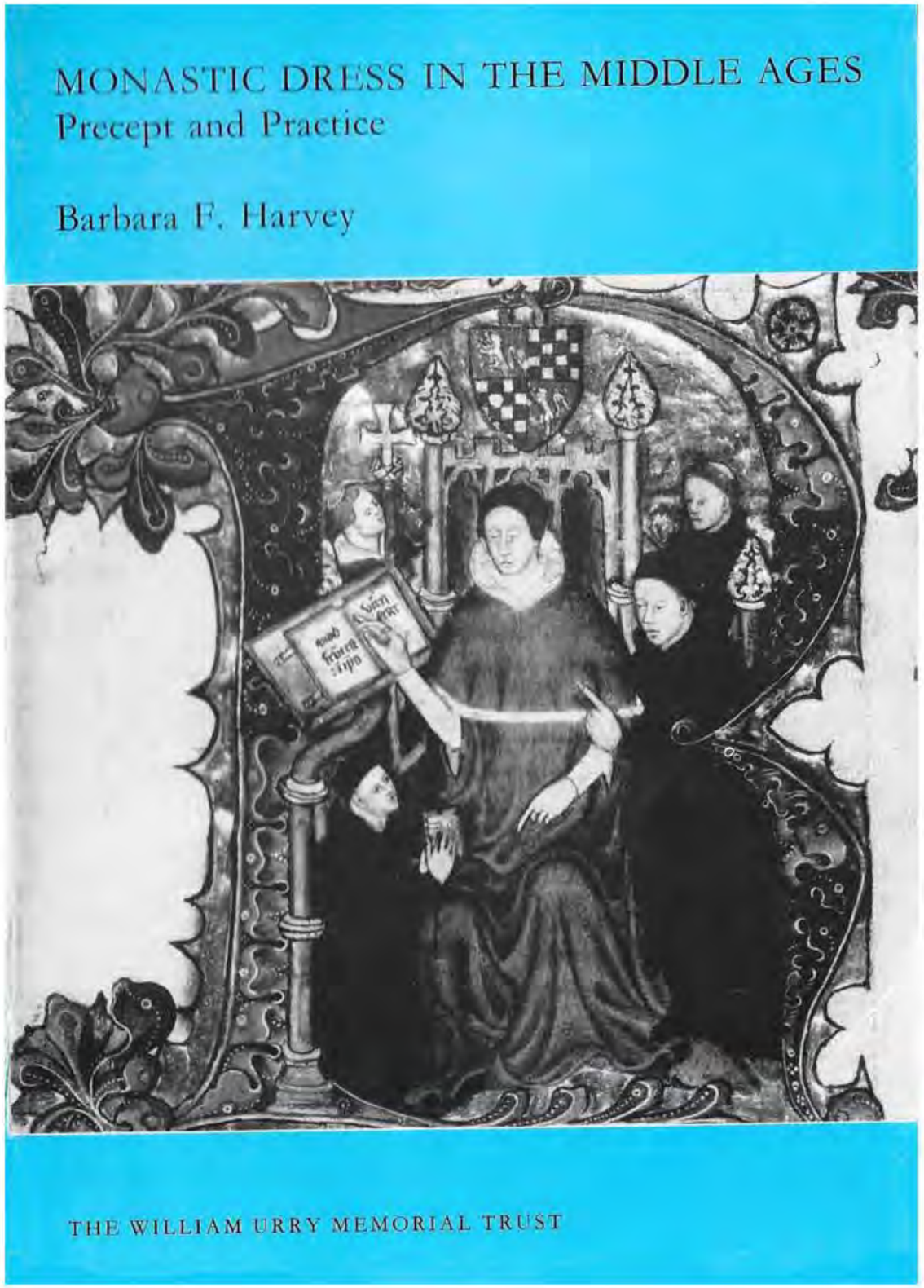

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MONASTIC DRESS IN THE MIDDLE AGES
Precept and Practice

BARBARA F. HARVEY

THE WILLIAM URRY MEMORIAL TRUST

COVER PICTURE
Archbishop Arundel presenting a book to monks of Christ Church, Canterbury. (MS Laud Misc. 165, fol. 5r°; reproduced by courtesy of the Bodleian Library, Oxford).

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This lecture, given in the Chapter Library of Canterbury Cathedral in May 1987 by Barbara F. Harvey, Fellow of Somerville College, Oxford, is the third in the series commemorating William Urry, the distinguished medieval historian, who at his death in 1981 was Fellow of St Edmund Hall and Reader in Latin Palaeography in the University of Oxford.

A Monk's Shoe from the Later Middle Ages (see p.15).
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MONASTIC DRESS IN THE MIDDLE AGES
Precept and Practice

It is an honour to be invited to give the third William Urry Memorial Lecture. The invitation left me free to choose any subject falling within Dr Urry's wide range of historical interests. I am confident that he would have been interested in the somewhat neglected subject that I have chosen and that he would have had much to contribute to it from his unrivalled knowledge of monastic life at Canterbury.

