THE BEGINNINGS

OF THE

PAROCHIAL SYSTEM

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1 Introduction

THE student, who is working on the mediaeval documents belonging
to the York Diocesan Registry or indeed any Diocesan Registry, is
confronted at the outset with a system of ecclesiastical organisation,
the unit of which is the parish. Through the parish the Church's
pastoral work is done. This unit consists of a certain geographical
area, with a church, a priest (the parson or rector) and an endow-
ment, the income from which belongs to the rector for the time
being. But the parish does not function on its own. It is a sub-
division of a wider unit, the diocese, ruled by its bishop, the
ordinary. Without the bishop, no new rector can be appointed, no
church consecrated, and no changes made in the disposal either of
the endowment or of its income; nor without the bishop can the
people receive the blessing of confirmation. If there is a lay patron
he enjoys wide rights in the appointment of a rector. Often the
rector is a religious house or a cathedral or collegiate church or the
occupant for the time being of a canonry in such a church. In this
case, while the rector is still the legal recipient of most of the income
from the parish's endowment, the parish itself is cared for either by
a vicar, appointed and paid under a deed known as an ordination
of a vicarage, or by a curate, paid by the rector and removable at
his will. Some parishes may stand outside the diocesan organisation
altogether; ordinary jurisdiction being exercised either by another
bishop or by a rector of the type just described. Such parishes are
commonly known as "peculiars", and in them acts requiring
episcopal orders are performed when the ordinary is not a bishop,
either by the diocesan bishop or by a bishop of the ordinary's own
choice, according to the extent of the peculiar jurisdiction in question.

This parochial system, which is to be found in the earliest
episcopal registers, had been growing and developing ever since the
Church in Western Europe started to spread into the countryside in
the fourth century, and was in its final form the work of the great
legislators, who occupied the papal throne in the twelfth and early
thirteenth centuries. Broadly speaking it is still in operation in the
Church of England, though modified at the Reformation through
the disappearance of religious houses; and its oddities and abuses
have been pruned away since the opening of Victoria's reign, first
by numerous acts of Parliament and since 1919 by measures of the
Church Assembly. It is the aim of this and a succeeding paper to
outline the most important stages in the development of the system
from a legal and administrative point of view. The outstanding
figures are the bishops, notably St. Caesarius of Arles, responsible
for the canons in the great series of councils, held in Gaul in the
first half of the sixth century; the emperor, Charlemagne; and the
two popes, Alexander III and Innocent III, the finest lawyers
which the Christian Church has ever possessed. In our own country

no small part in the development was played by archbishop Wulfstan II, archbishop of York from 1002-1023. This paper will deal with the beginnings of the parochial system or parish churches of the first foundation as Henry Wharton called them. This was the system under which the Church carried on its pastoral work broadly speaking on the continent down to the accession of Pepin the Short as King of the Franks in 751 and in Anglo-Saxon England down to the Viking invasions of the mid-ninth century.

2 *The City Parish in the Roman Empire*

The word "parish" which is the English equivalent of the Latin *parochia* and the Greek *paroikia*, has been used by the Church since its very early days to denote the primary unit, through which it carries on its mission. Christianity began as a city religion. In the first three or four centuries of the Church's existence it was in the cities of the Roman Empire that fully organised Christian communities were normally found. Such a community in each city was called a *parochia*. The word signified a community dwelling together in Christian charity; but carried with it a hint that the dwelling together of Christians in an earthly city was a temporary affair. They were people who awaited in joyful expectation a city that was to come.

The parish of the early Church differed very considerably from the later mediaeval and modern institution of the same name. It meant the community of Christians in a city, not the geographical area which they occupied. The chief resident clergyman was not as in a modern parish a priest, the rector or vicar, but the bishop. The parish, formed by the Christians in each city, was also a diocese in the modern sense of the word; and it was on the bishop that the life and work of the parish depended.

The bishop stood in the same relation to the Christians in the city as the rector or vicar to the people of a modern parish. In many cities, at any rate up till the fourth century, there was only one church, and here the bishop presided at all the services of the parish. He alone baptised as well as confirmed, he was the celebrant at every mass, he alone preached, he alone reconciled to the Church those who had sinned and were penitent; and of course he alone ordained. But he was not the only clergyman in the parish; he was assisted by other clergy, or clerks as they are called, priests, deacons and clerks in minor orders. The priests were particularly his assistants in the administration of baptism and the celebration of mass; and in his absence or in a vacancy of the bishopric they administered both these sacraments. The deacons, of whom the chief was in the later days of the Roman Empire to be called the

