WHEN IS A MONASTERY NOT A MONASTERY?

BY

A RETIRED FELLOW OF THE SOCIETY OF ANTIQUARIES OF SCOTLAND

WHEN IS A MONASTERY NOT A MONASTERY?

Abstract

From the earliest of times, religious communities were referred to in Latin texts as *monasteria*. The reason for this is very simple – there was no alternative, at least, not so far as many of the scribes of the day were concerned. Their grasp of Latin was insecure at best and they were often working in dreadful conditions.

However, it is a fact that today, many of the most educated and erudite of writers continue to use the word *monastery* as a white-wash with which to cover every ecclesiastical possibility, and this is a carelessness that militates against professionalism. This short paper addresses this situation and encourages professionals of all casts to consider, where appropriate, the use of a more appropriate term – the *muinntir*.

Argument

After listening to an excellent presentation given by Anne Crone, of AOC Archaeology, to the north-east section of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, in which she described the programme of excavations at the 'monastery' of *Auldhame*, I was taken back to considering the question posed in the title: a question which I first struggled with a number of years ago whilst researching the first minster churches of Mercia.

Some scholars would say that this problem, which centres round the use of the word *monastery*, can be traced back at least to the time of Bede if not to the very doorstep of the Venerable man himself. But, if there was any sin of error committed on his part, it has surely been absolved by his immense contribution to our understanding of the history of these isles. Bede died on the evening of 25 May 735, after First Vespers of the Feast of the Ascension. He died as he had lived, a devoted son of his community at Jarrow. As such, his knowledge of the history of the north-east was particularly finely honed.

In early Latin writings, such as those of Bede, one regularly encounters the term *monasterium* in relation to an early centre, or site, of Christianity. However, for the modern reader there is an understandable temptation to equate *monasterium* with *monastery*, which word necessarily brings with it a whole collection of 'baggage' – cloisters, vast endowments, busy scriptoria,

schools, etc., much in keeping with great medieval houses such as those of Durham, Reading and Glastonbury. But John Blair reminded us that, "the most intractable problem is that of terminology and personnel."[1] The use of certain terms can very easily lead to the adoption of pre-conceived ideas which may be completely inappropriate when applied to a particular situation. Blair continued by observing that, "in Anglo-Saxon England, use of the word *Monasterium* ranged from monasteries in the strict sense, observing a version of the Benedictine rule, through mixed communities ruled by royal abbesses, to groups of secular clerks pure and simple."[2] This is not just a matter of semantics. As professionals, we are charged with using language both intelligently and accurately – a battalion is not a company; a battleship is not a destroyer.

Also, as Eric Cambridge argues, "there is an important functional difference in principle between a church whose *raison d'être* is to provide for the pastoral needs of a lay population … and one whose prime purpose is to accommodate the liturgical requirements of a community which has come into being as a result of a desire to live according to a monastic rule."[3] The former is often now called a (lesser) *Minster Church* whereas the latter is what most people would recognise as a *monastery*. They are very different entities, but, as we have already noted, both are regularly referred to in old writings using the same word - *monasterium.*

Part of Cambridge's thesis is that whereas the 'true' monasteries – those with stone buildings and sculpture - can be clearly distinguished amongst archaeological remains, the 'pastoral' lay communities have left very little in the way of material remains. My argument is that most of these first Christian communities are quite indistinguishable from early, purely secular, settlements. Often of great antiquity, they sometimes had an associated embryonic 'parish' church and churchyard within them but, to the archaeologist's trowel, they are all but invisible.

The common model in early Anglo-Saxon England (e.g. *Diuma's* mid-seventh century mission to the Mercians) was for 'minster' churches to serve a group of 'satellite' churches (many of them *field churches*). These minster churches appear in the historical record as *matrix ecclesia* and are also regularly called *monasteria* in old texts. In Scotland, it would appear that, because of the geography of vast stretches of the country, communities of the Early Church were located within tribal centres. Here then, and particularly in the Highlands,

---

[1] Blair 1988, 36.
[2] Ibid.
[3] Cambridge 1984, 65-68.

because of their isolation, any system of minster churches with associated satellites, was only very rarely possible.

The fundamental argument here is that the term *monasterium*, if translated (as it often is) as *monastery*, is utterly inappropriate when relating to many settlements of the Early Church in Scotland.