In the Middle Ages, dress was highly symbolic: it signified feeling, intention, social status, and more beside. In consequence, we have always to look beyond the colour, shape and quality of the garment in question, for the lesson which these features convey – a point vividly illustrated in the most notorious event in the history of Canterbury Cathedral. In 1170, when the monks of Christ Church, hastily and in great fear, prepared the body of Thomas Becket for burial after the murder, they discovered among the archbishop's ample clothing – for Becket felt the cold

– some items of singular interest that were quickly to become part of the legend of the saint. The monks were, of course, familiar with his outer garments, a black mantle and white rochet or tunic, and would have known that these were the distinctive dress of an Augustinian canon; but it came as a surprise to find, as they did, under these garments the black cowl and tunic of a monk, and underneath these, next to the skin, shirt and drawers of hair skin.[1] The existence of these latter penitential garments had been known only to Robert of Merton, Thomas's confessor, and it was Robert who revealed them in all their filth, crawling with lice and worms. In devout circles of the period, hair shirts may not have been so very unusual. The remarkable feature of Thomas Becket's was its length: it covered the whole body from neck to knees, a circumstance provoking so much amazement among the witnesses that we can be sure that this, at least, was quite exceptional. Not for the first time, Thomas had done the thing thoroughly.

More than one of Thomas's biographers tells us that he endured the excruciating discomforts of the hair shirt, which was opened several times a day at the back so that his chaplain could scourge him, as a means of overcoming carnal desires. The monastic habit and the rochet and mantle of a canon regular were worn as symbols, for Thomas was not a monk, and he was not a canon: he was a secular clerk. At this date, however, and, indeed, until the end of the Middle Ages, the secular clergy lacked a distinctive livery or uniform, despite the attempts made from time to time by the authorities to coax them into such attire. We should probably attribute this to the fact that secular clerks had no single place in society but were to be found at very nearly every level of the status system: ordination did not eliminate established social differences deriving from family and

connections, and clerical careers themselves, being of such diverse natures, might well add others. For such a heterogeneous collection of people, it was impossible to devise a universally recognised norm of dress. On becoming archbishop in 1162, or perhaps at a later stage in his conversion, Thomas of Canterbury, it appears, assumed the mantle and rochet of a canon regular, thus signifying to the world that he had put off the courtier and put on the clerk. The monastic cowl signified a private resolve, probably dating from his years in exile at Pontigny, beginning late in 1164, to live as far as possible as a monk: to eat what a monk might eat, and so on. But Pontigny was a Cistercian house, and the Cistercians wore white habits. Why then did Thomas choose a black habit – if he did choose it himself? Perhaps there is some truth in the later report that the garment had been sent by Pope Alexander III, who first blessed it. Thomas, however, will have known that whereas white was the colour of glory, black was the colour of repentance. Like the garment itself, the colour was symbolic.

I

In this lecture I shall consider exclusively monastic dress, in particular the dress of the so-called black monks. These were the monks who, however varied the religious practice of the time, followed the Rule of St Benedict along traditional lines, avoiding on the one hand the asceticism of a Carthusian or Cistercian and on the other the involvement in active pastoral care outside the cloister that the Premonstratensian canons as well as the

Augustinian strove to combine with a life under rule. They were of course known as the black monks after the black habits which were their characteristic dress from the eighth century, though not until much later the sole permissible livery. I shall be concerned mainly with the twelfth century to the sixteenth, and in this period mainly with the community of black monks established by St Dunstan at Westminster but later refounded, on a much grander scale, by Edward the Confessor. At the beginning of our period, the community numbered *c.*80 monks, at the end *c.*50. If not the largest community in England, it became, with the sole exception of Glastonbury Abbey, the richest: such were the material advantages of burying so many of the kings and queens of England. I shall begin with the Rule of St Benedict, which provided black monks, and many others too, with their authoritative standard of practice. When reading this and every other source bearing on the subject of monastic dress, we must remember that a monk, unlike a secular clerk, stood outside whatever status system was recognised by the rest of contemporary society: from this he was a voluntary exile, and in due course the principle that he died a civil death on making his profession was established.

It is most unlikely that St Benedict intended to prescribe an immutable form of dress for those who should follow his Rule. But in common with other monastic teachers in the late Roman Empire, where monasticism first took firm root, he would have considered it essential to dress his monks in clothes distinct from those normally worn in contemporary society, for it was precisely social status that these clothes were designed to express. St Benedict considered that, except in cold climates, a monk could make do with very few garments: just a tunic, a cowl – that is, a cloak, shaped perhaps rather like a chasuble, with a

hood attached – shoes and stockings, drawers when on a journey but not otherwise, and a scapular for work; the scapular of sixth-century Monte Cassino was probably a form of smock or apron. For the cowl, there were to be two thicknesses of cloth – one for winter and one for summer. There is a hint, too, of 'best wear' in the provision that clothes worn on a journey were to be better than usual. As to the quality of cloth, and the colour, these would vary with the district, for monks were to use whatever could be obtained locally and cheaply, and there was to be no complaint. In addition to his personal attire, a monk would need bedclothes, and a mattress, blanket, coverlet and pillow were prescribed.[2]