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PLATE I
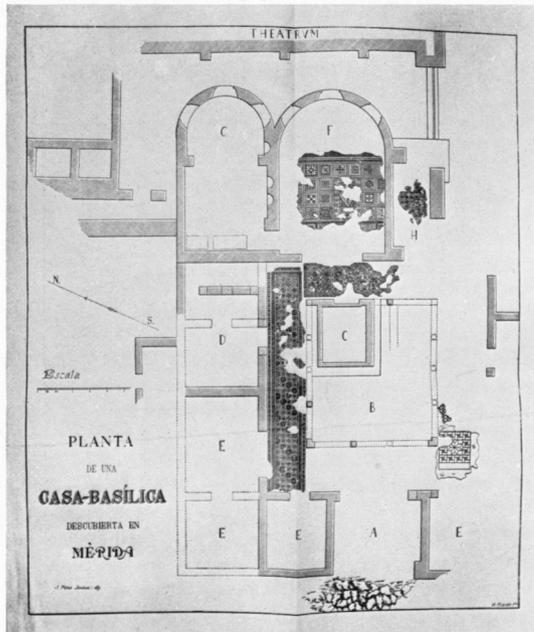
MERIDA, SPAIN. Plan of 4th century Church and Bishop's House. The entrance is on the west side at A. The rooms are arranged round an *atrium* or *patio* (B) with its *impluvium* (C) in the north-east corner. On the east side of the atrium is the Church (F), with the Baptistery leading off it. Note the apsidal east end of the Church and Baptistery, and the niches on the south wall of the Baptistery for the candidates' clothes. The rooms (D, E) are living rooms; it is thought that D may have been a dining room.

PLATE II
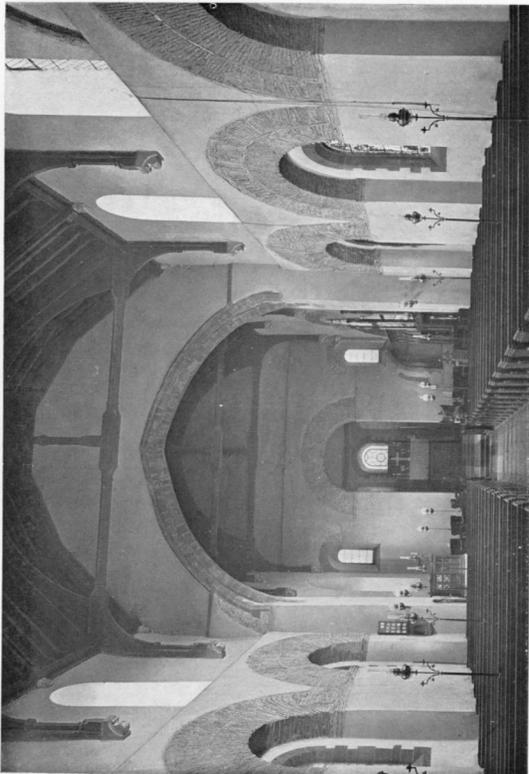
BRIXWORTH NORTHAMPTONSHIRE. Nave of the 7th century Church looking east. The apsidal sanctuary is a Victorian reconstruction. In the chancel arch was originally a triple stone arcade, separating chancel and nave. Note the original nave arcades, now filled in to form the outside walls.

Photo by courtesy of Dr. J. R. H. Weaver

archdeacon, assisted the bishop in the management of the parochial finances; while the clergy in minor orders, sub-deacons, acolytes, exorcists, readers, and door-keepers all had their particular functions to perform during the services of the Church.

The clergy could not exercise their functions except under the authority of the bishop. If there was more than one church in a city, a clerk could not minister in it, unless specially deputed to do so by the bishop; much less could a clerk start up a church on his own without the bishop's permission. A clerk could not leave the city and serve as such elsewhere, unless he carried with him the bishop's permission in the form of Letters Commendatory; nor could he be ordained to higher orders in another city, unless he had received Letters Dimissory from the bishop of the city where he had been first admitted to orders.

Even in a city like Rome, where by the opening of the fourth century there were a number of churches, the principle that the Christians in a city were under the direct pastoral care of the bishop was still maintained. In Rome the work of the Church was carried on through the titular churches, as they are usually called, eventually fixed at twenty-five in number, each with a staff of five or six priests assisted by clerks in minor orders. But the duties of these clergy were confined at first to preparing people living in the streets near the church for baptism and looking after those undergoing public penance. The pope took not only all baptisms, but also all masses, celebrating at each church in turn, and the consecrated elements were carried by acolytes to each of the titular churches and here administered to the people by the priests. Some historians think that this system of the one mass for the whole city lasted in Rome till the opening of the fifth century. At any rate masses celebrated in city churches by the priests attached to these churches were a late development.

