

The monastic renaissance in late medieval England

For generations it has been almost an article of faith that the history of western monasticism in the Middle Ages describes an arc that rises to a period of remarkable creative strength between the eleventh and the thirteenth centuries and then falls sharply into a period of cultural decay that persisted from the fourteenth century to the Reformation. Research interest in forms of later monasticism in northern Europe has done little to displace this view since it has suggested that the locus of intellectual innovation and spiritual fervour was in movements outside of the monastic mainstream - for example, the *devotio moderna* of the Brethren of the Common Life - in which the influence of trends in the secular church, the universities and the culture of the laity outweighed the monastic tradition itself. The textual residue of monasteries of the later Middle Ages remain little studied; by contrast with those of the early and high Middle Ages the majority of original works surviving have not been the subject of critical editions. Yet under examination these manuscripts reveal patterns of intellectual life which in their energy and novelty are at least comparable with the better-known late medieval currents. This lecture will examine in particular the evidence from some of England's largest monastic communities - Benedictine, Cistercian and Augustinian - which points not only to a recovery of traditional features of monastic culture - *lectio divina*, scribal craft - but also the enthusiastic reception of new currents, not least the Latin classics propagated by humanists in Italy and France. The narrative of rise and fall must now be revised.