At a time when the barbarians were popularising the use of trousers, St Benedict prescribed for his monks, in the tunic and cowl, long and flowing garments of the kinds worn by the Roman upper classes. It was the poor quality of the clothing – the cheapness of it – that expressed the monk's lack of status. In general, St Benedict's prescriptions on dress permitted great latitude of interpretation: nothing, in fact was forbidden except the possession of more than a single change of clothing. Six centuries and more later, in a northern climate and in a society almost as far removed from St Benedict's Italy as the late medieval world is from our own, it was difficult to know where to draw the line. Just how much could be allowed to the climate? Did it legitimise the use of drawers every day, or were the Cistercians correct, as they claimed, in wearing this garment only on journeys? Were fur-lined cloaks permissible, and if so, what kinds of fur might be used? If the developing fur trade was now a source of temptation, so too was the cloth trade, brightest of all the stars in the economic firmament of the period. It was surely foolish to buy poor cloth locally when fine cloth bought at

Boston fair for less than double the price would last more than twice as long and feel much softer to the skin. Nor could monks altogether ignore the temptations of fashion. What about buttons, for example? Was the new fashion of buttons on the cuff – the forearm of the tunic – permissible? Not after Pope Clement V explicitly forbade this usage, as he did in 1312.[3] Nor had the passage of centuries left the structure of authority in the community or the internal economy of the monastery quite as St Benedict envisaged these matters. By the twelfth century, in most if not all black monk houses, immediate responsibility for clothing the monks had devolved from the abbot, whom alone St Benedict mentions, to an official known as the chamberlain, and revenues were set aside for his use. By the end of the thirteenth century, many chamberlains were finding that it made sense to modify the customary practice of issuing new items of clothing at regular intervals during the year, as, for example, tunics at Michaelmas and night shoes on 1 November, by giving a money allowance to each monk that he could spend at the tailor's shop in the monastery as he liked and when he really needed something – it made sense to an administrator to do this, but it was the thin end of what proved to be the very large wedge of personal wages, or pocket money, for monks. Thus the apparently simple matter of clothing became intimately involved with a grave moral issue: should monks have a personal income?[4] In any case, it was hard to be sure what St Benedict intended, for words were apt to change their meanings: his 'cowl' was probably what a black monk in the later Middle Ages called a 'frock'; and the later 'cowl' was a workaday garment, serving the purpose, it appears, of his scapular. As for this latter garment, it is still not quite certain what it was actually like.

Of the popes, not only Clement V but also Gregory IX (1227-

41) and Benedict XII (1334-42) issued statutes on monastic dress. By the thirteenth century, moreover, the black monks had their own legislative body. This was the General Chapter, a body meeting quite frequently throughout our period and for much of it at three-yearly intervals. There can hardly have been a meeting of the Chapter at which sartorial eccentricity in the houses sending representatives, or the reprehensible institution of clothes money, or both, were not on the agenda. In due course, Henry V tried his hand at legislating for the monks; and we can be sure too that many a bishop pronounced on clothes when visiting monasteries in his diocese. Pope, Chapter, and King faced the classic problem of the legislator: how to steer the right course between generalities that were too vague to have any effect and particularity that must soon be superseded. Clement V's decree on buttons was all very well in its way: but what about low-cut shoes – an object of concern to Benedict XII in 1336 – or the sleeves so extravagantly long that they provoked Henry V to propose half a yard as the maximum length for a cuff?[5] Nevertheless, in all the particularities of the legislation, certain principles can be discerned: garments such as the tunic were to be circular and not have openings in front or at the sides; colours were to be sober and in the case of outer garments black; fashions tending to reveal the shape of the body or of a limb were to be avoided, as was every kind of extravagance and vainglory. As for clothes money, Benedict XII's stern prohibition may have had some effect – it all but killed the practice for a time at Westminster Abbey – but in the end no authority proved capable of eradicating a practice which economy and individual advantage combined to recommend. This means that, if we wish to discover the full outlay on clothes at any time, we must take a monk's private resources into

account, as well as the official expenditure of the monastery in question. What, then, did the black monks wear in the Middle Ages, and at what intervals of time did they adopt the fashions of secular society? A single case study will not answer these questions, but it will, I hope, provide pointers.[6]

II

It will already be clear that a monk's wardrobe in the Middle Ages was more extensive than that envisaged in chapter 55 of the Rule, and that of a monk of Westminster is no exception. Out of doors – except on horseback, when special cloaks were worn – and on all formal occasions within the monastery, a monk of this house wore the so-called frock, a long garment reaching to the ankles and having ample sleeves. The Abbey's chronicler tells us that when John of Gaunt visited the Abbey in 1389, the abbot and convent, wearing their frocks, processed to the gate of the monastery, whence they conducted their distinguished visitor into the church: they were properly clad for a formal occasion.[7] In less formal circumstances, they might well have been wearing the cowl, for they were, after all, on home ground, within the monastic precinct. The cowl, their workaday garment, though itself long, probably ankle-length, was sleeveless, or, if it had sleeves, they were short. These outer garments, though never worn together, were known together and severally as the 'habit'. Under the frock or cowl, a monk wore a tunic, shirt, drawers and hose, and , in cold weather a pelisse, a special kind of tunic,

