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## **MONASTIC LANDSCAPES: A NEW APPROACH TO COLUMBANIAN MONASTICISM**

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## Abstract

This contribution proposes different notions of “monastic landscapes” (geographic, political, textual, economic, spiritual) and discusses whether applying them to the monastic movement allegedly initiated by Columbanus may help us to refine or deconstruct the concept of “Columbanian monasticism.” Comparing evidence on monastic life in Gregory of Tours’ hagiographic and historiographic works with the depiction of monastic life in Jonas of Bobbio’s *Vita Columbani* shows that we can indeed identify a shift from a “landscape with monasteries” in sixth-century Merovingian Francia to a politically integrated “monastic landscape” in the seventh century. However, this does not mean that the fundamental shift was necessarily the result of the activities of the Irish monk Columbanus. An investigation of Jonas’ depiction of the spiritual and physical landscape around Columbanus’ main foundation Luxeuil shows the grade of continuity between monastic foundations in Gaul before Columbanus and the alleged center of a new “Columbanian” monastic movement.

### Keywords:

Jonas of Bobbio, Gregory of Tours, Columbanian monasticism, Merovingian Francia, Hagiography

## Resumen

Esta contribución propone diferentes nociones de “paisajes monásticos” (geográficas, políticas, textuales, económicas, espirituales) y discute si el hecho de aplicarlas al movimiento monástico supuestamente iniciado por Columbanus puede ayudarnos a redefinir o deconstruir el concepto de “monacato columbano”. La comparación de las evidencias sobre la vida monástica en las obras hagiográficas e historiográficas de Gregorio de Tours con la descripción de la vida monástica en la *Vita Columbani* de Jonás de Bobbio muestra que podemos identificar un cambio de un “paisaje monástico” en la Francia merovingia del siglo VI a un “paisaje monástico” políticamente integrado en el siglo VII. Sin embargo, esto no significa que el cambio fundamental fuera necesariamente el resultado de las actividades del monje irlandés Columbanus. Una lectura atenta de la descripción de Jonás del paisaje espiritual y físico entorno a Luxeuil, la principal fundación de Columbanus, muestra el grado de continuidad entre las fundaciones monásticas en la Galia antes de Columbanus y el supuesto centro de un nuevo movimiento monástico “columbano”.

### Palabras clave:

Jonás de Bobbio, Gregorio de Tours, monacato columbano, Francia merovingia, hagiografía

## 1. The concept of monastic landscape

The expression “monastic landscape” evades any clear definition, which may make it unsuitable for becoming a household term in monastic studies. Yet reflecting on its different possible meanings, their hermeneutic potential and their limitations appears to be productive: monastic landscapes of various sorts become a playground for trying out ideas suitable for the evolving landscape of monastic studies.<sup>1</sup> My contribution does, therefore, not favor any specific definition.<sup>2</sup> Instead, I want to present a case study on how experimenting with different “landscapes” – political, textual, imagined, spiritual, economical, and physical – may change our understanding of old and maybe too well-established concepts of monastic history, in this case that of “Columbanian monasticism” and, in extension, other anchor points in the established monastic narrative.<sup>3</sup>

I will begin by suggesting five understandings of the concept of “monastic landscape”. In a broad sense, a “monastic landscape” could refer to a landscape in which monasteries were not only present but a self-evident and impactful part of the political, cultural, religious or economic fabric to an extent that on a fundamental level it would not function in the same way without them.<sup>4</sup> This definition constitutes the point of departure for addressing a key question in the history of monasticism: How “monasticized” were specific ecclesiastical, political, cultural or economic landscapes in the late- and post-Roman world – and how did monastic institutions impact on them? Peter Brown argued that different parts of the late- and post-Roman world generated their specific “micro-Christendoms”. Some of them may have had a distinctive monastic flavor, others less so (BROWN 2013: 13-34). The textual documents produced by these various “micro-monasticisms” do, of course, emphasize their importance and place and evoke worlds in which the *saeculum* appears in an – often dark – margin. Following these documents uncritically bears the danger of detaching monasticism from its broader historical context and, indeed, overestimating its impact.

Based on our written sources, we could cautiously argue that Late Roman Egypt and Syria, Early Medieval Ireland, England in Bede’s time, Merovingian Gaul,

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1. On the “research landscape” of new monastic studies, see especially BEACH, COCHELIN 2020; for a brief introduction into the concept of monastic landscape, RÖCKELEIN 2020.

2. For a (limited) typology of monastic landscapes see FELTEN 2012. MELVILLE 2012: 221 proposes three notions of “monastic landscape”: (1) a geographical space that is shaped by the activities of an individual monastery or a conglomeration of monasteries; (2) a region containing a significant number of various monasteries where monastic life had a strong impact on religious, cultural, economic, social and political structures; (3) referring to the monasteries situated within a region that is delineated by external criteria, e.g. geography or, sometimes even modern, political boundaries, e.g. the “Swiss monastic landscape” or the “Bavarian monastic landscape”.

3. For the traditional narrative, see, for example, LAWRENCE 2015; MELVILLE 2016; ALBERT 2022.

4. This definition is congruent with Melville’s second notion of monastic landscape. See MELVILLE 2012: 221.

Carolingian Francia, Visigothic Spain, and Byzantium were all monastic landscapes of sorts, in the sense of political, cultural and ecclesiastical landscapes strongly impacted by monastic life (in its various forms). Yet there has been done little research in comparing them on the basis of clearly defined criteria, asking whether monasteries were indeed as important as our sources imply, and testing the place monastic life in their respective societies on historiographic, theological, or legal texts that described monasticism from outsiders' perspectives. Moreover, the question to what extent we can find monastic landscapes outside the boundaries of the Roman Empire and outside the Christian world has hardly been broached.<sup>5</sup>

