the thesis.

As the thesis consists of separate articles, it does not form one uniform entity in the same way as a monograph would do. This necessarily results in some overlapping and some gaps, and because the articles have been written at different stages, they reflect the progression in the understanding of the author. This is an unusual form for historians. Yet, this organization as "work in progress" fits with the candidate's constructivist conception of history, and it reflects and illuminates both the research process and the layers or arrays of structures in St Gall.

Considering that this is a thesis in history, it is more strongly oriented towards theory than is usual. Proportionately less attention is devoted to primary sources. The chronicle of St Gall by Ekkehard IV from around 1050 constitutes the main source for the study. The candidate's epistemological position is that there is no alternative to theory, and that theory and empirical data cannot be seen in isolation from one another, as they are mutually dependent (p. 16f.). Yet, because the prime concern of the historian is with the past, we want the theory to illuminate the past, not the past to illuminate the theory. The crucial question to be asked of theory is therefore: Does it take us any further? What do we gain from applying the concept of "total institution" to a medieval monastery?

Goffman uses monasteries as one type of total institution in *Asylums*, though it is mentioned mostly in passing and his main source is the rule of St Benedict. The rule fits well into the definition of a total institution, as it largely set out to create an institution with rigid internal routines, sealed off from the outside world. But why then take all the trouble to apply this concept when we already have the rule of St Benedict? Compared to the concept of total institution, the rule has the advantage of being influential in the Middle Ages, and of being continually elaborated (for instance in Benedict of Aniane's reforms in the 810's, and the Cluniac reform of the following century). The candidate criticizes the tendency to equate monastic practice with the rule (p. 23). But even if a concept involves another type of distance to the topic than a law or regulation, the same danger exists that a concept directs our research and therefore creates blind spots. Both the rule and the concept of "total institution" place emphasis on the ideal norms at the

expense of practice. The candidate does indeed pay attention to the "shortcomings" of monasteries as total institutions in practice. Yet, if practice is so different from the ideal type, why then devote so much space and time to the ideal? Moreover, whereas the focus on practice certainly qualified the concept of total institution, it happens mostly in a negative way, by stating what is was *not*. The monastery was *not* completely regulated internally, and it was *not* totally isolated from the outside world.

The monastery as a total institution is largely confined and isolated from the outside world, and thereby distinctly different from it. This is how the monastery is depicted in Foucault's *Discipline and punish*, where it is the creed of the "modern" disciplining institutions like prisons, military camps, schools etc. It is also in line with the candidate's aim of using sociological theory in order to illuminate similarities with past humans and historical conditions (p. 17). A disadvantage of this approach is that the monastery tends to emerge as alien to its contemporary world, and its interaction with the surroundings as departing from the ideal monastic condition of total enclosure. What if instead of presupposing that monasteries are institutions which are isolated and radically different from its environments we take the opposite stance and ask how monasteries are embedded in their environments? Then institutions are viewed as integrated parts of a wider world, and interaction is the normal case – not a "deviation" from an isolated point of departure.⁴

This study could be called micro-history, in that the focus is very specific and limited in quantity but deep in quality. How can St Gall be situated in a wider context? On the one hand, the candidate adopts a modest position on the representativeness of *Casus sancti Galli*, arguing that there are few reasons to suppose that this investigation should be typical of broader themes, as St Gall was too large and too closely attached to the Imperial court to be considered representative of monasteries in general, and because its unique sources and amount of previous research place it in a league of its own (p. 48f.). Nevertheless, the candidate holds that a micro-analysis of *Casus sancti Galli* can shed light on a variety of broader topics. Partly, monasteries with a multitude of sources can shed light on monasteries which are less endowed with sources, and in part large monasteries like St Gall may illuminate processes common to all monasteries, because of their central role in power networks, and because density of power and control co-varies with size (p. 49f.). Both these questions – argumentation "ex silentio" and the argument that "size matters" – are open to question.

The candidate also argues that *Casus* can throw light on broader pro-

4. This would be more in line with an anthropological approach à la Mauss. Another related theory to this approach is Pierre Bourdieu's influential theory on practice, which is briefly mentioned by the candidate.

cesses through two methodological assumptions: the possibility of "reading against the grain", and the primary source's "exemplary" function. The former method, inspired by Jacques Derrida, claims that it is possible to get beyond authorial intention and explicit ideology, because an author cannot command the language he uses in full (p. 44). The notion of "exemplary" function refers to Foucault and is based on an argument that extraordinary cases should not be interpreted as singular moments without any inferential power, but to the contrary as incidents revealing and bringing to the fore processes that are normally hidden (p. 47, 50). Both premises are highly interesting but not unproblematic. Does this mean that "any" example is representative, so that it is permissible to skip all the intermediary levels between examples and general trends when discussing representativeness? And how are we to delimit proper context in a micro-historical study?

