

10 Interesting Historical Facts about European Monasteries

Monasteries began cropping up in corners of the Roman Empire even before Rome “officially” fell in 476 A.D.

Rome had brought order to the Western world for nearly 1,000 years. In its absence, the monastery, which began as small religious settlements, would eventually grow into the dominant religious, cultural, educational, and economic institution of the Middle Ages.

Here are some facts about monasteries:

1. One of the first monasteries ever founded was not in Europe, but Africa. Saint Pachomius founded it Tabennisi, Egypt, sometime between 318 and 323. Nearly 100 monks, including Pachomius' elder brother John, lived on or near the religious settlement.
2. Benedict of Nursia (480–547 AD) established more than a dozen communities and the [Benedictine] order that become the predominant monastic structure in the Middle Ages.
3. The most prestigious monastery was Cluny. It was founded in central France in 910 by William the Pious, Duke of Aquitaine, and dedicated to St. Peter. It adhered strictly to the Benedictine model.
4. Monasteries were much more than places of prayer. They also offered welfare to the needy and served as hospitals.
5. By the turn of the millennium, monasteries had unequivocally become the single biggest employer in Europe. Nuns and monks had amassed great wealth and influence. In England, for example, monasteries held one-third of the land

and about a quarter of England's wealth.

6. Most monasteries had an abbey, or church; these structures often were the most impressive buildings in the community or region from an architectural perspective.

7. Monasteries were the primary educational institutions of the Middle Ages. They were virtually the only places where libraries existed. (Europe's first universities did not arise until the late 11th and 12th centuries, and these were few and far between.) The vast majority of medieval art, scholarship, and literature came out of monasteries.

8. Wealthy, poorly-defended monasteries became plum targets of Viking warriors. The first ever is believed to have occurred in 793 on Lindisfarne, a settlement on the northeast coast of England (though there is [some dispute](#) as to whether or not this was actually the first attack).

9. By the late 11th century, even monks themselves had become concerned about the monastic focus on wealth and social structure. Many sought a return to simpler lives that allowed greater focus on faith and prayer. This resulted in several new orders of monks, including the Cistercians, Premonstratensians, and Franciscan orders.

10. By the 13th century, thousands of monasteries existed across Christendom. (I spent 20 minutes in books and on Google trying to find a more specific estimate, but had no luck. If anyone has a better answer, please let me know.)

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