In the report on the Auldhame excavations, Alex Wolf, referring to Colmán Etchingham's work, hints at the *para-monastic* nature of such an early community.[4] The dating information indicates that *Phase 1a* of the settlement spans a period c. AD 650-1000.[5] Necessarily, the foundation must have taken place c.650. This is well before the time when it is generally accepted that the *parish structure* was being established in the Carolingian world – the accepted date for this being c. AD 800.[6] Blair writes of "the evident concern of seventh-century kings not only to endow the church but to found, as quickly as possible, a network of minsters spreading across their kingdoms."[7] He also reminds us that in AD654, King *Osuiu* of Northumbria, vowed, before battle, "to found twelve small *monasteria*, six in Bernicia and six in Deira, each endowed with ten hides."[8] This he did as a thank-offering for his victory c.655 against the dreaded King *Penda*, (in the face of the treachery of his own son *Æthelwald*). The dates and the rough correspondence of the size of the estate – 10 hides (roughly 1000 acres) – might lead us to suspect that Auldhame was one of these small monasteries which were founded by Osuiu. This was in the same era that St Diuma, a 'Scot', was sent by King Osuiu to convert the Mercians and, although it is beyond the scope of this paper, the *modus operandi* adopted by this product of the school of *Hy* (Iona) when he arrived in Mercia, is illuminating when it is compared to the life of the early church in Northumbria, of which Auldhame was a part. Wolfe uses the term *para-monastic* to describe this early Christian community, but this is awkward and does not convey any intrinsic meaning. It does not give us any insight into the life of the community.

In the absence of a more appropriate name, I would argue that the term *muinntir*, as used by Archibald Scott and others, is much more suitable and that historians, and (perhaps especially) archaeologists, working in the field should discard the terms *monastery* or *monastic* in situations where they might be inappropriate and/or misleading.

---

[4] Crone and Hindmarch 2016, 169.
[5] Ibid., 44-45.
[6] Reynolds 1984, .81-2.
[7] Blair 1988, 38.
[8] Bede HE, III, 24.

The term *muinntir* has an ancient pedigree and is the name used, by preference, in many native Gaelic/Celtic contexts.[9]

I give the final word in this to one who could speak from an extensive understanding of the language. James Robertson, a Gaelic speaker who had been brought up with the language as his 'mother tongue', used the phrase

<div align="center">

MUINNTIR A' BHRÀIGH

(Folk of the Braes)

</div>

to describe the people of *Bhràigh Rannoch* (Braes of Rannoch) where he had spent his childhood.[10] This idea of 'folk' has an implicit component of 'family', and a powerful sense of 'community', which not only suits it to the ancient Christian communities but gives an added dimension to the nature of the relationships within them.

So, not only is *muinntir* a better fit, but it carries with it a deeper sense of the human relationships to be found within a community. As a bonus, it also gives an appropriate place to the *abb* of the community as 'the father of his family' rather than creating the utter confusion which results from trying to force the title of *abbot* or *prior* on to an essentially Gallo-Christian society.

Of course, this hypothesis is particularly suitable in Scotland where the concept of the *clan* as a *family* became such a fundamental part of highland life. The chief's responsibilities were simple – to be the father of his clan – his family (*tuath*). This was not a hierarchical power structure – it was, instead, a family structure involving the authority (not power) of a father-figure. The individuals who were part of the *family* belonged to it by choice and had the right to renounce and transfer their allegiance to another *family* (clan). In the ecclesiastical sense, this would mean that the organization to be found within a *muinntir* would be far removed from any monastic rule which requires *continuity* and *obedience*. Indeed, this early approach to community living is seen by some to be a mirror-image of Christianity's relationship with the "Father God".

Conclusion

It is my firm belief that this term – *muinntir* – is much more appropriate and has the potential to create a synergy that can maintain the essential difference between the 'lay' communities of the Early Church and the 'monastic (regular)' communities of establishments such as

---

[9] Scott 1918, 1; 24; 32; 78.
[10] TGSI, Vol. 51 (1978-80), 222.

Jarrow, Whitby and, of course, Durham. Is the time now right to adopt the use of *muinntir* where appropriate? I believe it is and I would call on all professionals to exercise a greater measure of care in their writings. Let *monastery* be reserved for those establishments founded after the tradition of a 'rule', such as that of St Benedict of Nursia. But when treading through the remains of such sites as Applecross, Auldhame, Hy, Unthank, Congash and, dare I say Portmahomack, let us respect their 'insular' roots and call them *muinntirs*.

Cushnie inter montes.   PDF

September 2019

BIBLIOGRAPHY

The Ecclesiastical History of the English People [Bede HE.], eds J. McClure and R. Collins 2008. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Blair, J. 1988 "Minster Churches in the Landscape" in *Anglo-Saxon Settlements*, ed. D. Hooke. Oxford: Blackwell.

Cambridge, E. 1984 *The Early Church in the County of Durham: a reassessment*. Journal of the British Archaeological Association, 137 (1984), 65-68.

Crone, A. and E. Hindmarch. 2016 *Living and Dying at Auldhame: the excavation of an Anglian Monastic Settlement and Medieval Parish Church.* Edinburgh: Society of Antiquaries of Scotland.

Reynolds, S. 1984 *Kingdoms and Communities in Western Europe, 900 – 1300*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Scott, A.B. 1918 *The Pictish Nation: Its People and its Church*. Edinburgh: T.N. Fowlis.

Journals

The Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness [TGSI] Vol. 51, (1978-80).