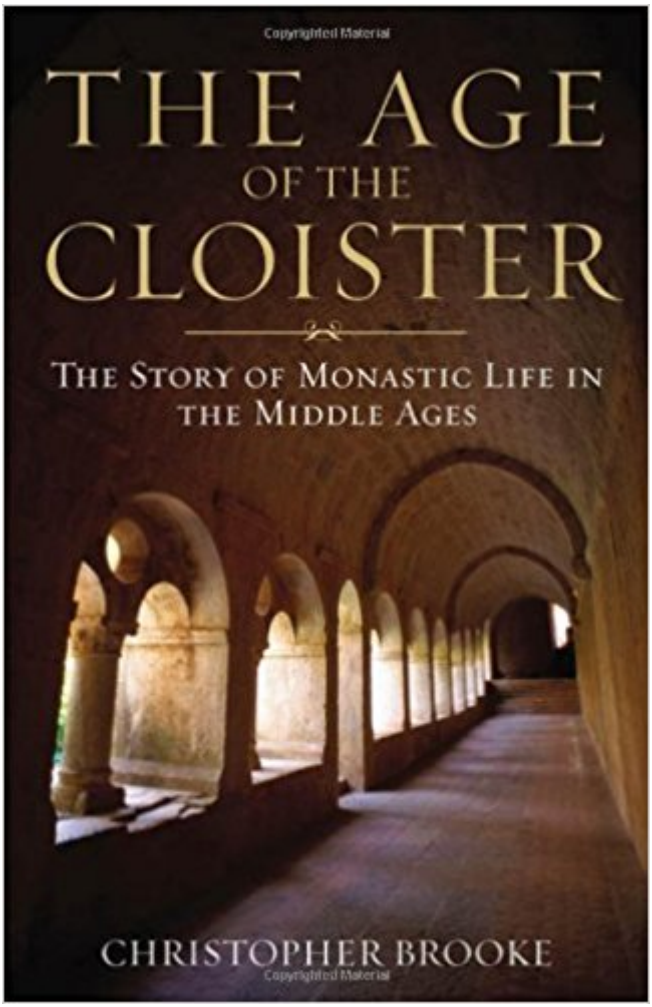
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The Age Of The Cloister: The Story Of Monastic Life In The Middle Ages



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Synopsis

The birth and flowering of monastic life and its impact on seekers today This comprehensive study of medieval monasteries offers a fascinating history of everyday monastic life and the literature, society, economy and culture of the Middle Ages. Brooke’s sweeping narrative offers a compelling look at monastic life for today’s spiritual seekers and is well suited as a travel companion to many European destinations. This meticulously researched book offers: * everyday monastic life in exquisite detail, from the food served to the timing of prayers, to the interdependence between the monasteries and the local populace. *special attention to the 12th-century renaissance, a time of revitalizing ideas, when every village in Western Europe was within a day’s pilgrimage of an abbey, monastery, or convent. * an exploration of the extraordinary movement of the human spirit at its peak, through its manuscripts, art, sculpture, and architecture. * the importance of the monastic world, its ideas and ideals, to the rise of Western civilization.

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Customer Reviews

A learned, comprehensive, and readable text covering all aspects of monastic life in the central Middle Ages. -- Giles Constable, Professor Em., Institute for Advanced Study, PrincetonAll those interested in monastic history will be well instructed by The Age of the Cloister. -- John R. Sommerfeldt, Professor of History, University of DallasIt tells the fascinating story of those who fled the world while remaining so constructively engaged with it. -- Louis Dupre, T. Lawrason Riggs Professor Emeritus, Yale UniversityThis beautiful book reads like a historical commentary on Wim

Swaan’s magnificent photographs of medieval monasteries. --Louis DuprÃƒÂ© , Yale University

Christopher Brooke, the former Dixie Professor of Ecclesiastical History at Cambridge University and a life fellow of Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge, is a leading scholar of medieval history. A fellow of the British Academy and corresponding fellow of the Medieval Academy of America, he has written and edited numerous books.

Covers a wide range of monastic disciplines across many eras, many borders, and many historical periods.

Excellent book on the history of monasticism. Includes information about specific monasteries as well as key players/figured in the movement.