made of leather and, in some cases, lined with fur. The frock and cowl had hoods. From the mid-thirteenth century, however, if not from an earlier date, separate fur-lined hoods were provided, and these were probably intended for use with the frock or, when appropriate, the riding cloak.[8] We should envisage hoods of generous proportions, covering the shoulders and in shape resembling the academic hood of today, though cut even more generously. It is likely, however, that in due course the monks of Westminster began to use small caps on certain occasions. Such a form of covering for the monastic head is shown in a well known illustration of Archbishop Arundel presenting a book to monks of Christ Church, Canterbury.[9] The cap had the great advantage over the hood that it did not make it difficult to hear what was being said. Two kinds of covering for the feet were provided: shoes, actually called 'boots' for daytime, and slippers for night wear. In the thirteenth century it was customary at Westminster to issue winter shoes, which were lined, together with a new pair of slippers, on 31 October, and unlined shoes for the summer, also with a pair of slippers, on the day before Palm Sunday.[10] A century ago some footwear, probably dating from the fourteenth century, was discovered in what was formerly the infirmary cloister. The only complete specimen, a leather shoe, was evidently designed to cover the whole of the top of the foot but has an opening lengthwise along the top.[11] The opening was closed with leather thongs, of which parts remain. The shoe is ten inches long, and from the sole to the opening measures 4 inches on the left-hand side and $4\frac{1}{2}$ inches on the right. It is black, has a pointed toe, and is still exceedingly oily, despite the lapse of six centuries. Of all the items of clothing which I shall mention, this is the only complete specimen to survive. I should mention, finally, the special cloaks provided for use in church,

though possibly only when albs were worn and a monk lost the warmth provided by his frock. At the end of the thirteenth century these were described as 'small' and must therefore have been short.[12]

At Westminster, as commonly elsewhere, the official responsible for ensuring that all these garments were available when needed was the chamberlain. In the later Middle Ages, however, the chamberlain himself was mainly occupied in administering the properties which provided the income of his department, and in buying the raw materials, the cloth, furs and other skins. His deputy the sub-chamberlain, also a monk, saw to the actual making of the garments: this was done on the premises, in a complex of workshops known collectively as the sartry. The chamberlain's income, sufficient to clothe *c.*80 monks when first assigned to his office *c.*1100, was to a considerable extent made up of fixed rents, and in our period it was as much as he could do to provide for 50. This circumstance helps to explain the introduction of money allowances in lieu of clothing. Briefly, in the early fourteenth century, this system was extensively used at the Abbey, but the publication of Benedict XII's statutes in 1336 was fatal to these particular arrangements.[13] If, however, the late medieval monks did not receive clothes money under that name, they did receive other kinds of wages in abundance, and circumstantial evidence points to the use of some of this money on clothes. The private sector never again assumed the importance it had in the early fourteenth century, but it did take over responsibility for tunics, including the pelisse, fur-lined hoods and summer hose, and, when special night clothes were introduced in the fifteenth century, for these too: when a late medieval monk needed any of these items, he paid for them himself.

III

Responsible as he was for choosing the raw materials, the chamberlain had quite as much power to influence the well-being of the monks as those more intimately involved with the actual manufacture of garments, and some painful episodes are recorded. One of these occurred towards the end of the fourteenth century. It had been the chamberlain's practice to purchase the serge or worsted now used for the habit, not by the yard but by the cloth, and a cloth normally consisted of 23 or 24 yards. From each such cloth new habits were cut for two monks, and since each habit consisted of two items, frock and cowl, every cloth made two frocks and two cowls. The advantage of this arrangement was that the individual cloth need not be divided into exact halves: a tall monk could be paired with a short one, or a fat one with a thin one, the former, in each case, being given rather more than half the length of material, the latter rather less than half. In 1381 or 1382, however, the chamberlain began to buy half-sized cloths, only $11\frac{1}{2}$ yards long, and worse was to follow, for in order to bring the cost of a cloth down from 10s. to 8s. the piece, Br John Enston, who was chamberlain from 1397 to 1400, reduced the width of the cloth from the customary $1\frac{1}{2}$ yards to $1\frac{1}{4}$ yards or less. The monks, we are told, could scarcely support this economy, and evidently some of them did feel very strongly on the matter, as they tried to make themselves comfortable with several inches less of material around the body, for a note of the whole sad episode was inserted in the Abbey's cartulary, for posterity to read.[14] At any point in the later Middle Ages, it probably took 20 to 25

yards of cloth of various kinds to provide the complete wardrobe of a monk of Westminster. In addition, bedding was needed, and this now included, not only mattress, coverlet, and blanket, as in the Rule, but also strails – that is, sheets – and furs for the top of the bed in cold weather.[15] There can rarely have been less than *c.*1400 or 1500 yards of cloth in daily use in the personal clothing and bedding of the monks, and this is to say nothing of towels for the lavatorium and bathhouse, the tablecloths and napkins used in the refectory and misericord, the second refectory, where meat was eaten, the curtains for these rooms and for the dormitory, or the very large quantities needed to clothe the Abbey's officials, servants and retainers.

