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Spaces for servants and *provendarii* in Early Medieval Monasteries. The example of the virtual monastery on the Plan of Saint Gall

Alfons Zettler
1 The general character and purpose of the Saint Gall Plan is still very much in discussion. Some authors maintained that the plan was the direct architectural outcome of the Aachen monastic reforms of 816/817, or even, that the plan was a copy of an official document of the court issued either by Charlemagne or Louis the Pious. Others have doubted a close connection to the Carolingian Court suggesting, the plan was a (paradigmatic) Benedictine vision of how a large abbey should be planned and built, or a vision of a new monastery at Saint Gall to be built by Abbot Gozbert and his successors. For the German scholar Wolfgang Braunfels the plan was in the first instance « a work of art of the highest order ». In 1979 Braunfels wrote:

« It draws upon old customs and serves old ideals. In styling it a, near utopian concept », we want to stress the fact that it is an architectural entity whose outer order most nearly reflects its inner order, and whose laws govern the aesthetic organization of even the smallest buildings and gardens. It was to result in an organism within which the Rule of Saint Benedict could be lived in the most rational manner. It was a self-contained and completely rationalized monastic entity. »

2 Let me consult, for another current interpretation, a popular student’s guide to art. It says: « Schematic plan for a monastery at Saint Gall, Switzerland, circa 819... The purpose of this plan for an ideal, self-sufficient Benedictine monastery was to separate the monks from the laity. » Thus, the Saint Gall plan still proves to be one of the most controversial and disputed sources to our knowledge of Early Medieval monasticism.

II

3 Apart from these general interpretations there is some specific historical data that must be kept in mind. The authors dedicated their work according to the literary conventions of the time to one Gozbert. This is in the letter of transmittal in the upper margin of the plan (fig. 1).
It has long been agreed that the name of Gozbert meant the abbot of Saint Gall (816-836). But there was another prominent monk Gozbert of Saint Gall in this period. The other Gozbert, the so-called younger Gozbert, is mentioned in some literary works and in the charters of Saint Gall during the period the plan was made. Walahfrid Strabo’s life of Saint Otmar, the first abbot of Saint Gall, was dedicated to the younger Gozbert, for example, and not to the abbot. Anyway, even if we could be in doubt about the identity of the person addressed in the letter of transmittal the plan was certainly made for the abbey of Saint Gall.

Where did the plan originate? We do not know the author by name. But the document was made without doubt by a team of learned monks in the abbey of Reichenau. This much is clear from the inscriptions. Both scribes who added the inscriptions to the drawing can be traced in Carolingian manuscripts of Reichenau (fig. 2).

One of the scribes has even been identified by name. It is the monk Reginbert – the man in charge of the scriptorium and the library of Reichenau in the 820s. Thus, we may conclude: the plan was made in a Carolingian abbey, Reichenau, only to be sent to another Carolingian monastery, Saint Gall. And it was made by a team of learned monks of one monastic institution for the authorities of another monastic institution. Why, then,
was this unique and intriguing document produced? Why would the authors choose this extraordinary form of rendering information about monastic planning and architecture? And besides this, it was much more common, during the early middle Ages, to give detailed descriptions of architecture rather than drawing a ground-plan. I think, for example, of the description of the basilica of Saint Martin of Tours and of the description of the basilica of Saint-Denis. Why would the authors create this « earliest preserved and most extraordinary visualization of a building complex produced in the middle Ages » – a unique document of its Age regarding both its form and its contents? The fact that the authors « completed » this very detailed and obvious drawing with almost 350 inscriptions makes it clear: The Saint Gall Plan was created as something like an « exemplum », or we might as well speak of a « scholarly puzzle ».

There is not much historical evidence, though, as to the particular occasion and motive for the composition of the plan. But we do know that the abbot and the brothers of Saint Gall decided to build a new abbey church sometime in the 820ies. In fact the building activities were started in 830. We also know that, in 829, the Carolingian prince Charles the Bald was officially introduced to his heritage, to the Regnum Alamanniae, which included the abbeys of Reichenau and Saint Gall. Obviously, the authors had been asked to provide Saint Gall with some ideas for the projected church, and political aspects seem to have been involved, too. Furthermore, we have to take into account that, at that time, Reichenau was a royal monastery whereas Saint Gall still belonged to the bishop of Constance. Thus, the particular historical coordinates point out another possible motive for the composition of such an extraordinary, king-size, plan. The authors presented their conception of a royal monastery to the congregation of Saint Gall, a concept apt for the future reign and, perhaps, the expected visits of their new king, Charles the Bald. This interpretation would also account for the somewhat over-sized royal palace in the lower part of the plan. Recent research has suggested that only large and influential royal monasteries, like Saint-Denis for example, would have disposed of a palatium or palace. The facilities in question are not called « palace » on the plan. The main building is described as « house that serves for the reception of guests ». But the indication of a hospice for pilgrims and paupers on the other side of the church and the fact that two other groups of buildings obviously belong to this guesthouse would certainly support our suggestion (fig. 3).
III