Not only did the clergy exercise their pastoral and liturgical functions in strict dependence on the bishop; they were also dependent on him financially. The Church in each city could legally own property, which consisted of houses, farms, profits from commercial undertakings, and the offerings made in money or kind by the faithful. Attached to two fifth century basilicas, which have been excavated at Salona outside Split, are the remains of a machine for pressing grape and olive skins, the survival of the plant which was used to turn into wine and olive oil the grapes and olives grown on the farms belonging to the Salonan Church. The property of the Church in each city was administered by the bishop. From it he paid his clergy their stipends, the amount each received being left to his discretion. The system, as one would

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expect, produced frequent quarrels over money between a bishop and his clergy; and under an unbusinesslike bishop, a church might be brought near to financial ruin.

Various remedies were devised to deal with this problem. The most important of these was the rule established by the papacy towards the end of the fifth century for the bishops of the suburbicarian sees, that is the sees of central and southern Italy and the islands of Sicily, Sardinia and Corsica, which were subject to the pope's metropolitical jurisdiction. Each bishop was to divide the revenues of his church into four equal parts. One part he was to keep for himself for his own expenses; the other three parts he was to use respectively for the stipends of his clergy, the relief of the poor and the repair of church buildings. But apart from a general direction that each clerk was to be paid according to his merits, what he actually received from the clerical quarter was still left to the bishop's discretion. From the letters of St. Gregory the Great, one gathers that there was a custom in some churches of dividing one-third of the clerical quarter amongst the priests and deacons of the church, and the other two-thirds amongst the more numerous clerks in minor orders.

The number of clergy in each city, except in places like Rome or Constantinople, was quite small. At Cirta (the modern Constantine) in North Africa at the outbreak of the Diocletian persecution in 303 there were besides the bishop, four priests, three deacons, four sub-deacons, seven readers and a number of sextons. Just over a century later at Hippo, it has been calculated that St. Augustine only had two priests, six or seven deacons, and one sub-deacon. On the other hand already at Rome in the middle of the third century there were forty-six priests, seven deacons, seven sub-deacons, forty-two acolytes and fifty-two exorcists, readers, and door-keepers; though in Alexandria itself at the time of outbreak of the Arian controversy about 320, there were only seventeen priests and twenty-four deacons.

In the smaller cities after the peace of the Church the clergy often lived with their bishop in what was called in Merovingian Gaul, a domus ecclesiae. An idea of what such a building was like in a city where the Christian community was small, may be gained from the remains of a fourth century bishop's house and church at Merida in Spain, built out of what was previously the theatre (Plate I). On the east side of the atrium opposite the entrance are two rooms, one of which was the church and the other the baptistry, with a font let into the ground and niches in the walls for the candidates' clothes, while living rooms for the bishop and his few senior clergy opened off the north and south sides of the atrium. Those on the south side have disappeared.

3 The First Country Churches

By the opening of the fourth century Christianity in western Europe had begun to establish itself in the countryside. The chief though not the only agents in the work were bishops, who in the fourth and fifth centuries, converted the country-people by going from village to village, like St. Martin of Tours, preaching the Gospel, and then consolidated their missionary work by building churches in the larger villages, especially those on important roads, and in the small walled towns of the civil territory belonging to their city. There was no attempt to divide up the city's territory into geographical areas, each with its church; much less to build a church for each centre of population.

With this spread of Christianity to the countryside, the word parish came to be applied not only to the church and christian community in the city, but also to individual country churches or all churches in the country, as distinct from the church in the city, under a bishop's care. At the same time an alternative word came into use, namely diocese. This was a technical term in the civil administration of the Roman Empire; originally it meant the territory subject to a city and then after the Diocletian reforms the unit between a province and a prefecture. The Church took over the word and used it to denote either the whole area, city and country districts governed by a bishop, or the country districts only or individual churches in these districts. In sixth century Gaul diocese was the word often used for what we should call a country parish; while in seventh century Anglo-Saxon England the whole area under the bishop's rule was called his parish. Only from the ninth century onwards, did parish and diocese begin to be used exclusively in the modern way. Up till then, it is often only from the context that one can tell to which unit the words refer. To avoid confusion we shall in the rest of these pages use diocese for an area ruled by a bishop, and parish for a unit in that area.

To return to the spread of the first country churches or mission stations. Judging from the details given by Gregory of Tours at the end of his History of the Franks, their growth was slow. In the diocese of Tours the work was begun by St. Martin, who built six churches; sixteen were built in the course of the fifth century; by the time Gregory became bishop in 573 six more had been built, and Gregory tells us that he added to the number. In the diocese of Auxerre at the end of the sixth century there were thirty-seven country churches; covering the same area in the fourteenth century were two hundred and seventeen. Figures are also available for the numbers of country churches in the dioceses of what is now north-west Spain and northern Portugal in the sixth century. In 569 a council of the Church in the kingdom of the Suevi was held at

Lugo; new dioceses were created; and lists have survived, purporting to give the names of the churches in each diocese under the new scheme. If these lists are a genuine account of a re-arrangement of churches that followed the Council of Lugo and not a later invention, the number of churches in each diocese varied from thirty in that of Braga, probably the result of the missionary work of St. Martin of Braga, to four in each of the dioceses of Lugo and Astorga.