A second approach to the concept “monastic landscapes” could be reached by consulting specific texts and textual corpora. Gregory of Tours evokes, for example, in his *Liber Vitae Patrum* and his other hagiographic works Merovingian Gaul as a landscape dotted with monasteries, hermitages, and shrines of saints and martyrs that were administrated by monks.<sup>6</sup> The *Historia monachorum* and the *Historia Lausiaca* do the same for Egypt;<sup>7</sup> Theodoret's *Historia religiosa* for Syria.<sup>8</sup> John Moschos textually shapes a staunchly orthodox monastic landscape in a world in the grip of supposed heretics at the dawn of the rise of Islam – a landscape reaching from Capadocia to Egypt with a strong focus on the monastic communities that emerged in the Judean desert.<sup>9</sup> Roughly at the same time Jonas of Bobbio describes the northern parts of Francia as a monastic landscape well integrated in political and ecclesiastical structures that was inspired by the Irish monk and monastic founder Columbanus.<sup>10</sup> Each of these authors emphasizes with different agendas and textual strategies the role of monastic life in their respective regions. For these textually created monastic landscapes it is necessary to study how the author's claim of importance and unity meets reality. It is difficult not to look at Egyptian monasticism through the eyes of the authors of the *Historia monachorum* or the *Historia Lausiaca*, or at Syrian monasticism through Theodoret's eyes, or at seventh-century monasticism in Gaul through those of Jonas and the authors of sequels of his *Vita Columbani*. But it is essential to be aware of their agendas and the purposes of their respective works – and, if necessary, distance oneself from their convenient narratives.

A third way of defining “monastic landscapes”, which often overlaps with those constructed by geographic boundaries or textual *corpora*, might refer to the landscapes shaped by modern historians out of the understandable need to create order

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5. See, most recently, BOWMAN 2021; GARSOÏAN 2007; CAMPLANI 2007.

6. For a recent edition and translation of Gregory's hagiographic work, see DE NIE 2015.

7. *Historia Lausiaca*, ed. WELLHAUSEN 2003; *Historia monachorum*, ed. SCHULZ-FLÜGEL 1990.

8. Theodoret of Cyrrhus, *Historia religiosa*, ed. CANIVET, LEROY-MOHLINGHEN 1977-1978.

9. John Moschos, *Pratum spirituale*, ed. MIGNE 1863: 2851–3112; transl. WORTLEY 1992.

10. Jonas of Bobbio, *Vita Columbani discipulorumque eius*, ed. KRUSCH; transl. O'HARA, WOOD 2017. See also FOX 2014.

and structures.<sup>11</sup> Peter Brown compared in a pioneering way Egyptian and Syrian monastic landscapes (BROWN 1971). James Goehring, William Harmless and Philip Rousseau (among many others) contributed to creating the Egyptian monastic world (HARMLESS 2004; GOEHRING 1999; ROUSSEAU 1985), Brouria Bitton-Ashkelony and Aryeh Kofsky monasticism in Gaza (BITTON-ASHKELONY, KOFKY 1995). Georg Jenal provided us with the idea of early Medieval monastic Italy (JENAL 1995). Sarah Foot did so for Early Medieval England (FOOT 2006). Friedrich Prinz postulated for Late-Roman and Merovingian Gaul three different monastic landscapes: “Martinian monasticism”, “Lérinsian monasticism”, and “Hiberno-Frankish/Columbanian monasticism” (PRINZ 1988). Josef Semmler shaped the Carolingian monastic world, as did Pablo Díaz for Visigothic monasticism (DÍAZ 1987).<sup>12</sup> Their categorizations are indispensable because we need structures, but they also created boundaries and postulated unity and uniformity that need to be questioned and re-evaluated.

Moreover, “monastic landscapes” might also refer to the regional structures shaped by specific monastic institutions through the accumulation of property and the foundation of affiliations, and the impact of monastic foundations on local economies.<sup>13</sup> Individual monasteries may also have shaped “spiritual landscapes” created by shrines of saints and martyrs, hermitages, branches, or affiliations. Prinz, for example, postulated a “Martinian” monasticism based on places where Martin of Tours was venerated (PRINZ 1988: 19-46). Peter Ehrhart and Hans-Werner Goetz (among others) studied, for example, the far-reaching economic impact of St. Gallen and its possessions, which extended its influence from Southern Germany to Northern Italy (ERHART 2015; GOETZ 1993).<sup>14</sup> John Henry Clay studied the landscapes created by Anglo-Saxon monastic foundations in Hesse in a study that in a pioneering way combines monastic history with landscape studies (CLAY 2011). Janneke Raaijmakers investigated the spiritual landscape emerging around the monastery of Fulda (RAAIJMAKERS 2011). Yet, all of these studies define and study the “landscapes” created by individual monasteries in different and therefore not really comparable ways, even though their specific approaches have the potential of cross-fertilizing future research.

Ultimately, “monastic landscape” could refer to the physical landscape that was shaped and altered by monastic communities through their agricultural and economic activities, through building roads, clearing land and forests, embanking or

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11. Melville’s third definition of a monastic landscape (monasteries situated in a region delineated by geographic or medieval or modern political or geographical boundaries often) overlaps with these landscapes constructed by modern historians who often orient themselves along these boundaries. See MELVILLE 2012: 221.

12. For an overview of Semmler’s work, see BAUER 1988. For a careful attempt to create a new 21<sup>st</sup>-century narrative of Carolingian monasticism, see KRAMER, KURDZIEL, WARD 2022.

13. In Melville’s typology, this would be the first type of a monastic landscape. See MELVILLE 2012: 221.

14. FELTEN 2012 provides a survey of studies on high medieval monastic landscapes.

diverting rivers or building canals. Narrative texts refer to turning the desert into a paradise and transforming the wilderness into cultivated land (and sometimes cleaning it from demons). They reflect, maybe in a metaphorically inflated way, a reality in which monasteries massively altered their physical surrounding (BRUNERT 1994; DIESENBERGER 2000). Whenever monks sought out a real or imagined desert, they inevitably destroyed it, and connected (or reconnected) their desert to the civilized world, and usually they did so deliberately.<sup>15</sup> Many monasteries turned into population centers surpassing or replacing the dwindling Roman cities, though there was certainly no unity in the landscapes created by monasteries, and different centuries created different modes and models for interfering with the physical landscape.