8 Additional data about the concept and purpose of the plan can be gathered by examining and analyzing the process of making it. The parchment, or vellum, on which the plan was drawn, consists of five pieces sewn to one another in a complicated sequence (fig. 4) 24.
And it is important to note that the drawing was started before all of the pieces had been put together. In fact, the draughtsman carved a preparatory drawing of the church into the central piece of vellum, and he added the ground-plan of the cloister before the other pieces were joined to it. More than thirty steps and phases of the complicated process of composing, drawing, and inscribing the plan have been recorded. I cannot go into further details here. For our purpose it must suffice to note that the plan was not drawn on the final version of the parchment consisting of five pieces of vellum (1,18 m by 0,78 m). There was a first version of the plan consisting of the central piece of vellum, depicting the abbey church and the adjacent cloister, and nothing else (fig. 5).
The second version of the plan was produced by adding two further pieces of parchment to the central piece. The church was prolonged, and a set of buildings was added around the cloister. And it is at this stage of the plan that we leave the production process and turn to another issue. The next step of the draughtsman would be to add some buildings next to the church and cloister, and also some single lines (fig. 6a).

Obviously, these lines were meant to indicate fences or walls, and they would subdivide the lay-out of the plan monastery into separate districts or precincts. A long line was drawn along one side of the church just to end in nothing. It belongs to the second stage of the plan (three pieces of vellum) because it ends at the former edge of the parchment.
This line was, as a matter of fact, not resumed and decently prolonged during the third and final phase of the composition. In the course of this line two other lines branch off, running to the actual edge of the plan. There are two inscriptions that make clear what the idea of these lines was: « The hall [the abbot’s house] is thus enclosed by fences. » And the other one says: « These fences enclose the endeavour of the learning youth » (fig. 6b and 6c).

**Fig. 6b – Saint Gall Plan. Lines indicating fences or walls on the left side of the church** (www.stgallplan.org/ ; 20.03.2014).

Similarly, two areas or districts are « fenced off » by lines on the other side of the abbey church. One of them joins the corner of the cloister and ends at the former edge of the plan in its second stage of composition (three pieces of vellum). The other line joins the refectory wall and ends at the edge of the actual plan (fig. 7).

**Fig. 6c – Saint Gall Plan. Lines indicating fences or walls on the left side of the church** (www.stgallplan.org/ ; 20.03.2014).

**Fig. 7 – Saint Gall Plan. Lines indicating fences or walls next to the cloister** (www.stgallplan.org/ ; 20.03.2014).

Even if there is no inscription in this case I would like to suggest, as a conclusion of analogy, that the lines in question were made to separate certain areas and districts in a similar way as do their equivalents on the other side of the church. For the moment, two
intermediate results may be noted: 1.) Probably there was neither an initial conception nor an initial vision of the plan as a whole. 2.) And, what is even more important in our context, in the second stage of making the plan (three pieces of parchment) the authors tried to subdivide the virtual monastery into several districts. The lines they drew for this purpose ended at the edges of the parchment, and the draughtsmen did not readopt them when they added two more pieces of vellum. Nevertheless, at first they intended to subdivide the collective and public spaces into different areas and sectors according to the different functions of these facilities in the organism of a Carolingian monastery. It is particularly this observation that must be kept in mind when we test the plan monastery for spaces for servants to the monks and *provandarii*.

### IV

14 At first I try to subdivide the drawing into a rough scheme of communal, collective, and public sectors. As communal space we may regard the cloister with some adjacent buildings in the centre of the plan and some portions of the abbey church (fig. 8).

Fig. 8 – Saint Gall Plan. Public spaces (shaded) (Zettler, Public, collective and communal spaces, p. 272-273).