The chamberlain was, then, a large consumer of cloth, and he needed many different kinds – serge or worsted for habits; linsey-wolsey, but later serge again, for shirts; kersey, an East Anglian cloth, for hose; linen for the strips used to bind hose, and linen also for drawers and strails; blanket for slippers and bedding, and so on. Down to the early fourteenth century, a consumer with needs as large as these would have purchased much of his cloth in bulk at fairs, the episodic markets where alone he could be sure of access to the full range of the products of the English cloth industry as well as the foreign wares carried by the merchant princes of the international trade. Very likely, in this period the chamberlain's needs were satisfied in the Abbey's own fair in Westminster, held each year on 13 October, the feast of St Edward the Confessor. Later, however, the chamberlain made contracts for his large items with merchants who supplied him on a regular basis and brought their wares to the Abbey. Delivery might be an occasion for some little hospitality, as, for example, in 1338 or 1339, when three merchants bringing cloth of Cerne, in Dorset, for habits were entertained for three days.[16]

Such courtesies made it a little easier for the chamberlain to delay settlement of the bill and harder for the merchant in question to ask for this. At any rate, the chamberlain's accounts show that sometimes he enjoyed extended credit. One merchant, John Bongey, who was perhaps from East Anglia, waited 12 years to be paid for habits supplied under a contract made in 1431 or 1432, although, to judge from the chamberlain's outlay on refreshments for his attorney in the year when the account was finally settled, Bongey did in the end become impatient and threaten legal proceedings.[17]

In his choice of cloth, the chamberlain was seldom, we may think, extravagant, and sometimes circumstances obliged him to be very careful indeed. Towards the end of the thirteenth century, the monks of Westminster, the monks who served the coronation church and place of sepulture of the kings of England, were reduced to wearing frocks and cowls of the cheap, thick, cloth known as frieze, and half a century later some of their shirts were made of 'wilkoc', a very cheap cloth which could be bought for less than 3d. a yard.[18] The serge and worsted normally worn later were much superior. Even so, at 10s. or 11s. and sometimes less, a monk's habit – that is, his two outer garments – in the later Middle Ages was no more expensive than the clothing which the monastery customarily provided each year for a valet, an upper servant in its household. If the chamberlain was ever tempted to spend more than he need, it was probably to provide the monks with comfortable underwear. In the fifteenth century, he paid 6d. to 10d. per yard, depending on the year, for linen for drawers and these were relatively high prices for the fabric in question.[19]

The furs used to line the monks' hoods and boots and their pelisses are harder to identify than the varieties of cloth in use. In

the context of medieval dress, 'fur' signifies the dressed skin of any animal, including sheep and lamb, with the natural growth. In the world outside the cloister, more than comfort and warmth were involved in the choice of furs: for each social rank there was in theory an appropriate fur. For a long time the Cistercians did not use such luxuries at all. The Black Monks, however, argued that despite St Benedict's silence on the subject, the use of furs was perfectly compatible with the Rule, since the latter provided for the use of different clothes in different climates. It was only uncertain whether or not monks should forego the skins of wild beasts, some of which were particularly soft to the skin, and use only sheepskin and lambskin. *c.*1230, Gregory IX ruled on this point: the use of the skins of wild beasts was unlawful for monks.[20] At Westminster, only a generation or so later, coverlets made of the skins of rabbits, wild cat or fox were considered permissible, but only special medical reasons could justify the use of anything softer than lambskin in a pelisse.[21] If, for good reason, softer skins were used, at least the cuffs and collar were to be of lambskin, to hide the singularity of the garment from hostile gaze. I think it unlikely that the chamberlain, hard-pressed as he was to make ends meet, did often lay in anything but sheepskin or lambskin – as it happened, the least pretentious as well as the most economical choice open to the monks. Indeed, whether we consider the furs or the kinds of cloth that were used, the chamberlain's issue of clothing normally met the requirements of moderation and the avoidance of excess. If the due bounds were exceeded in this respect, it was by monks who purchased better quality cloth out of their wages and persuaded the tailor to make it up for them, and this, we know, sometimes happened. When Br Richard Exeter died in 1396 or 1397, his wardrobe included a cowl of worsted as well as

two 'livery cowls', as they are called in the inventory of his effects.[22] At this date, the chamberlain bought serge, a similar but less fine material, for cowls and frocks. Not content with this for all occasions, Br Richard had evidently paid for a cowl of worsted to be made up for himself; and likewise in the case of his frock, for he left a 'best frock' and a 'livery frock'. A few years later, Br John Canterbury also left a cowl of worsted among his effects.[23] But these were no ordinary monks: Br Richard had formerly been prior of Westminster, and Br John had held several major offices, if not the highest one. Each had enjoyed a private chamber, and no doubt a rather independent existence, in retirement.

IV

So much for quality. What about the colour of garments at Westminster? Here, too, we have to distinguish between the garments purchased out of private funds, and especially perhaps by obedientiaries and other senior monks following a relatively independent way of life, and the chamberlain's issue. Richard Exeter left at his death, not only a frock and cowl of above average quality, but also a tunic with a striped lining – and the use of striped cloth in monastic clothing had long been a bête noire of the reformers. It would be interesting to know, too, the colour of the so-called 'cloaks for London' possessed by Br John Canterbury and other obedientiaries of the period and distinct from the ordinary riding cloak. But it is significant that only the lining of Br Richard's cloak was striped: the cloak itself was probably black or some other dark colour. In general, the monks

of Westminster seem to have been conscious of the propriety of wearing regular colours. An obedientiary's riding cloak, as distinct from his cloak for London, was made of burnet, a fine cloth for which Beverley in Yorkshire was famous; being of burnet, it was probably brown or grey, if not black, but in a riding cloak such colours were permissible.[24] If a novice's wardrobe is anything to go by, at the end of the fifteenth century, not only the monastic habit but also the tunic underneath and the night gown were black.[25] It was in furnishings that the monks of Westminster gratified their desire for bright colours. In the mid-fourteenth century, the curtains in the dormitory were made of blue muslin; at the end of the century, John Canterbury had curtains of red worsted round his bed; and a century later still even the novices' windows were hung with curtains of blue buckram.[26]