## 2. Columbanian monasticism and its landscapes

All five notions of a “monastic landscape” intersect within the monastic world that is commonly indicated as “Columbanian” and still sometimes as “Hiberno-Frankish” (*Iro-Fränkisch*), two terms introduced in Friedrich Prinz’ magistral work *Frühes Mönchtum im Frankenreich* from 1965. Prinz postulated that the arrival of the Irish monk Columbanus in Merovingian Francia unleashed, supported by kings, aristocrats and bishops, a wave of new monastic foundations emanating from Luxeuil, Columbanus’ main foundation. According to Prinz, these monasteries followed first the *Regula Columbani* and later a mixed rule consisting of elements of the *Regula Columbani* and the *Regula Benedicti*, paving the way for the spread and triumph of the *Regula Benedicti* in Francia and the rest of the Latin world (PRINZ 1988: 121-291).<sup>16</sup> “Columbanian” monasteries were, in his view, the result of a synthesis of the monastic ideals and practices Columbanus imported from Ireland and forms of monastic life and the broader cultural context that was already present in Francia. His expression *Iro-Fränkisch* did not take strong roots, but “Columbanian monasticism” became a broadly used term and the foundation of Luxeuil is commonly seen as an anchor point in any chronology of monastic history.<sup>17</sup>

Prinz visualized the Columbanian landscape beautifully in three of the hand-drawn maps in the appendix of his work.<sup>18</sup> He identified almost all monastic foundations that took place between the foundation of Luxeuil and the first Anglo-Saxon foundations under early Carolingian rule as *Iro-Fränkisch* or *Columbanisch*, either because they were mentioned in Jonas of Bobbio’s *Vita Columbani* or in one of its spin-offs and continuations or because its founders and first abbots were somehow related to Luxeuil and other “Columbanian” monasteries, or because they received

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15. On ambivalent attitudes towards the desert, see LEYSER 2006.

16. See also MOYSE 1973; DIERKENS 1989.

17. See DUNN 2000: 158-190; LAWRENCE 2015: 39-53; FOX 2014; O’HARA 2018; ALBERT 2022: 72-79.

18. PRINZ 1988: appendix, map. VIIA, VIIB and IX.



episcopal privileges in the style of those issued to Columbanian monasteries, or because they were founded by aristocrats and rulers who otherwise had founded monasteries identified as *Iro-Fränkisch* (PRINZ 1988: 121-316). Even monasteries that existed before Columbanus' arrival allegedly reformed themselves to Columbanian monasticism if they tied themselves in any form to monasteries, founders or patrons that were identified as "Columbanian" (PRINZ 1988: 152-185).

Prinz' model has received criticism – especially regarding his claim of a long-lasting and uniform Columbanian network "by contagion" and the idea that the *Regula Benedicti* spread in Gaul, as it were, piggybacking on the *Regula Columbani* (DIEM 2002; DIEM 2011), but also his assertion that Irish monastic ideals and practices had a lasting impact on the development of Continental monastic life (WOOD 2016; MARRON 2012: 20-59). Nevertheless, Prinz is still a significant point of reference and inevitably quoted in any study of early medieval monasticism. There may, indeed, be good reasons for ditching "Columbanian" monasticism, but there are also reasons for keeping the periodization and finding a – maybe more cumbersome – replacement that re-evaluates Prinz' model rather than abandoning it. I will try to do this along the line of the different definitions of a "monastic landscape" I suggested.

### 3. Merovingian Gaul – a monastic landscape?

If we listen to two of the most important narrative sources on sixth- and seventh-century Gaul, we hear two different answers to the question of how "monasticized" Merovingian Gaul indeed was. Roughly at the time of Columbanus' arrival, Gregory of Tours' hagiographic and historiographic works describe a world in which male and female monasteries, strict ascetics, hermits, recluses, and religious women of various sorts undoubtedly existed and occasionally caused trouble, but it is a world that would function without them. A few bishops may have had a monastic training;<sup>19</sup> some royals may have founded or supported monasteries,<sup>20</sup> but kings, aristocrats, and bishops did not structurally rely on monasteries for any purpose. It was perfectly possible to live a good Christian life without having any monastic inclinations. Fourteen of the twenty *vitae* of Gregory's *Liber vitae patrum* tell about individuals of various social backgrounds who lived as monks, hermits or recluses and founded monasteries, but none of them is allowed to have much of an impact on society at large, or define themselves as part of a "movement".<sup>21</sup> *Divide et impera* seems to have

19. Gregory of Tours, *Liber Vitae Patrum* VI, prol.: 230 (Gallus); XVII, c. 1: 278 (Nicetius of Trier); Gregory of Tours, *Decem libri historiarum* VI, c. 9: 279 (Domnolus); VII, c. 1: 323-327 (Bishop Slavus).

20. Gregory of Tours, *Liber Vitae Patrum* I, c. 5: 217 (King Chilperich supports the Jura monasteries); Gregory of Tours, *Liber in Gloria Confessorum*, c. 12: 305 (King Leovigild returns stolen good to a monastery); Gregory of Tours, *Liber in Gloria Martyrum*, c. 74: 87-88 (King Sigismund supports Saint-Maurice d'Agaune and is buried there).

21. For an analysis of the role of monastic life in Gregory's hagiographic works, see DIEM 2015.

been Gregory's motto when composing his *Liber vitae patrum* – and he was successful to an extent that there is still hardly any systematic study on Gregory's distinctly powerless monastic landscape – despite the fact that much of what we know about sixth-century monasticism comes from his work.<sup>22</sup>

If we examine the role of monasteries in Gregory's monumental historical work, the *Decem libri historiarum*, we might get the impression that the author rather disliked monasteries and purposefully downplayed their importance in order to postulate a church structure that was firmly held under the sway of bishops – most notably himself. In the first of the *Decem libri*, Gregory placed his attempt to write a political and ecclesiastic history of the Frankish world into a wider framework of Christian salvation history. In this framework, monks and monasteries appear just thrice: he mentions in passing that there were monasteries in Egypt and that Antony died, refers once to Melania the Younger as monastic founder, and complains that Emperor Valens tried to force monks to become soldiers.<sup>23</sup>