The best picture of how these first country churches were organised and continued to be so up till the mid-eighth century is to be obtained from the canons of the great series of the national and regional councils held in Gaul in the first half of the sixth century; particularly the Council of Agde (506) for Visgothic Gaul; the Council of Carpentras (527) and the Second Council of Vaison (529) for Ostrogothic Gaul; the Council of Epaon (517) for Burgundy; and the First Council of Orleans (511), the Council of Clermont (535), and the Third and Fourth Councils of Orleans (538, 541) for all or part of Merovingian Gaul. The legislation of these councils represents the first attempt of any part of the Church in western Europe to create a body of law governing the work of country churches. The mind largely behind it was that of the great bishop of Arles, St. Caesarius (c. 470-543).

The churches in a diocese according to this legislation fell into three grades; there were churches in the episcopal city, country churches with a permanent staff of clergy, where the surrounding Christians regularly worshipped, and oratories on the estates of Christian landowners. In the city itself the churches were organised very much as they had been in earlier centuries. Individual churches might have their staff of clergy; but the whole city was worked as one unit with the bishop still occupying the same relation to the people as a modern parish priest. For instance at Tours itself on the greater festivals in the sixth century, only one church (there were three in the city) was used; and here the bishop, the city clergy and the laity assembled for all the services. Gregory of Tours has preserved the scheme drawn up by one of his predecessors, detailing which of the three churches was to be used on each festival.

Country churches when they were first built had been looked after by clergy sent out from the city. But by the sixth century in Gaul country churches had their own staff of clergy, reproducing in miniature the clerical organisation of the Church in the city. In the larger churches there were several priests, deacons and clerks in minor orders; sometimes its chief sub-deacon rejoiced in the title of arch-subdeacon. The clergy formed a kind of college under an archpriest, who occupied the same position as a modern rector or vicar; and often they lived a semi-communal life in a domus ecclesiae. Such a church had a school where children who had been admitted to the order of readers could be trained for the priest-

hood. A smaller church had one priest and one or two clerks in minor orders.

The clergy in these country churches exercised all the functions which, in the days when the city and diocese had been coterminous, they had exercised as assistants to the bishop. They baptised, preached, and celebrated mass; and it was to these country churches that the people living round in the parochia of the church looked for the ministrations of their religion. But one must remember that the parochia was a large and ill defined area often embracing several villages; and the church more like a mission station than a modern parish church. They were in fact the centres from which the neighbouring countryside was won for the Christian faith.

Although the priests and other clergy in these parish churches exercised liturgical functions, which before the spread of the Church to country districts had been exercised by the clergy as assistants to the bishop, they were still liturgically dependent on the bishop and as much his clergy as those in the city. No church could come into being unless the bishop had consecrated it, nor could there be any services taken in it, unless its clergy had been either ordained by the bishop or, if ordained in another diocese, accepted by him as members of the clergy of his diocese. Neither baptism nor unction could be administered except with the chrism, which the bishop alone could bless, and which the clergy had to fetch from the city each Lent. The baptism administered by the clergy had to be completed by confirmation at the hands of the bishop. At regular intervals the bishop held visitations; he visited his country churches to see what was going on. Regularly too the clergy in country churches were summoned by the bishop to a synod in the city, to receive instruction in the performance of their pastoral duties. Both visitations and diocesan synods are institutions originally designed to maintain the unity of the clergy round their bishop, when they were serving churches all over a diocese and no longer working under his immediate direction in the city.

The archpriest or priest of a church was chosen by some form of election on the part of the clergy and people of the church, under the direction of the archdeacon of the church in the city, one of whose functions was the looking after of country churches. The priest so chosen was instituted, to use modern language, as arch-priest or priest by the archdeacon, and a Merovingian formula of institution of an archpriest has survived. It comes from the diocese of Bourges and dates from the eighth century. The text of this dark ages predecessor of what we call Letters of Institution is as follows:—

"In Christo venerabile fratre illo ille archediaconus. Conperta fide et conversatione tua seu et sollertiam mentis, ideo

committimus tibi vico illo, res ejus ac menisteria tibi in Dei nomen credimus praeponendum, ut ibi archepresbeteriae curam indesiniter agas, ut serves conposita, diruta restaures, populum tibi commendatum assidua foveas praedicatione. Ita age ut ordinationem nostram ornes et inantea te reprobum inveniari non patiaris, sed meliora tibi committantur." [K. Zeumer, *Formulae Merovingici et Karolini Aevi*, M.G.H., 1886, p. 170].

