

## CLIL LESSON: Monasteries as centres of prayer and learning in the early middle ages

### The beginning of monasticism

The monastic way of life began in countries to the east of the Mediterranean Sea in the 4th century. The first type of monasticism was when a solitary person, called a hermit, would go away from society to live in a cave or in the desert, to be closer to God. This is called *eremitic monasticism*. The second type was when a group of people would join in a community to worship God. This is called *coenobitic monasticism*.



### The monasteries as centres of learning

Monasteries were peaceful, **self-sufficient** communities of monks. They were usually built away from a city or town, and were surrounded by walls. It was easier to defend a monastery because of these facts. In the beginning, they were places for prayer and meditation for people who wanted to dedicate themselves to God. Over time, monasteries began to provide services, such as caring for the sick in a hospital, looking after the poor, and teaching boys and young men. They also became important centres of culture and civilization.

A monastery was firstly a centre of prayer and of peace. However, because the community of monks had to be self-sufficient, various economic activities happened within the monastery, such as agriculture. The most important monasteries became the centre of economic life for the towns around them.

#### Glossary

Self-sufficient – produces everything needed to live life

Monasticism – the spreading of the monastic way of life

A novice – a person who is training to be a monk or a nun

A scribe – a monk who copied the old books by hand.



## The Rule of St Benedict, and how it spread

In the west, **monasticism** began to spread thanks to Saint Benedict of Nursia. In 529 he founded the monastery of Montecassino, in central Italy. He then wrote a book which explained the way a monk or nun should live in a monastery. This book is called “The Rule of St Benedict.” In Latin, it was called *Regula Benedicti*. All monks who wanted to stay at Montecassino had to obey those rules.

The *Regula Benedicti* was based on the criteria ‘ora ed labora’ – pray and work. The monks’ day was divided between praying, intellectual work, and physical work. Before this, manual labour was thought of as being for slaves. Now hard work became a Christian virtue.

## The monks save ancient culture

Benedictine monasteries were centres of learning, and of culture. In fact, they often had a library, in which they kept the books for the **novices** – the future monks. They did not only have religious books. The abbots wanted to save all books by great writers from ancient Greek and Rome, like Socrates, Cicero, and Terenzio.

To save the books, the monks copied them in a scriptorium. In a monastery, many **scribes** copied the books by hand, and decorated them beautifully. These are called “Illuminated Manuscripts.” In this way, the Benedictine monks saved and passed on the ancient classical culture, which would have been lost to the barbarians otherwise.



Where all your questions answered? \_\_\_\_\_

What did you learn from the text? \_\_\_\_\_

What questions do you still have? \_\_\_\_\_

### Sources of images:

Unknown miniaturist, Brussels Royal Library, MS 9278, fol. 10r [Public domain], <a href="https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Jean\_Mi%C3%A9lot,\_Brussels.jpg">via Wikimedia Commons</a>

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