Monasteries play a slightly more prominent role in the subsequent nine books. By far, Queen Radegund's embattled monastic foundation in Poitiers receives the most attention. The scandals arising after the Queen's death placed Gregory in the position of a skillful crisis manager. A second place holds the description of the mother-daughter battle in the monastery of Inghitrudis in Tours – two stories that might amuse Gregory's audience but certainly can't be read as a praise of monastic life.<sup>24</sup> Aside from that, the author repeatedly refers to monasteries as places of imprisonment of sinful priests, political enemies and dynastic competitors.<sup>25</sup> He benevolently mentions a number of monastic communities around holy men with little traceable afterlife,<sup>26</sup> but many more monasteries, monks, and (often dubious) holy

22. An exception is BIARNE 1997 (map on p. 117). See also DIEM 2015, GAILLARD, SAPIN 2018.

23. Gregory of Tours, *Decem libri historiarum* I, c. 10: 10; I, c. 39-41: 27-28.

24. On Radegund and on Inghitrudis: Gregory of Tours, *Decem libri historiarum* III, c. 7: 104; VI, c. 29: 295-297; VI, c. 34: 305; IX, c. 2: 415; VIII, c. 33: 451-454; IX, c. 39-43: 469-475; X, c. 12: 495; X, c. 15-17: 501-504; X, c. 20: 513.

25. Gregory of Tours, *Decem libri historiarum* I c. 44: 29 (Bishop Urbicus); IV, c. 26: 159 (Queen Theodogild); V, c. 14: 207 (Merovech); V, c. 20: 228 (the rebellious bishops Salonius and Sagrattarius); V, c. 39: 247 and VI, c. 34: 305 (Basina); V, c. 49: 262 (the imposter Leudast); VI, c. 16: 285-286 (the niece of a certain Felix). On forced monastic entry, see DE JONG 2001.

26. Gregory of Tours, *Decem libri historiarum* II, c. 21-22: 67-68 (Eparchius foundation Chantoin, which did survive beyond Gregory's lifetime); II, c. 37: 86-87 (cell of Saint Maxentius miraculously protected by its founder); IV, c. 32: 166 (the priest Julian living in the monastery of Randan); V, c. 7: 203 (The recluse Senoc living in a cell among ancient ruins); V, c. 10: 204 (Patroclus another priest and strict ascetic); V, c. 12: 206 (On Brachio abbot of Menat); V, c. 21: 229 (The ascetic Winnoch was ordained priest in order to prevent him from travelling to Jerusalem); V, c. 9: 204 (on the recluse Caluppa); VI, c. 8, pp. 227 (on the miracles of Eparchius, a recluse with a small community of followers, who is very good at collecting alms and, as Gregory states with some irony, never has to bake bread); VIII, c. 35, pp. 455-456 (Berethrudis makes bequests to the nunneries she had founded); X, c. 1: 477 (Gregory the Great founded six monasteries in Sicily and one in Rome out of his own expenses).



men found their way into the *Decem libri* because they caused problems and needed to be disciplined or saved.<sup>27</sup>

Of all the monasteries that played a key role in the traditional monastic narrative (Lérins, Saint-Maurice d’Agaune, the Jura monasteries, Caesarius’ foundation, Montecasino), Gregory mentions in his *Decem libri* only Saint-Maurice<sup>28</sup> and – maybe – Caesarius’ foundation in Arles.<sup>29</sup> There is no reference to monastic life as *vita regularis* except for identifying the Rule of Caesarius of Arles as the normative basis for subduing the nuns’ uprising in Poitiers.<sup>30</sup> Royal involvement in monastic matters appear, apart from Saint-Maurice d’Agaune and Radegund’s monastery, only twice in a sideline.<sup>31</sup>

Thus, if we believe Gregory – which one should do only with caution (GOFFART 1988: 112-234; REIMITZ 2015) – Merovingian Gaul was indeed dotted with monasteries, but it was, as a whole, not a “monastic landscape” of the first category I suggested. The Frankish world would – at least according to the picture he drew – not have looked fundamentally different without monasteries. The “ascetic invasion” Robert Markus proclaimed for fifth- and sixth-century Gaul did in Gregory’s world not really take place (MARKUS 1990: 199-211). There is a remarkable discrepancy between the picture shaped by the hagiographic and normative sources that were commonly used to establish the history of post-Roman monasticism in Gaul and the largely ignored narrative of Gregory of Tours.<sup>32</sup>

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27. On monks and nuns causing trouble or being in trouble: Gregory of Tours, *Decem libri historiarum* I, c. 48: 32-33 (argument between Poitiers and Tours about Martin’s body); IV, c. 31: 164 (on thirty greedy monks killed by a landslide); IV, c. 33: 166 (Sunniulf, the abbot of Randan is too lenient towards his monks and needs to improve his leadership skills); IV, c. 34: 167 (a monk in a monastery close to Bordeaux performs a miracle and is severely punished in order to prevent pride); IV, c. 39: 171 (Palladius commits suicide out of fear of being killed by Sigibert. He is buried in the monastery of Cournon but no mass was sung for him); IV, c. 47: 184 (Chilperich plunders monasteries, kills monks, and rapes nuns on the Limousin); IV, c. 49: 184-185 (Gregory complains that in the old times rulers endowed monasteries and churches, now they destroy them, referring especially to the monastery of Latta that owned relics of Martin of Tours); VI, c. 6: 272-274 (Hospitius, the strict ascetic, with an ironic remark about local ascetics who import their bitter herbs from Egypt); VIII, c. 15: 380-383 (Wulfilaic the stylite); VIII, c. 19: 385-286 (Daugulf); VIII, c. 21: 387-388 (453-454: monks attached to a church near Metz prevent a grave robbery); VIII, c. 34: 403 (Winnoc who became, instigated by the devil a violent alcoholic and had to be locked up in his cell. Annatolius, a young boy wants to become a recluse, locks him up in a crypt and becomes mad, instigated by the devil); VIII, c. 6: 417-418 (the imposter Desiderius).