The emphasis on preaching as part of an archpriest's functions is interesting.

Up till the opening of the sixth century, although a country church of the type we have described had its own endowments, distinct from those of the church in the city, consisting of land, slaves and offerings made in money or kind, these were still administered by the bishop; and from them he supplied the needs of all his churches and his clergy. In the legislation of the councils mentioned on page 8 it is possible to trace out how in the course of the sixth century the administration of the endowment of country churches was by degrees transferred from the bishop to the clergy of these churches. From the revenue of his church an archpriest or priest maintained himself and his clergy, kept the church buildings in repair, distributed alms to the poor, and also paid over a share, determined by local custom, to the bishop. Individual churches in the cities also had their own endowments; but these were still administered by the bishop, subject to a regulation that of the offerings made to these churches half was to go to the bishop and half be divided between the clergy of the church according to their status.

But churches with their own clergy and endowments were not the only type of church in a sixth century diocese in Gaul, or indeed elsewhere in western Christendom. There were also oratories built by the owner of a villa for himself and the tenants and slaves on the estate. Christian owners of villas were building these oratories in the fourth century; and were exhorted to do so by no less a person than St. John Chrysostom. Their appearance created a problem in church administration. Often a villa was outside the civil jurisdiction of a city; and its owner exercised within its boundaries governmental and judicial powers. A bishop of a neighbouring city had little grounds for claiming jurisdiction over the oratory. The owner appointed a priest from amongst his *coloni* or slaves (though a slave had to be manumitted before he could be ordained), had him ordained by any bishop he chose, and paid him what he liked.

In sixth century Gaul an estate oratory occupied a very inferior position as compared with the church in the city or parochial country churches. Often it had no priest at all, being served by clergy from a neighbouring parish church; or if it did have a priest or a clerk in minor orders, he was not on the official list of the clergy

of the diocese like those in the city or the parish churches. It could not be used for baptisms, nor might services be held in it on the greater festivals, a neighbouring parish church being resorted to by the people on these occasions; nor could the owner appoint a priest or clerk unless he first had the approval of the bishop.

In Italy, where dioceses were small in extent, country churches were mostly of the type of estate oratories. Before an oratory could be consecrated the owner of the estate had to renounce all rights in it, over and above those possessed by any Christian man in a church by virtue of his Christian profession. It was allowed no baptistry, nor could a priest be permanently attached to it.

But however low in the hierarchy of churches these estate oratories were in the sixth century, they were to have an important future. For it is from them and not from the first type of country parish church, that the majority of parish churches today are descended. Provision indeed was made by the Fourth Council of Orleans (541) to meet the case of an owner of an estate who wished his oratory to attain parochial status. The main thing required of him, being that he should provide it with endowments sufficient to maintain its own staff of clergy. When this happened, the people on the estate looked to the one time oratory for all the ministrations of the Church and not to the ancient parish church of the district; thus through estate oratories becoming parish churches, the pastoral responsibilities and importance of the ancient parish churches gradually declined. Of the thirty-seven parishes in the diocese of Auxerre in the sixth century (see above, p. 7), it has been calculated that only thirteen originated as mission stations, established in the larger villages; the remaining twenty-four being oratories that had subsequently acquired parochial status.

4 The First Parish Churches of Anglo-Saxon England

The conversion of the Anglo-Saxons to Christianity was the work of bishops who came, some from Rome, some from Iona and some from Merovingian Gaul. But for the first eighty years or so after the arrival of St. Augustine in 597, there was no diocesan system in the accepted sense of the word; only a number of missions, each under the leadership of a bishop. It was Theodore of Tarsus, archbishop of Canterbury from 668-690, who divided England into dioceses, on the basis of forming a diocese out of either each kingdom or where that was too large its tribal subdivisions.

Within each diocese the pastoral work of the Church was carried on from mission stations, called minsters, corresponding to the country parish churches of Roman and Merovingian Gaul; what later Anglo-Saxon law called "old" ministers. One such minister, the "head" minister of later Anglo-Saxon law, was the bishop's headquarters. A minister usually owed its foundation to a king, or bishop or important monastery. Its parish might be an estate belonging to the founder (many of the first ministers were founded to serve royal estates), or what Bede calls a *regio* or *provincia*, an area occupied by a particular tribe. The minster itself would be situated in the village, which was the administrative centre of the estate or *regio*. Some minster parishes covered an enormous area, and almost all of them contained a number of villages and centres of population. There were no parish boundaries in the modern sense; a minster's parish simply merged into the surrounding forest and waste.