Next, we must consider the shape of the monastic garments – always a sartorial minefield, and for us, given the reticence of our sources, the most elusive of all topics. Yet we can detect interesting changes in the shape of three garments: shirt, drawers, and tunic. But I must first deal with some preliminary points. Although a monk normally wore only one tunic, a layman who could afford to do so wore two: the under-tunic, known by the end of our period as the doublet: and the super-tunic, later the cote-hardie or jerkin. Not surprisingly, over so long a period, both garments underwent considerable changes, affecting length, and other points of style.[27] It became the purpose of the authorities regulating monastic dress to prevent a sympathetic development of monastic tunics, and this purpose was pursued with particular vigour during the fourteenth century, when, as a matter of fact, both under-tunic and super-tunic became much shorter than formerly and of a tighter fit, the

sleeves of many an under-tunic acquired buttons along the forearm, and those of the super-tunic became extravagantly long. The later doublet, successor to the under-tunic, itself varied in length, but by the early sixteenth century, it commonly reached to the knee. The last monks of Westminster may actually have seen the most famous doublet of all, that worn by Henry VIII in the 'Holbein' portraits: this fell to a point just above the knee, but the jerkin worn over it, to the knee itself. In the course of the fifteenth century it had become fashionable to show the top of the shirt above the doublet. Formerly, however, the shirt had been an invisible under-garment.

Two other points of a preliminary kind claim attention: the often uncertain meaning of medieval measures of cloth, and the all important but entirely obscure matter of the size of the monks we are considering. As a matter of fact, the only monk whose size provokes comment in our sources is Br John Canterbury. Br John possessed a suit of armour – an unusual item to find in a monastic wardrobe, but he took part in the disastrous crusade which Bishop Henry Despenser led to Flanders in 1383, supposedly to promote the cause of pope against anti-pope. When, later, the monks of Westminster tried to dispose of this, they found that its exceptional dimensions made it a drug on the market: Br John, we are told, had the longest limbs of any man in England.[28] With this exception, we are left in the dark. I shall assume that the average monk was rather shorter than an average man today, though not necessarily thinner. As for measures of cloth, we are normally left to form our own judgement of those in use, but some deviations from standard lengths and widths are recorded. The long ell, used for linen, measured $1\frac{1}{4}$ yards. Blanket was purchased, on occasion, in three widths – respectively, $\frac{3}{4}$ yard, 1 yard, and $1\frac{1}{2}$ yards. The wide serge

mentioned in the early sixteenth century was probably $1\frac{1}{4}$ yards wide; the narrow, 1 yard.[29]

In the Middle Ages, monastic shirts were quite commonly made of linsey-wolsey, and the latin word for this cloth, *stamineum*, was retained for the garment itself, whatever the material actually in use. From the mid-fourteenth century, the shirts at Westminster were made of serge, and 4 or $4\frac{1}{2}$ yards of material were allowed for each garment. It is unlikely that this cloth was less than a yard wide, and it may well have been wider. We must, I think, envisage a long, ankle-length garment, and a loose one, probably with generous sleeves – and a good thing too, since the monks of this period probably slept in their shirts, and tight-fitting garments would have been most uncomfortable in bed. Early in the sixteenth century, around 1510, our sources seem to betray a change in the shape of the shirt, or perhaps a decision to adopt as a permanency a change which the tailor had been moving towards for some time. The chamberlain now began to buy two different widths of cloth for this garment: $2\frac{1}{4}$ yards of wide cloth for the back and front – that is, for the back and front together – and $1\frac{1}{2}$ or $1\frac{3}{4}$ yards of narrow cloth for the sleeves and so-called gores.[30] In this period the word 'gore' already has several senses: in the present case it probably denotes a piece let into the bodice to facilitate movement. If so, it seems likely that the shirt now had a tighter bodice than formerly. But, with more than a yard of material for the back and as much for the front, it was still quite a long garment, though falling to the thigh, not the ankle. Even allowing for the gores, $1\frac{1}{2}$ or $1\frac{3}{4}$ yards of the narrow material – itself probably a yard wide – would have been enough to make full sleeves, of a kind very popular in early Tudor England, though not enough for the tailor to attempt anything extravagant. A little before this date, in the

early 1490's, the chamberlain's accounts begin to specify white serge for shirts.[31] If this insistence on white was then new, it may tell us when the top of the monastic shirt began to show above the top of the tunic, and colour became important.