28. Gregory of Tours, *Decem libri historiarum* III, c. 5: 100 (Saint-Maurice d’Agaune); IV, c. 26: 159 (Arles). The Jura monasteries appear in *Liber Vitae Patrum* I, c. 1-2: 213-219; Saint-Maurice d’Agaune in *Liber in Gloria Martyrum*, c. 74-75: 87-89.

29. Gregory of Tours, *Decem libri historiarum* IV, c. 26: 159.

30. Gregory of Tours, *Decem libri historiarum* X, c. 16: 505-507.

31. Gregory of Tours, *Decem libri historiarum* III, c. 17: 120 (Clothild as supporter of monasteries); X, c. 7: 488 (Childebert proclaims a tax remission for churches, monasteries and parish clergy).

32. It is striking that Marilyn Dunn refers in her work on the emergence of monasticism to Gregory of Tours almost exclusively in the context of the uprising at Radegund’s monastery. See DUNN 2000: 107-110.

Jonas of Bobbio, who wrote just two generations after Gregory and probably knew his work, somehow confirms what Gregory implied, but gives it a rather polemic twist. In his view, Gaul severely lacked an ascetic impact, but this was going to change with the arrival of Columbanus:

Leaving the coast of Brittany behind them, they enter Gaul. At that time, whether due to the numerous foreign enemies or through the negligence of the bishops, the fervor of the religious life had almost been extinguished there. All that remained was the Christian faith. The medicines of penance and the love of mortification were scarcely, or only in a few places, to be found there.<sup>33</sup>

While Gregory's home-grown ascetics mostly developed just regional impact (if at all) and usually stayed out of politics, Columbanus proceeded, according to Jonas, immediately to the royal courts where he found open ears and lavish support from kings, but also from aristocrats, who expected that the holy man's and his companions' intercession may have a beneficial effect on their salvation.<sup>34</sup> If we can believe Jonas, Frankish noblemen flocked *en masse* to the monasteries in order to live a life according to the *medicamenta paenitentiae*.<sup>35</sup> A large part of Columbanus' life consisted of interacting with kings and members of aristocratic families, acting as intercessor, moral and political advisor, prophet of triumph and doom, recipient of land and privileges, and healer or wonder worker in service of the Frankish elites (DIEM 2007: 529-546).

The same applied to Columbanus' successors who effortlessly interacted with rulers and who themselves were of the highest aristocratic stock.<sup>36</sup> Through Columbanus' arrival, monastic life became a *Chefsache* to an extent that major political developments – the downfall of Brunhild's branch of the Merovingian dynasty and the rise of Clothar II as sole ruler of all Frankish kingdoms – was directly tied to royal attitudes towards monastic foundations (DIEM 2007: 546).

Jonas skillfully created a closely interconnected landscape of monasteries that is rather different from Gregory's isolated dots on the map of the Frankish kingdoms. After Columbanus' death, his successors, but also supporting aristocrats and bishops, founded numerous male and female monasteries *ex regula Columbani* which were ruled and sometimes populated by monks from Luxeuil and kept in line by Columbanus' successors Eustasius and Waldebert, who travelled back and forth between these foundations. At least according to Jonas, Northern Gaul became indeed a monastic landscape *sub regula Columbani*. Three passages of the *Vita Columbani*

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33. Jonas, *Vita Columbani* I, c. 5: 161; transl. O'HARA, WOOD 2017: 105-106.

34. On Jonas' interaction with the Merovingian kings, see DIEM 2007.

35. Jonas, *Vita Columbani* I, c. 10: 170.

36. Jonas, *Vita Columbani* I, c. 10: 169-170; transl. O'HARA, WOOD 2017: 115-118.

describe how Columbanus' aristocratic supporters and his successors created a network of monasteries under the saint's rule.

[the monk and future bishop Donatus and his family:] He grew up in this same monastery where he was instructed in wisdom [i.e. Luxeuil]. He became the bishop of Besançon and, still living, rules over the same cathedral. Later, out of love for blessed Columbanus, he founded a monastery for men following the Rule of Columbanus called Palatium, on account of the defenses of the old walls there. And after him the Bountiful Giver, to fulfil the promise made by His servant, gave them [his parents Waldelenus and Flavia] another son called Chramnelenus who, distinguished by his nobility and wisdom, was appointed to the dukedom following the death of his father. Although a layman, he was, nevertheless, conscientious in his love for the Creator. For he too, out of love for the holy man, founded a monastery under the Rule of Columbanus in the Jura forest, beside the little river Nozon, and placed Siagrius there as abbot. The Lord also gave (in addition to His original gift) two daughters who were both nobles in the world and devoted to the fear of Christ. After these gifts their mother, Flavia, following the death of her husband, founded a convent in the aforementioned town of Besançon. She gave it every form of protection and assembled there a large community of nuns. The grace of the man of God was enflamed in them to such an extent that, scorning all the trappings of this present life, they pursued only the cult of the Omnipotent [God].<sup>37</sup>

Following on his journey, Columbanus came to a certain villa called Ussy on the river Marne. He was welcomed by Authari, whose wife was called Aiga. They had young sons whom the mother brought to the man of God to be blessed. Seeing the mother's faith, Columbanus consecrated the little children with his blessing. They later, when they had reached adolescence, were held in high esteem, first by King Chlothar and then by Dagobert. After they had achieved worldly glory, they began to grow anxious lest they should lose eternal glory out of concern for that of the world. The eldest, Ado, retired of his own accord and built a monastery in the Jouarre forests under the Rule of blessed Columbanus. The youngest, Dado, built a monastery in the forests of the Brie by the stream of Rebais, also under the Rule of Columbanus. Such great grace abounded in the man of God that whosoever he consecrated was found to be persevering in good behavior when they died. Let it be rightly said at once that those whom he diligently warned, rejoiced afterwards that they had merited freedom from punishment. Nor did the person, supported by the help of such a man, undeservedly obtain the addition of grace who, bound by Columbanus's learning, refused to deviate from the narrow path of a just life.<sup>38</sup>

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37. Jonas, *Vita Columbani* I, c. 14: 175-176; transl. O'HARA, WOOD 2017: 123-125.