The author weaves a rich tapestry of monastic life in the Middle Ages that brings to life these mysterious and spiritual religious orders.

Not to doubletap what others have said, but this is an incredible book for the budding medieval scholar or even the interested Catholic. Most medieval scholars usually hop skip over monasticism and only focus on the larger issues at play, however The Age of the Cloister blows away the cobwebs and breaks "vows of silence," to bring the reader back into the monastery. One intersting note is, when most refer to the Cluniac and Gregorian reform movements of the period, Hirsau abbey in Germany is rarely mentioned, not here though. The author has done intense scholarship on Abbot William of Hirsau, giving him the light of day he deserves.

New Book

You should read this book if you are:1. A Christian2. Interested in medieval history3. Interested in Christian Church history4. Interested in history5. Interested in the birth of Christian monasticism6. Interested in monasticismAnd that isn’t an exhaustive list. Just a wonderful book that seems to this layman to have been written with a combination of frankness, succinctness, and flat out brilliantness that you only get from a long time expert in the field. Highly recommended. Not a 5 due to minor issues that I can’t remember right now.

First, a few samples:"The razors for shaving were kept by one of the monks under the chamberlain’s jurisdiction, locked in a box in the cloister near the door to the dormitory. At the appointed time he organized a group of monks in two rows in the cloister, one row to shave, the other to be shaven, and the task was performed to the accompaniment of a psalm." (79)"`As to our baths,’" says a chronicler, "`there is not much that we can say, for we only bath twice a year, before Christmas and before Easter.’" (79)"Once a month or so all the monks had a blood-letting and a holiday, when they could enjoy the less arduous, more relaxed routine of the infirmary, where meat might be eaten and a briefer round of services attended." (80)"In every large community the fishponds were vital, providing some relief from the salt fish that seems to have played a heavy role in the monastic diet." (81)Brooke, an emeritus Cambridge University professor and leading medieval scholar, gives us a sympathetic portrait of monasticism largely between 1000 and 1300, prefaced by a basic narrative of the history of monasticism from its roots in Egypt through the founding of Cluny around 900, and concluding with an epilogue moving the narrative beyond 1300.I appreciated not only Brooke’s clearly careful scholarship, but also his affinity for his subject. The Age of the Cloister provides a welcome antidote, for example, to William Manchester’s World Lit Only by Fire: The Medieval Mind and the Renaissance: Portrait of an Age. The latter book uses the time-honored technique of telling a ripping yarn and along the way confirming readers’ worst prejudices about the history of the church. As of this writing, it sat at #720 on the sales rankings, while Brooke’s beautifully and overall accurately written book sat at #72,540. Yet another sign of the collapse of Western civilization.Despite his essential sympathy with them, Brooke does not always spare the warts and flaws of his subjects. He acknowledges, for example, that both the strength and the weakness of Benedict’s Rule lie in his "vision of the abbot, who is assumed to be both a notable spiritual director and a master in handling human relations." Brooke concludes succinctly, "Such men are rare." (49) Bernard of Clairvaux, too, comes in for appropriate critique on his less-than-charitable treatment of various opponents.Along the way, Brooke corrects stereotypes:The writings of the early monastics were full, above all, of "pleas for moderation."Contrary to popular opinion, "learning never became a normal characteristic of any medieval religious order or of any large group of monasteries." However, the monasteries did tend to have some of the best libraries in the West, thus "when men of a scholarly turn of mind grew up in the cloister, they could thus sometimes find the food they needed to hand." (52)"The attack on worldly distraction in Cassian or Bernard’s Puritanism was not coupled with distrust of all human emotions and values. In the most fundamental sense of the term, in their interest and belief in human capacity and human emotions, both were humanists." (42)Yet though perhaps "humanists"