15 The core of the virtual monastery was to be reserved for the monks. As a consequence, the inscriptions in this area do not mention guests, servants, and laymen. On the other hand: Even if servants and laymen are not explicitly excluded there by of the inscriptions we can be sure that the laity should not be admitted to these parts of the monastery. Cloister and abbey church are completely surrounded by collective and public spaces on the plan, or, in other words, by facilities and areas where the monks (or at least some of them) would regularly come in touch with laymen, with guests and servants of the
monastery. It seems to me that the authors of the plan took particular care arranging these facilities around the cloister in a most rational manner according to the respective functions of those facilities in monastic life. But there probably was another principle of arrangement. If we follow the different sectors and facilities clockwise around the church and cloister, beginning at the infirmary, there would be a gradual increase of the presence of laymen. Public spaces close the circle around the church and cloister, that is, facilities which were almost completely reserved for the laity, for pilgrims, paupers and the monastery’s guests. In my opinion, the starting point and arrival point of the circle or belt around the cloister may well have been, in the eyes of the authors, the abbot’s house.

I cannot go into much detail. Let me choose one example: the conglomeration of monastic facilities in the area around the infirmary (fig. 9).

Fig. 9 – Saint Gall Plan. Infirmary and « health services » (shaded) (Price, The Plan of St. Gall, p. 32).

The infirmary, the « house of the physicians » (with pharmacy and sick ward), the « house for bleeding » or blood-letting, the « kitchen and bath for the sick », and the medicinal herb garden – all these buildings and sites form, on the plan, the first unit of the circle of monastic facilities and sites around church and cloister. This unit is situated close to the communal spaces, next to church and cloister, and it was, in the case of the infirmary, designed very similar to it. The infirmary of the monks constitutes the core of this quarter of the plan monastery. It was an indispensable monastic institution, postulated in chapter 36 of Benedict’s Rule. « Before all things and above all things let care be taken of the sick », Benedict says at the beginning of this chapter. As a consequence, a separate cell should be prepared for the sick: « Quibus fratribus infirmis sit cella super se deputata et servitor, timens Deum et diligens et sollicitus. » Thus, the monastic infirmary and the institution of the infirmarius who is also mentioned on the plan, originate directly from the Rule. Benedict’s idea of the infirmary is a monastic cell, a
small monastery, in fact, supervised by a monk appointed to this office by the abbot. This concept does not include laymen as servants to the monks and medicinal personell like the physicians mentioned on the plan.

18 In the drawing, the *domus medicorum* and the herb garden are fenced off from the « house for bleeding » and the « bathroom and kitchen of the sick » by a line without inscription (fig. 10).

![Fig. 10 – Saint Gall Plan. Line indicating a fence or wall near the « domus medicorum » (www.stgallplan.org/; 20.03.2014).](image)

19 But the fence or wall could be passed by means of a passage. And it is, as I understand it, particularly this house that the physicians are supposed to work and to live in. Only in the case of blood-letting would they have to cross the line of the fence by the passageway to do their work in the « house for bleeding ». It is not quite clear, though, if the physicians in the virtual *domus medicorum* of the Plan would also be in charge of the patients and of the medical attendance to the sick monks in the *locus ualde infirmorum* (« the place for those who suffer from acute illness ») of the infirmary. Obviously, the medical staff in the virtual monastery on the plan would have disposed of a compound of their own, at any rate, a compound next to the infirmary but clearly separated from it. The *medici* would be laymen, in fact, and servants to the monks. There is no relationship of this body on the plan, and their fenced-off compound to Benedict’s Rule. Furthermore, the *Regula Benedicti* does not speak of, or even hint at, the regular scheduled bleeding of the monks that was largely practiced in early medieval monasteries. Thus, this practice was probably adopted by and by during the early Middle Ages, and I think the *medici* mentioned in connection with the *domus medicorum* on the plan were not physicians in the truest sense of the word. They would rather have been responsible, in the first instance, for the procedure of bleeding the monks. Additionally, it seems to be quite
obvious that they would have practiced medicine at their house, that is, in the domus medicorum, and not in the infirmary.

V

It is not possible here to go through all facilities in the circle around the cloister – like the « great collective workshop » or the « bake and brew house of the monks », etc. (fig. 7). On the whole, there would have been some fifty or even more laymen in the virtual monastery of the plan working as artisans, craftsmen, and servants for the monastic community. And we know that in large Carolingian abbeys the number of servants might as well have exceeded the number of the monks sometimes 46, whereas Benedict’s Rule has only one chapter – this is chapter 57 – on the possible presence of craftsmen (artifices) in the monastery. Those could be admitted into the monastery by the abbot, if necessary 47. But in another chapter of the Rule Benedict decreed that there should be water, a mill, a garden, and workshops inside the monastery, so that all the necessities of life could be produced and provided by the monks themselves – as I understand it – without requiring them to leave the monastery 48. In the virtual monastery on the plan all these facilities seem to be included to a certain extent, and the drawing and the inscriptions make clear that servants and craftsmen produced bread, beer, and other goods to be consumed by the monastic community 49. Thus, the authors of the plan did not connect this problem with chapter 48 of the Rule where Benedict prescribes that the monks must regularly accomplish manual labour 50. The virtual monks of the plan monastery would hardly have complied with the words, and the sense, of chapter 48.