38. Jonas, *Vita Columbani* I, c. 26: 209-210; transl. O'HARA, WOOD 2017: 154-156.

How many monasteries they establish out of love for Columbanus and his rule, how many communities they set up, and how many flocks they gather for Christ! Among them at the time was a man of illustrious standing, Eligius, who is now bishop of the Vermandois, whom I should not elevate with my judgement lest I be accused of being a flatterer – established near to the city of Limoges, the distinguished monastery of Solignac, above the river Vienne, four miles distant from the city, as well as many other communities in the same region. He also founds a convent in Paris, which he had received as a gift from the king, over which he placed the virgin of Christ. Aurea. In the city of Bourges, a noble and religious woman, Berthoara established a convent according to the Rule of blessed Columbanus. On the outskirts of the same city of Bourges, the venerable man Theudulf, surnamed Babclenus, in the full flush of his devotion, established monasteries according to the Rule of Columbanus. The first was on an island in the river Marmande, where he gathered a community of religious men. The other, which is called Gaudiacum, is situated not far from the stream l'Aubois. The third was for the virgins of Christ and is situated at a place called Charenton on the aforementioned river Marmande. He also established another community of the virgins of Christ near to the town of Nevers which was subject to the same Rule.<sup>39</sup>

Jonas also emphasizes that this new monastic landscape had a strong impact on ecclesiastical structures by producing various monks who ascended to episcopal sees.<sup>40</sup>

Moreover, the *Vita Columbani* itself became an agent creating a “textual landscape”. Numerous later hagiographers incorporated elements of Jonas’ narrative, produced sequels, or at least referred to Jonas as hagiographic authority.<sup>41</sup> Both Jonas’ own work and these sequels were the main sources for Prinz’ construction of Hiberno-Frankish monasticism. Prinz assumed that every hagiographer who used Jonas also shared his notion of a monastic movement *sub regula Columbani*, which vastly multiplied the number of allegedly “Columbanian” monasteries. In addition to these narrative texts, we have a corpus of episcopal privileges granted to monasteries

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39. Jonas, *Vita Columbani* II, c. 10: 255-256; transl. O’HARA, WOOD 2017: 201-202.

40. Jonas, *Vita Columbani* II, c. 8: 245; transl. O’HARA, WOOD: 193: “Then Eustasius arrived at the aforementioned monastery [Luxeuil]. He strives there to rouse the monastic community as much as the neighbouring people to Christian vigour, and he drew many of them to the remedies of penance. It was his concern to instruct many by his eloquence. Many [of his monks] later became bishops: Chagnoald of Laon; Acbarius of Vermand, Noyon, and Tournai; Ragnacbarius of Augst and Bale; Audomar of Boulogne and Therouanne.” For a critical assessment of Columbanus’ impact on the Frankish episcopate, see RICHÉ 1981.

41. Audoinus of Rouen, *Vita Eligii*; *Passio Leodegari*; *Passio Praeicti*; *Vita Agili*; *Vita Amati*; *Vita Anstrudis*; *Vita Audoini Rotomagensis*; *Vita Balthildis*; *Vita Bertilae*; *Vita Desiderii Ep. Carducensis*; *Vita Faronis*; *Vita Filiberti*; *Vita Galli vetustissima*; *Vita Germani Grandiuallensis*; *Vita Pardulfi*; *Vita Sadalbergae*; *Vita Wandregisili altera*; Walahfrid Strabo, *Vita Galli*. Many of these texts are translated in FOURACRE, GERBERDING 1996; McNAMARA, HALBORG, WHATLEY 1992.

under the condition of following the *Regula Benedicti et/vel/seu Columbani*.<sup>42</sup> The same members of aristocratic families serve in different capacities in these charters: as granting bishops, as monastic founders and recipients of grants and immunities and as subscribing witnesses. These two textual corpora formed the basis for Prinz' construction of Columbanian/Hiberno-Frankish monasticism.

There are, however, reasons to approach the monastic landscape created by Jonas' own work and its sequels with caution. First, it is striking that Columbanus and the *Regula Columbani* largely drops out of the equation in most of the sequels and spin-offs of the *Vita Columbani*. Columbanus himself serves outside Jonas' own text hardly ever as a marker of identity, and it even seems that monastic narratives written after the *Vita Columbani* aimed at downplaying the role of Luxeuil in their own foundation history. There is also very little that may point to a lasting Insular impact.<sup>43</sup> Many monasteries listed by Jonas as tied to the *Regula Columbani* either defined themselves differently in other sources or aimed at emancipating themselves from their ties to Luxeuil and Columbanus' successors. The network of monasteries under the *Regula Columbani* may have been Jonas ideal and textual creation rather than a lasting reality. He himself does not conceal that the centrifugal tendencies already started soon after Columbanus' death, and that the *Regula Columbani* was disputed in several monasteries.<sup>44</sup>

#### 4. The physical and spiritual landscape of Columbanus and his community

For the fourth and fifth definition of “monastic landscape”, in relation to the spiritual/economic and the physical landscape, Jonas' *Vita Columbani* appears, again, as both deceiving and prolific – in a wonderful way that might sharpen our gaze at other sources of a similar kind. The spiritual landscape evoked by Jonas is that of the desert conquered by strict ascetics. The economic landscape is initially one of dire needs and a community at the verge of starvation: asceticism by necessity.<sup>45</sup> Recent archaeological research indicates that Jonas' narrative of the humble and perilous beginnings of Columbanus' foundations represents an ideal rather than a reality. The place where Luxeuil was founded was already a thriving settlement and maybe even an ecclesiastical center. It was well-connected to the rest of the Frankish world and situated strategically

42. For an overview see DIEM 2002: 77-84. See also ROSENWEIN 1999: 59-96. EWIG 1979 provides studies on each of the preserved episcopal privileges.

43. For a critical assessment of the Irishness of Columbanus' foundations, see also MARRON 2012: 21-59; MEEDER 2010.

44. See especially Jonas, *Vita Columbani* II, c. 9-10: 246-256 (on opposition of the monk Agrestius against Columbanus' successor Eustasius); II, c. 1: 231-232 (on the secession of monks from Bobbio under abbot Athala). On these conflicts see, e.g., HELVÉTIUS 2018.