The Latin word used for a minster is *monasterium*. But the minsters were not necessarily staffed by monks. The clergy of a minster, technically known as a *familia*, might be secular clerks, leading a semi-community life, or monks living under a rule either Benedictine or Celtic in spirit. The head of a minster was known as an *abbas* or *praepositus*, though these titles were also given to its senior clergy. Some minsters were what are known as double monasteries, that is they were primarily communities of nuns, to which were attached clerks living under some form of rule. In this case the head of the minster was an abbess. It is generally thought that in a minster with parochial responsibilities, the life of the clergy approximated more to that of secular clerks than monks. In the dark ages, though, the two kinds of life were not sharply divided, but tended to shade off into each other.

The subscriptions to the Canterbury and Worcester charters give us some idea of the numbers of clergy serving a more important minster at the beginning of the ninth century. At Christ Church, Canterbury, in 805, there were two *praepositi*, eight priests, one archdeacon, one deacon, and two clerks of lesser rank; in 824 there were two abbots, nine priests, three deacons and nine clerks of lesser rank. The staff of the cathedral minster at Worcester was slightly less; at the end of the eighth century for instance there were nine priests, four deacons and five other clerks. Incidentally both at Canterbury and Worcester the *familia* at this time was one of secular clerks. In the small minsters there were probably about two or three priests, with a few clerks in minor orders.

Within the minster the chief duties of the clergy were the mass and the divine office (attended on Sundays and great festivals by the people of the parish), ascetic exercises, and the keeping of a
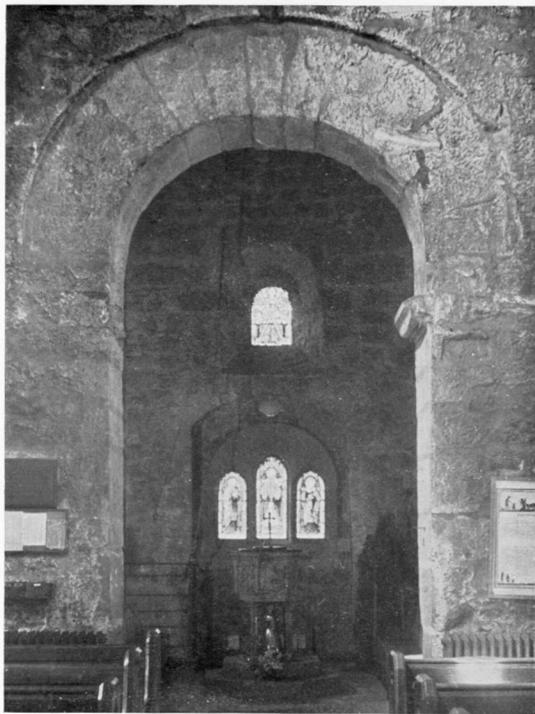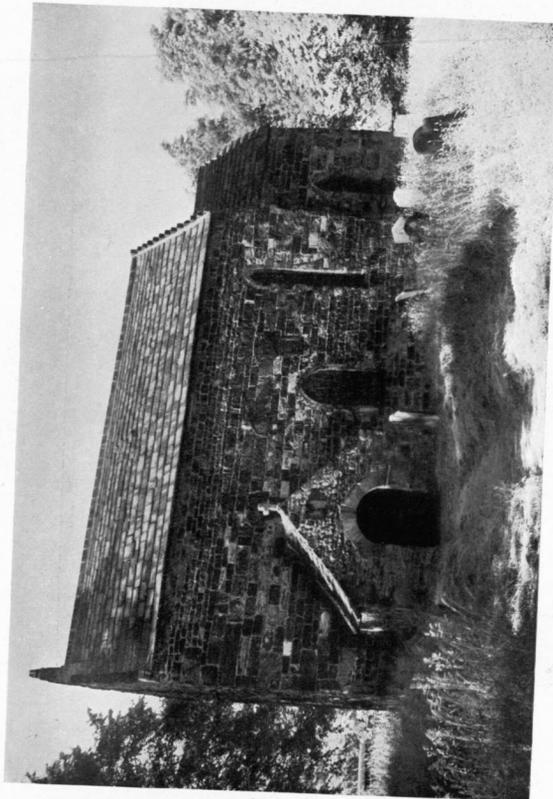
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PLATE III

CORBRIDGE, NORTHUMBERLAND. Western arch of 8th century Church, built of re-used Roman material. The Church was entered by a porch, the walls of which, seen through the arch, now form the base of a later west tower.