VI

The Saint Gall Plan does not show the lay-out or the ground-plan of a specific Carolingian monastery, and the monastery depicted was not meant to be built at Saint Gall or elsewhere 51. It is, in fact, a virtual monastery or rather a vision of a large royal abbey conceived and set in a very particular political situation of the Regnum Alamannorum and the abbeys of Reichenau and Saint Gall in 829/830. The authors of the plan were learned Reichenau monks. On the one hand, they had their own monastery in the mind’s eye, as a prime example for an influential royal abbey, and they might well have known other large Frankish abbeys from their own experience. Their personal monastic and architectural knowledge and experience would have provided a first material basis for composing the plan. In fact, the drawing was executed according to the principles of contemporary geometrical designing. On the other hand, the concept of the plan was created, in the first instance, with Gozbert’s building project of a new abbey church at St. Gall in mind. The plan church has been directed to the specific needs of St. Gall. It is the core of the drawing, and it was the initial reason for the making of the plan. When the authors added the other monastic facilities around the church and cloister and the inscriptions, they turned their work into an « exemplum », into a learned puzzle. In the transmittal letter is suggested that Gozbert exercise his ingenuity with this « exemplum », having been depicted not for instruction but for him « alone to scrutinize ». A close examination of the infirmary and the « health services » section, for example, shows how much the conception of the Plan monastery owes to contemporary Carolingian monastic Life and practice. Belonging to the elites of Frankish society, the
monks would be entitled to dispose of a multitude of lay servants working and living in the areas around church and cloister. In accord with the general character and purpose of the Plan the authors provided various spaces for the servants to the monks, for craftsmen/provendarii and even for the laity who would visit the monastery. The draughtsman fenced off these areas from the inner space of the abbey consisting of church and cloister, and from the monastic infirmary, intending to keep the monks apart from the laity living in the monastery, i.e. servants and artisans, or visiting it, i.e. pilgrims and guests. Thus, the Saint Gall Plan seems to be a most important and challenging document in the context of our Conference here but a lot of work still needs to be done examining and understanding the presence of laymen in the plan monastery.

NOTES


35. Cf. supra n. 6.


43. W. HORN and E. BORN, The Plan of St. Gall..., ibid., t. 1, p. 315 and 321; for the inscriptions see t. 3, p. 59; W. BERSCHIN, Mittellateinische Studien..., ibid., p. 135.

44. Cf. W. HORN and E. BORN, The Plan of St. Gall..., ibid., t. 1, p. 314; for the inscriptions see t. 3, p. 58; W. BERSCHIN, Mittellateinische Studien..., ibid., p. 135.


50. « Otiositas inimica est animae, et ideo certis temporibus occupari debent frater in labore manuum, certis iterum horis in lectione divina... »; Benedicti Regula, c. 48 (De opera manuum cotidiana), ed. R. HANSLIK, p. 113.


RÉSUMÉS

Der St. Galler Klosterplan stellt ein großes frühmittelalterliches Benediktinerkloster vorwiegend im Grundriss dar. Nach allem was wir wissen, wurde die Tuschzeichnung auf Pergament (ca. 1.12 x 0.77m) in den Jahren zwischen 820 und 830 von einer Gruppe Reichenauer Mönche erstellt und an Abt Gozbert von St. Gallen übersandt. Sinn und Zweck des Plans sind nicht genau bekannt. Aber auch wenn niemals ein Kloster nach Maßgabe des Pergamentplans gebaut worden ist, kann die Plandarstellung doch auf der virtuellen und funktionalen Ebene gewissermaßen wie ein reales Kloster der karolingischen Periode betrachtet werden. Das geschieht in diesem Beitrag unter dem Aspekt des Raumes, oder der Räume, die für die unterschiedlichen Personengruppen in einer Abtei jener Zeit vorgesehen wurden. Hier geht es insbesondere darum, die verschiedenen Raumvorgaben im Plankloster im Hinblick auf ihre soziale Verortung bzw. ihren sozialen Stellenwert zu betrachten und die für die Laien, provendarii und Bedienstete der Mönche vorgesehenen Räume zu bestimmen und zu charakterisieren.

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