The tunic, worn over the shirt, is a more elusive garment: it was normally a charge on the monk's private funds and is therefore unnoticed in the chamberlain's accounts. But, of course, it must have been as long as the shirt; full sleeves would have been needed to accommodate those of the shirt; and it was probably the rather tight bodice of the tunic that determined the shape of this part of the shirt. The tunic made for a young monk named Martin James in 1493, which happens, most unusually, to be mentioned in our sources, required just under $3\frac{1}{2}$ yards of black cloth, of unspecified width, and 6 yards of frieze for the lining which was evidently of double thickness.[32] It seems very likely that the hemline of the monastic tunic had moved upwards since the fourteenth century: it had followed, though at long remove, the hemlines of secular society. Was it divided – that is, did it open down the middle – or was it still a circular garment, put on over the head? On that point our sources are silent but when we consider the number of buttons that would have been needed for a divided tunic, the labour needed to sew them on and replace them when they fell off, in a workshop where a degree of economy in the use of labour was practised, to say nothing of the time needed to do them up on rising in the morning, it seems likely that the undivided garment would still have been in use. This would have pleased an old-fashioned rigorist; so too the fact that the monastic tunic of this late period was black. But such a person would have been pained by any tightening of the bodice, and a sartorial fundamentalist might still have objected to the edging of fur round the cuffs: the

purchase of 5 'tavelins' – pieces of fur – for the sleeves of Martin James's tunic shows that this was still a feature of the garment at Westminster. Even so, an early Tudor monk of Westminster, with full but not extravagant sleeves of black cloth showing under the sleeves of his frock or providing his only visible sleeve when he wore the cowl, and with perhaps a little of his white serge shirt showing at the neck of the tunic and outer habit, was not exactly the glass of fashion.

As for the monastic drawers, down to the mid-fourteenth century, these took as much as two ells per pair. The ells in question were long ones, each measuring $1\frac{1}{4}$ yards; and some of the linen was 1 yard wide, some $1\frac{1}{4}$ yards.[33] Clearly, the drawers of this period were of the very long variety, already beginning to be superseded in secular wardrobes in the twelfth century. From the 1350's, however, only 1 yard or $1\frac{1}{4}$ yards of material was allowed, and this must indicate a change, at long last, to short drawers.[34] In general, I think we must acquit the monks of Westminster of being too quick to adapt the shape of their garments to that in fashion for comparable garments in the world at large.

V

Finally, I shall say something about monastic night clothes. St Benedict assumed that a monk would sleep fully clothed, in tunic and cowl; but, unusually for the period, he seems to have envisaged a change of garments on retiring to bed: to meet this need, and to allow for washing, each monk was to have two

tunics and two cowls. Thus only when the change of clothes was in the wash would he need to sleep in the garments that he had worn by day. For the greater part of the Middle Ages, it was regarded as absolutely essential that a black monk should wear shirt, drawers and stockings in bed, and until the fourteenth century some considered that one of the outer garments should be worn too. But the practice of changing the garments at night was, for a long time, abandoned. Prudery may largely explain this circumstance. As long as monks slept in dormitories which had no partitions or cubicles, changing at night, with the attendant risk of exposing parts of the naked body to the gaze of one's neighbours, could only be regarded as morally dangerous. In this period at Westminster, when a change of clothing was necessary, a monk was expected to return to the dormitory at a point in the day when he would otherwise have been reading in the cloister and effect the change under cover of his frock, much as, on the beach, we sometimes take clothes off and put them on using a bathing wrap as a tent.[35]

The introduction of partitions or cubicles into monastic dormitories made the need for quite so many clothes in bed seem less urgent. At first, this new privacy was secured simply by hanging curtains round each bed. The fact that the General Chapter of the Black Monks, meeting at Reading in 1277, found it necessary to order the removal of such curtains from dormitories may mean that the practice of hanging them there was fast creeping in.[36] By the early fifteenth century, it no longer seemed reasonable to require monks to wear an outer garment in bed, though Henry V, in his reforming statutes, made the brave attempt;[37] but in the end even he agreed that shirt, drawers and stockings were sufficient. We should probably envisage these garments as the night attire of a monk of Westminster at this

time, and, if so, practice was unchanged from the thirteenth century.[38] We know, however, that in the 1490s even a novice's wardrobe here included a so-called night-coat, a garment made from black cotton and having a double lining of cheaper material: such a garment is mentioned in the list of the clothes provided for William Breynt, on his clothing as a monk of Westminster in 1493.[39] It is a safe inference that the community as a whole changed into special night-clothes before retiring to bed. Cubicles are mentioned in the dormitory at Westminster at this time and may long have been in existence there. In the old days, when the frock had been used as a bathing tent at every change of clothing, the shirt must have been the most difficult garment to manoeuvre into position, for it was in one piece and had to go over the head; yet a monk who came out of his tent for a moment to execute this operation would have been partly naked. In a cubicle, these problems were greatly eased. The monastic night-coat was probably a circular garment, of much the same length as the day-time tunic – that is, if I am right, thigh-length. It would have been worn with drawers and hose. A kerchief and a night-cap completed William Breynt's sleeping attire. Night-caps made of linen are mentioned much earlier, in the thirteenth century, but then as exceptional items, allowed in cases where perspiration would otherwise soil the pillow.[40] From the night-cap's inclusion in a novice's wardrobe two centuries and more later, we can conclude that it too was now a perfectly normal item of attire. It would have done something to keep monks warm in a dormitory of vast proportions which did not lose all its chill when cubicles were installed.