PLATE IV

ESCOMB, CO. DURHAM. Late 7th or early 8th century Church, possibly an example in stone of a type of Church described on pages 14-15. The large windows are of course later, and the porch is 17th century.

school, where boys in minor orders were trained for the priesthood. From the minster they went out to the villages in the parish, where they baptised, preached, taught and visited the people; and, if the village had no church, they said mass in the open air. St. Cuthbert, when he was prior of Melrose, was away on this kind of work, sometimes two or three weeks and occasionally a month at a time; and St. Boniface, as a child, used to hold edifying conversations with the clergy when they came to preach in his father's village.

The foundation charter of the minster at Breedon-on-the-Hill, Leicestershire, shows the purposes which it was thought that a minster should serve. Some time between 675 and 691 a Mercian ealdorman, Friduric, gave land at Breedon to the monastery of Medeshamstede (the later Peterborough). Friduric was impressed with the increase in the number of Christians in England, and he gave the land on the express condition that Medeshamstede should found a monastery at Breedon and there appoint a priest of good repute, who would minister baptism and teaching to the people assigned to him.

The finest remains of an early minster church are at Brixworth in Northamptonshire (Plate II), also founded as a monastery from Medeshamstede about the same time as Breedon. Here the nave has survived, though shorn of its aisles; it is now the nave of the parish church and was described by the late Sir Alfred Clapham as "perhaps the most imposing architectural monument of the seventh century yet surviving north of the Alps." Smaller, though equally imposing, are the remains of an early minster at Corbridge, Northumberland (Plate III), which was the administrative centre of a Northumbrian royal estate. Here in the eighth century was a minster, serving the estate; and a magnificent arch of re-used Roman material, which formed its western entrance, still survives as the tower arch of the present parish church. Not all minster churches were as fine as those at Brixworth and Corbridge; many like that at Lindisfarne would have been only of wood. Round the church were the living quarters of the clergy, built of wattle and daub with a thatched roof. In their layout they were not unlike the cells of a modern Carthusian monastery. The senior clergy each had a separate hut, rectangular in shape and divided into two rooms, a living room and a bedroom. In addition there were larger buildings serving as a refectory, domestic offices, workshops and living quarters for the clerks in minor orders, the servants and workpeople. The whole was surrounded by a wooden stockade or thorn hedge or a wall of turf or stone. In outward appearance the simpler type of minster would have looked in fact like nothing so much as a native village in Africa.

For most of Anglo-Saxon England it is impossible to reconstruct the lay-out of the minster system, though such an attempt has been made in the case of its Welsh counterpart, the "clas" church system

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(see William Rees, *An Historical Atlas of Wales from Early to Modern Times*, Cardiff, 1951, plate 27). But charter evidence gives some idea of the system in the diocese of Canterbury and the area represented by modern Worcestershire prior to the Viking invasions. Excluding the churches in Canterbury itself, it is almost certain that the diocese of Canterbury was organised round the seven minsters of Reculver, Minster in Thanet, Dover, Folkestone, Lyminge, Minster in Sheppey and Hoo. In what is now the east part of modern Worcestershire, in the country bordering on the Avon, there were minsters at Evesham (a monastic minster), Fladbury, Pershore and Bredon; while the triangle of country between the Severn and the Avon was served by minsters at Hanbury, Kidderminster, Kempsey, and the bishop's minster at Worcester. In another part of England, the country threaded by the middle Thames, Sir Frank Stenton is of the opinion that the most ancient minsters were at such places as Aylesbury, Lambourn, St. Mary's in Reading, Bampton and Sonning, whose parish was the *provincia*, occupied by the tribe, the *Sonningas*.

Both the clergy and the endowments of each minster were under the jurisdiction of the bishop. He placed as well as ordained the clergy, and in consultation with the *familia* chose its head, though in a number of minsters the office was hereditary. The endowments of a minster consisted not only of land, but also of dues payable in kind; church-scot at Martinmas, plough-alms at Easter and soul-scot at funerals; and they were administered jointly by the bishop and the *familia*. In certain monasteries, and minsters founded from them, the bishop's jurisdiction by virtue of a papal privilege was limited to consecrating the abbot and ordaining the clergy, chosen by the community, and correcting spiritual disorders. The temporal possessions of the monastery and its dependent minsters were exempt from his control.

The minster organisation was supplemented by churches, built by bishops, monasteries and thanes for individual villages on their estates. For instance St. John of Beverley, during his episcopate at York (705-718), consecrated churches at Bishop Burton and Cherry Burton, built respectively by the thanes Puch and Addi. Such village churches were few and far between; only in the ninth century did they come to be established in any number. If a village did not possess a church, it usually had a cross of wood or stone, set on high, where the people assembled for daily prayers, but not all existing remains of early Anglo-Saxon stone crosses originated in this way; they were often erected to mark the site of a battle or the place where a body had rested on a funeral procession, or in cemeteries as memorial crosses.