45. Jonas, *Vita Columbani* I, c. 7: 110-111; I, c. 11: 118-119; I, c. 17: 183. See also I, c. 27: 215.



in the borderland between Austrasia and Burgundy.<sup>46</sup> The bitter poverty and threatening starvation of Columbanus and his twelve Irish followers, which was relieved by the support of a neighboring monastery, clashes with his own reports about the royal support his community received, probably right from the beginning (WOOD 1989).

There is, however, more to Jonas' insistence that Columbanus' first monasteries were founded in deserted land than just assuming that he applied the trope of desert asceticism.<sup>47</sup> Jonas does not just once mention Annegray's and Luxeuil's remoteness; he insists time and again that Columbanus founded his monasteries to pursue the quietness of the desert (*quietem heremi sectare*), to seek out the desert (*heremum petiit*), settle in the remoteness of harsh solitude and at places covered with rocks (*aspera vastitate solitudinis et scopulorum interpositione loca*), to endure the desert (*in heremo sustinerent*, *Vita Columbani* I, c. 6: 163), to dwell in the vastness of the desert (*intra heremi vastitate*, I, c. 7: 164-165), to seek a place for a new monastery in the same desert (*in eodem heremo*, I, c. 10: 169). A support convoy reaches the edge of the wilderness without finding a path,<sup>48</sup> until the horses tear open with their hoofs an unknown path through the mountains,<sup>49</sup> so that God can prepare for his monks a meal in the desert (*in deserto praeeparare mensam*, I, c. 7: 166).

The desert around Columbanus' first foundation is a key theme in Jonas' narrative. He wanted to convey that Columbanus' founded his monasteries indeed in a densely forested no-man's-land but also that the monastic landscape he established does not just consist of three monasteries. Columbanus claimed various spaces in the surrounding forests by wandering around *in heremo* and living a hermit's life in a cave for most of his time – sometimes alone, sometimes with a few companions (I, c. 11: 170-171; I, c. 15: 178; I, c. 17: 181).

Jonas avoids talking about formal ownership, but he describes in great geographical detail a landscape that is controlled by Columbanus himself through his miracles and his ascetic achievements (I, c. 7: 164; I, c. 9: 167). This landscape is impenetrable, rocky (I, c. 6: 163), rough, vast, and steep (I, c. 9: 167). It consists of pathless forests (I, c. 7: 165) caves (I, c. 8-9: 167), springs (I, c. 9: 168),<sup>50</sup> and occasional remnants of a pagan past (I, c. 10: 169). It houses wolves, bears, buffalos, stags, and Swabian brigands (I, c. 8: 166). It is limited by three rivers, the Moselle, the Beuchin and the Ognon (I, c. 11: 170-172). It is a spiritual landscape that does not just include the three monasteries but also Columbanus' cave.

Jonas' obsession with details shows that he must indeed have seen the landscape around Luxeuil with his own eyes and that he knew its geography, but also that

46. A. BULLY, S. BULLY, ČAUŠEVIĆ-BULLY, FIOCCHI 2014; BULLY, MARRON 2018; MARRON 2012.

47. On applying the trope of monastic life on the desert, see GOEHRING 2003.

48. Jonas, *Vita Columbani* I, c. 7: 165: *cum solitudinis ora adtegit, viam sibi pandi itineris nequaquam reperit.*

49. Jonas, *Vita Columbani* I, c. 7: 165: *aequi ignotum iter ungula calle terent...*

50. Columbanus creates a spring through his prayers which still existed in Jonas' days.



conveying this sense of a landscape sacred by the presence of the saint but also of the community was an essential part of the message he wanted to convey in his text. Elsewhere I have argued that one of the central themes of the first book of the *Vita Columbani* was protecting the monastery's physical boundaries, the *septa secreta* of the monastery (DIEM 2005: 541-542). Placing the monastery in a landscape that consists of impenetrable forests in which Columbanus ruled over animals, springs and rivers, may have been part of his textual strategy – and it is this landscape that links the past with the present because it is still visible to Jonas' audience.

Yet there is also another side to Jonas' landscape. While Columbanus dwells in the forests and lives in a cave, his monks cultivate this landscape with their own hands, clear land for fields (I, c. 17: 183), grow crops (I, c. 12-13: 172-174; I, c. 15: 177), store grain (I, c. 17: 182), brew beer (I, c. 16: 179), and log timber (I, c. 15: 178). Here, again, Jonas is remarkably detailed, showing how the monks collectively make this landscape their own and how divine support manifests itself in various miracles happening in the course of this project: a grain multiplication in order to prepare a meal for His servants in the wilderness (*in deserto*, I, c. 17: 183), a beer miracle (I, c. 16: 179-181), a food multiplication miracle (I, c. 17: 182), two healing miracles involving monks who hurt themselves while at work (I, c. 15: 178), a healing miracle for the benefit of monks who go on to harvest despite their sickness (I, c. 12: 172-173), a miracle of diverted rain while bringing in the harvest (I, c. 13: 173-174), a miracle of a stolen work glove that was miraculously returned to the monastery (I, c. 15: 178-179).<sup>51</sup> With these miracles, Jonas makes two important theological points: first, the miraculous power does not rest with the saint himself, but it is shared by the community, and second, that the miracles are tied to a space, a spiritual landscape controlled by the saint and his community by God's grace.