in this sense, despite their program of "heroic effort," the monastic teachers were no Pelagians. They "saw the whole process of man’s perfectibility within the economy of divine grace." (43)The book is also full of important distinctions: the Benedictine traditions such as that at Cluny were not properly speaking "orders," as the mother houses did not hold much legislative or executive authority over their "daughters" (by these lights, the Franciscans and Dominicans were really the first true monastic orders). Though often muddled, the terms "monk," "friar," and "canon" refer to three different realities: The monk is a cloistered individual, almost always in the Benedictine tradition; the friar a non-cloistered, mendicant member of a religious order; the canon a secular (that is non-cloistered, parish) priest who nonetheless lives a "regular" life--that is, lives according to a rule.The fourth chapter, "Life, Work and Prayer," is alone worth the price of admission. Here we get a clear sense of the monastic routine, in which "from soon after midnight till late in the evening the bell rang every hour or two to summon the monks to the office." We confidently list Matins, Laud, Prime, Terce, None, Vespers, and Compline as "the monastic hours," but Brooke tells us that though medievals had hourglasses and sundials, we don’t know to what extent they used them, and it is fairly clear that those offices were rung not on exact clock-hours, but simply at fairly regular intervals. (70-71)There is much more to discover in this book. Chapter 6 shows us how cloister and world interacted. Chapter 7 details the monastic impact on that intellectual and cultural revival now commonly called "the twelfth-century renaissance." Chapter 8 opens to us a monastic tradition that existed in parallel with the Benedictine one of the cloistered monks: the life of the priestly canons under variations on a Rule originating from Augustine. Chapter 9 is dedicated to the Cistercians, chapter 10 to the crusading religious knights (e.g. the Templars), 11 to the women who headed their own monastic houses ("abbesses" and "prioresses"), and 12 to the rise of the Premonstratensian and Franciscan orders.Throughout, Brooke shows us fascinating ways in which the plans and ruins of monastic buildings, when taken together with key texts, illuminate many aspects of the monastic life. He brings this material together with particular clarity and insight in the book’s third part, which begins with tours of "three of the most evocative monastic sites in Europe" (235): Fountains Abbey in Yorkshire, England; Mont Saint-Michel in France; and Sant’ Ambrogio, Milan. He concludes this section with a survey of the "monastic map of Europe" as it stood in 1300 and an epilogue tracing monastic developments since that year.*The Age of the Cloister had two earlier incarnations: as The Monastic World, 1000-1300 in 1974 and as Monasteries of the World 1000-1300 in 1982. In all three versions, it is graced by plates of monastery floor plans and photographs of monasteries by Wim Swaan. This newest edition contains some updates (including, helpfully, new sources in the bibliographic notes section) and an introduction covering advances in monastic history since the first

edition.[...]

Brooke clearly has a strong grasp of his subject, as one would expect from a professor at Cambridge who's studied this field all his life. I appreciated his thorough overview of the field; a quick glance at the bibliography and notes shows just how well-researched this book is.However, I had two big caveats:1) I'm about halfway through, and so far Brooke seems to assume a certain level of base knowledge on the part of the reader. The first few chapters (which is as far as I've read yet) provide a basic historical overview of the developments of monasticism, but in such a way that Brooke doesn't manage to put much flesh on the bones of history. Know what differentiates the French Cluniacs from the German monks in the spirit of Gorze? If you do, great: Brooke will help you trace the way each type of monasticism impacted later European history. If you don't understand the distinction already, though, good luck. What I was hoping for was some understanding of how the monks' lives might have differedÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â •what might it have been like to live in a Cluniac house vs. a Gorze house vs. one in, say, Northumbria or Sussex? What might have drawn monastics to one of these orders over the others? Brooke doesn't provide that kind of detail.2) AndÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â •this is my biggest problem with Brooke's scholarshipÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â •he purports to be writing a book about "the story of monastic life in the Middle Ages," as per the subtitle. But despite what one might hope, Brooke's book doesn't address both monks and nuns equally. I've read the first four chapters, and the thrust so far is primarily about monks and the male monastic experience; nuns and the female religious experience are addressed not as an integral part of the text but as asides. Brooke includes one chapter "On Abbesses and Prioresses," but the other fourteen chapters are more or less explicitly about men. Even where he might have included examples drawn from women's communitiesÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â •such as in the chapter on "Life, Work, and Prayer"ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â •he addresses himself nearly entirely towards men.So in conclusion: if you're looking for a fairly dry (if extremely well-written) book about the male monastic experience, this might work for you. If you are looking for a book that includes women in a more than casual way, or a book that gives you a sense of what these peoples' lives might have been like, look elsewhere.

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