Next to nothing is known about the organisation of these early village churches. Some may have been served by a clerk in minor

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orders, with a priest from the neighbouring minster coming to say mass. When a church on an estate belonging to a thane or a monastery had a resident priest, the owner of the estate and not the bishop took the initiative in his appointment. But in this connection it is interesting to notice that Egbert, the first archbishop of York (734-766) in his *Dialogue*, the first treatise on canon law to be written by an Englishman, emphasises that no priest can serve a church, particularly one belonging to a layman, without the bishop's permission. Judging from certain regulations in archbishop Theodore's *Penitential*, the condition of a church on a thane's estate was precarious; it might be turned into a mausoleum for his heathen relations, or if wood, and most of them were, even pulled down and the wood used for some secular purpose.

The minster system was only suited to a Church in the missionary stage; it was unable to provide that constant, direct pastoral care which is needed once the missionary stage is passed and the work of building up people in the Christian faith has begun. Bede pointed this out in the famous letter, which he wrote to Egbert in 734, while he was still only bishop of York (for York did not become an archbishopric till the next year), and went on to stress the importance of providing priests in every village to preach, to celebrate the heavenly mysteries and to baptise; of creating in fact the parochial system, as we know it today. The system did not finally come into being till nearly four centuries after this letter. But to Bede belongs the honour of being the first Englishman to realise its necessity.

Further Reading

The best book on the early history of the parochial system on the continent is Imbart de La Tour, *Les Paroisses Rurales du IVe au XIe Siecle*, Paris, 1900. Unfortunately copies are not easy to come by, but its contents are summarised in the article, *Paroisses Rurales* in Cabrol et Leclercq, *Dictionnaire d'Archéologie Chrétienne et de Liturgie*, XIII, 2, pp. 2198-2235. The most recent account in English will be found in Henry G. J. Beck, *The Pastoral Care of Souls in South-East France during the Sixth Century*, Romae apud Aedes Universitatis Gregorianae, 1950. The classical English works on the subject are John Selden, *The History of Tithes*, 1618, and Henry Wharton, *A Defence of Pluralities*, 1692. They may still be read with profit. An analysis of the sixth century Gallic canons, mentioned on page 8, will be found in Carlo de Clercq, *La Législation Religieuse Franque de Clovis à Charlemagne*, Louvain, 1936.

For a general account of the first parochial system in England, the student should consult Bede's Historical Works, the best edition being *Venerabilis Bedae Opera Historica*, ed. by C. Plummer, 2 Vols., Oxford 1896; R. H. Hodgkin, *A History of the Anglo-Saxons*, 2 Vols., Oxford 1935; F. M. Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 2nd ed., Oxford,

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1947; Dorothy Whitelock, *The Beginnings of English Society*, Penguin Books, 1952. He will also find useful an older book, E. L. Cutts, *Parish Priests and their People in the Middle Ages in England*, S.P.C.K., 1898. For detailed study he should read:—

M. DEANESLEY .. ..   *The Familia at Christ Church, Canterbury, 597-832,* in *Essays in Mediaeval History presented to Thomas Frederick Tout,* ed. by A. G. Little and F. M. Powicke, Manchester, 1925, pp. 1-13.
Early English and Gallic Minsters in *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society.* Series IV. Vol. XXIII (1941), pp. 25-69

WILLIAM PAGE .. ..   *Some Remarks on the Churches of the Domesday Survey,* in *Archaeologia,* Vol. 66 (1914-15), pp. 61-102.

J. ARMITAGE ROBINSON   *St. Oswald and the Church of Worcester,* British Academy Supplementary Papers V, Oxford, 1919,
The Early Community at Christ Church, Canterbury in *Journal of Theological Studies* XXVII (1926), pp. 225-40.

F. M. STENTON ..   *Medeshamstede and its Colonies* in *Historical Essays in Honour of James Tait.* Manchester, 1933, pp. 313-326.
St. Frideswide and her Times in *Oxoniensia* I, (1936), pp. 103-112.

The documentary evidence is to be found in A. W. Haddan and W. Stubbs, *Councils and Ecclesiastical Documents,* Oxford, 1871, Vol. III, and W. de G. Birch, *Cartularium Saxonicum,* 3 Vols., London, 1885-1893.

The best accounts of the actual buildings of an old minster are A. W. Clapham, *English Romanesque Architecture Before the Conquest,* Oxford, 1930, and Charles Peers and C. A. Ralegh Radford, *The Saxon Monastery of Whitby,* in *Archaeologia,* Vol. 89 (1943), pp. 27-88.