## 5. A farewell to Columbanian monasticism?

To what extent Gregory of Tours' and Jonas of Bobbio's narratives represent a turning point at the beginning of the seventh century turning Gaul from a "landscape with monasteries" into a "monastic landscape"? Peter Brown somewhat downplayed this transformation by stating that Columbanus "ensured that in the rich earth of Christian Gaul yet another layer of soil came to the surface, adding a new and vivid streak of color to ancient fields" (BROWN 2015). He may be right if we look at Columbanus' foundations on the level of monastic practice and its roots in Gallo-Frankish traditions. Brunichildis and Theudebert may have expected their foundations in the wilderness of the Vosges looking similar to Saint-Maurice d'Agaune, the monastery founded a century earlier as one of the first "royal monasteries".<sup>52</sup> The sacred

51. On this miracle, see DIEM 2016.

52. On Saint-Maurice d'Agaune, see DIEM 2013; HELVÉTIUS 2015.

landscape and the cultivated landscape around Annegray, Fountains, Luxeuil and Columbanus' cave may have been conceptualized similarly as the landscape surrounding the Jura monasteries that is described in equally staggering details in the *Vita patrum Iurensium*.<sup>53</sup> Most seventh-century episcopal privileges for monasteries following the *Regula Benedicti et Columbani* list Lérins, Saint-Maurice, the basilica of Saint-Marcel in Chalon and Luxeuil as models (DIEM 2002: 82-83). Columbanus' successor Athala got his initial training in Lérins.<sup>54</sup> Eugendus recruited Amatus, the future abbot of Remiremont (one of the satellite monasteries of Luxeuil), from Saint-Maurice d'Agaune.<sup>55</sup> At least some of the monasteries that were originally part of the network around Luxeuil adopted the liturgy of Saint-Maurice d'Agaune, such as Remiremont, Sadalberga's monastery in Laon, the monastery of St. John in Soissons, Saint-Denis, Saint-Riquier, Saint-Benigne, and possibly others whose liturgical program is not documented in any sources (GINDELE 1959). The concept of monastic space and boundaries promoted by Jonas in his *Vita Columbani* was at least partly inspired by Caesarius' *Regula ad virgines* (DIEM 2021: 265-327). The *medicamenta paenitentiae* that were according to Jonas abandoned in Gaul before Columbanus' arrival point to Caesarius of Arles rather than Ireland (WOOD 2018: 32-33), and the notion of monastic life as *vita regularis*, which became a *conditio sine qua non* for monasteries founded after Luxeuil, existed long before, albeit as just one option.<sup>56</sup>

In this sense, the first "Columbanian" monasteries may have been not fundamentally different from their Frankish predecessors. The most obvious difference, however, between fifth- and sixth-century foundations and those coming after Columbanus is that they tended to last – often enough throughout the Middle Ages and until the French Revolution. According to Hartmut Atsma, we know about 220 monasteries founded before the end of the sixth century, but most of them are mentioned only in one source. We know of about 550 monasteries in the early eighth century, and a large part of the new foundations left traces in various sources of a long span of time (ATSMA 1976: 168).<sup>57</sup>

There may be several reasons for this difference. For the fifth- and sixth century, it would be more appropriate to speak about *monasticisms* in Gaul. We find a huge variety of different forms of communal religious life, urban and rural, ascetic and aristocratic, poor or wealthy, ranging from monasticized aristocratic villas to caves inhabited by hermits with small groups of followers. Most of these foundations were probably not even meant to outlast their founders; some of them may have transformed themselves into permanent institutions only by accident. Only

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53. *Vita patrum Iurensium*. See also FIGUINHA 2019; RIPART 2021: 302-312.

54. Jonas, *Vita Columbani* II, c. 1: 230.

55. *Vita Amati*, c. 5-6: 217.

56. See *Regula Benedicti*, c. 1: 436-438; *Regula magistri*, c. 1: 328-350.

57. See also UEDING 1935.

few of them were founded by outsiders who did not plan to embark monastic life themselves, but had a clear interest that they and their families would profit from the monk's and nun's intercessory prayer perpetually (DIEM, RAPP 2020). Gregory's *Liber Vitae Patrum* is a prime witness for this monastic diversity, but there is ample other evidence pointing towards the absence of any standardized model or impetus to order and unify.

Founding a monastery in the seventh century became a legal and economic transaction, which followed increasingly standardized models. This included the transfer of land to be cultivated and transformed to the monastery's needs, granting of rights and privileges, the active involvement of secular and ecclesiastical elites, the irreversibility of monastic vows, and the requirement on monks and nuns to live a "regular" or "regularized" life according to set standards – a *vita regularis* (DIEM 2021: 32-33). Jonas alludes to many of these aspects in his *Vita Columbani*, especially in the second book when referring to the monasteries that were allegedly founded *ex regula Columbani*.

In this sense, the beginning of the seventh century did indeed mark a watershed. We have to ask, however, to what extent Columbanus can indeed be credited for it and to what extent it is the result of any Irish or rather insular impact. Jonas claims that Columbanus played a key role in creating a new monastic world and describes Luxeuil became the center of a network of monasteries founded *ex regula Columbani*. These monasteries, e.g. Remiremont, Faremoutiers, Grandvalle, Sadalberga's foundation, Saint-Wandrille, Chelles, Corbie, Rebais, Solignac or Charmeliers may indeed have been founded in the orbit of Luxeuil, but their affiliation did probably not outlast Jonas himself. There are no signs that Columbanus played a lasting role in their perceived history and identity. However, this does not mean that we have to turn Columbanus into a marginal figure in monastic history (GAILLARD 2019). Jonas may have created a Columbanus to his liking, but it is undeniable that the Irish saint played a key role in creating the physical and spiritual landscape that Jonas saw with his own eyes and described so vividly. It is also clear that Luxeuil, Columbanus' main foundation, was crucial in establishing a monastic ideal and a model of regularized monastic life that was successfully emulated by later foundations. The Frankish political and ecclesiastical landscape developed a need that Columbanus knew how to fulfill.

It is, nevertheless, the question whether Luxeuil – which became the center of a network only after Columbanus' death – should indeed be called a "Columbanian" monastery. Brunichildis and Theuderic, the two royal founders whom Jonas depicted as the nemeses of Columbanus, probably had something entirely different in mind when they endowed Luxeuil: a place of well-organized intercessory prayer like the monastery of Saint-Maurice d'Agaune founded a century earlier or, indeed, a monastic stronghold in the wilderness like the monasteries of the Jura fathers. Eventually, they probably got what they wanted, by exiling Columbanus and his Irish

followers and forcing the Frankish aristocrats who had flocked to Luxeuil to stay.<sup>58</sup> Maybe we should at least partly credit the two so heavily vilified royals with unleashing the transformation from Merovingian Gaul from a landscape with monasteries to the monastic landscape that we used to call Columbanian.

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58. Jonas, *Vita Columbani* I, c. 20: 196.

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