It is unusual to read a thesis on eleventh century monasticism without virtually any references to Cluny. This is a relief because it challenges our expectations, but it is also problematic because the broader monastic development is rarely touched upon by the candidate. The result is that St Gall appears as a rather isolated case. Heinrich Fichtenau calls St Gall a conservative monastery, relatively little influenced by Cluny, as was the case in many of the eastern provinces of the former Carolingian empire, where Ottonian and later Salian emperors had a much tighter grip on monasteries than was the case in the western areas.⁵ On the other hand, as one of the biggest monasteries east of the Rhine, St Gall together with monasteries like Reichenau and Fulda were among the most prestigious, and as such could be expected to be in the forefront of reform. More concretely, the famous plan of St Gall from the early ninth century attests to an aim to create an ideal monastery in accordance with Carolingian standards. This plan says a lot about the ideals of the reformers, and could have been used as a point of departure for the practical analysis.

When Ekkehard wrote in the 1050's, the imperial power was still strong, and largely in control of the monasteries, often called the *Eigenkirche*-system. St Gall played an important role for the emperors, both in military campaigns and as a central node on the emperor's itinerary. The monastic interaction with secular powers could have been developed further in this study, for instance if the political sphere had been enlarged to include the monastery in imperial politics, in which negotiations formed a principal part of the game.⁶

5. Heinrich Fichtenau, *Living in the tenth century: mentalities and social orders* (Chicago & London 1991) p. 261. In these areas, the Gorze reform played a more central role.

6. The principal scholar on this field in the last decades has been Gerd Althoff. Considering the weight that the candidate places on involuntary entry, it is also somewhat surprising that

Several historians have studied the interaction between monasteries and their surroundings. One of the best examples is Barbara Rosenwein's *Being the neighbor of Saint Peter* (Ithaca, NY & London 1989), in which she considers the landed property of Cluny to be part of an intense local and regional network. Here the monastery is set in a "total" context, where landownership concerns power and prestige, also in religious terms (cf. Cluny's protector St Peter). Cluny needed protectors, but so did everyone else. St Gall was situated within a society with a somewhat more effective central ruler, but as it was lavishly endowed with landed property, it had to interact with its local neighbours in much the same way as Cluny in order to secure its possessions.

The candidate is clear about the shortcomings of monastic surveillance and discipline, but hardly discusses the tendencies towards discipline in society at large. Robert I. Moore in *The formation of a persecuting society* (Oxford 1987) asks the fundamental question why heresy became a big problem from the twelfth century onwards. He links the tendency to look for heretics with the more general thinking on orthodoxy and its necessary counterpart: the sensitivity to deviance and deviants – those who did not fit in. It is possible to link this more directly to monastic development, in that the Benedictines developed an ever more organized form and content of dogma. Stephen Patzold draws attention to the increasing totalizing tendency of monasteries in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.⁷ It would have been interesting to know more from the St Gall sources about possible precursors of such developments.

An opponent's duty is to identify and unravel weak points and blind spots. This can often result in an impression that the work in question is of little value. This would be a misleading conclusion in this instance. Wojtek Jezierski breaks with the expectation that a thesis should be dry and monotonous. It is rare to read such an enjoyable and stimulating thesis in history as this one. Partly this has to do with the article form, but it is also related to content and approach. The candidate is well versed in theory and has an advanced mode of reasoning. Wojtek Jezierski is a model for how historians should not only collect data but also think and be good thinkers. More specifically, by applying sociological theory to historical problems, he provides a good example of how interdisciplinary research can be done. This thesis will be of interest not only to historians, but also to sociologists, anthropologists, theologians and philosophers.

he does not discuss concrete entries of child oblates and younger aristocratic sons into St Gall, although these have been studied by Mayke de Jong.

7. Steffen Patzold, *Konflikte im Kloster: Studien zu Auseinandersetzungen in monastischen Gemeinschaften des ottonisch-salischen Reichs* (Husum 2001).