VI

It is time to ask what the clothes of a black monk, and in particular those of a monk of Westminster, symbolised, and what perhaps unintentional signals they now convey. As with so much else in monastic life in this period, the signals are somewhat conflicting. Striped linings to the tunic and special cloaks for expeditions to London suggest a certain responsiveness to the ways of the world, and in the case of the cloaks, a desire to do in Rome as Rome did. The disparity between a monk's regulation outfit and the clothes purchased with his private wages reminds us of the extent to which the common life in a late medieval monastery was undermined by the pursuit of individuality. More noteworthy, however, than any of these things is surely the monks' slowness to adapt to the fashions of the world, and, above all, their sustained loyalty to black: to the end of the Middle Ages, nearly everything in a monk's wardrobe that would be visible to other eyes, and some other things beside, was black. Like Becket, the monks of Westminster knew that black was the colour of repentance; and it was the colour that they were constantly bidden to wear by the various authorities taking an interest in their style of life. Yet in wearing this colour so consistently they principally affirmed their corporate identity and solidarity with other monks of their order, in a world where the difference between the several religious orders – between, for example, monks and friars, or Cluniacs and Cistercians – often seemed quite as great as those separating all the clergy from the laity. Far more than a fear of what Pope, King or General

Chapter might say, this need to stand shoulder to shoulder with other monks in a society where many powerful enemies existed recommended the kind of observance that we find at Westminster.

NOTES AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

1 *Materials for the History of Thomas Becket*, ii (Rolls Series, 1876), pp. 17, 321; Guernes de Pont-Sainte-Maxence, *La Vie de Saint Thomas Becket*, ed. E. Walberg (Paris, 1936), lines 5776 ff.; and for comment, F. Barlow, *Thomas Becket* (1986), pp. 238–9.

2 *Rule*, cap. 55. For invaluable comment on these and later developments, G. de Valous, *Le Monachisme Clunisien des Origines au xv^e Siècle*, i (1970), pp. 229 ff. For the significance of white and black, see *Letters of Peter the Venerable*, ed. G. Constable (2 vols., 1967), i, p. 116; ii, pp. 286 ff., 368–9. For Roman practice, J. Carcopino, *Daily Life in Ancient Rome*, ed. H.T. Rowell (1941), pp. 153–6. J. Mayo, *A History of Ecclesiastical Dress* (1984) is a useful general survey.

I am greatly indebted to Mrs M.T. Griffin and Mrs S.J. Loach for help with the subject-matter of this lecture, and to Dr Carolyn Clarke, who made the sketches which illustrated it when it was delivered on 6 May 1987.

3 Clementines, *Ne in agro*, III, x, 1.

4 D. Knowles, *The Religious Orders in England*, ii (1955), pp. 240–3.

5 *Concilia Magnae Britanniae et Hiberniae*, ed. D. Wilkins (4 vols., 1737), ii, p. 607 (24); *Documents Illustrating the Activities of the General and Provincial Chapters of the English Black Monks, 1215–1540*, ed. W.A. Pantin (3 vols., Camden, 3rd ser., xlv, xlvii, liv) [= *Chapters*], ii, p. 112; cf. p. 117.

6 The following account of practice at Westminster Abbey is based mainly on the chamberlain's accounts (W.A.M. 18717 ff.) I thank the Dean and Chapter of Westminster for permission to use these and other records in

the Muniment Room at the Abbey and to reproduce the photograph forming the frontispiece to this lecture. I am especially indebted to the staff of the Muniment Room for the very generous facilities which I have enjoyed there. [W.A.M. = Westminster Abbey Muniments.]

7 *The Westminster Chronicle, 1381–1394*, ed. and trans. L.C. Hector and B.F. Harvey (1982), p. 408.

8 *Customary of the Benedictine Monasteries of Saint Augustine, Canterbury, and Saint Peter, Westminster*, [=*Customary*]. ii, ed. E.M. Thompson (Henry Bradshaw Society, 1904), pp. 149–50.

9 Reproduced, from Bodleian Library, Oxford, MS. Laud misc. 165, in M. Aston, *Thomas Arundel* (1967), frontispiece, and on the cover of this lecture.

10 *Customary*, ii, p. 151.

11 See frontispiece.

12 W.A.M. 5879*.

13 W.A.M. 18718 ff. However, the monks continued for a time to receive money for boots. For clothes money at Westminster in the mid-thirteenth century, see *Customary*, ii, p. 149.

14 [W.A.M.] Liber Niger Quaternus, fos. 80–80^{v}.

15 *Customary*, ii, pp. 140, 146; and for expenditure on strails, W.A.M. 18717 ff.

16 W.A.M. 18721.

17 W.A.M. 18753.

18 W.A.M. 18717, 18724.

19 W.A.M. 18734 ff. Cf. J.E.T. Rogers, *History of Agriculture and Prices in England, 1259–1793* (7 vols., 1866–92), iv, pp. 583–6.

20 *Les Régistres de Grégoire IX*, ii. ed. L. Auvray (1907), no. 3045 (24); cf. *Statutes of Peter the Venerable*, ed. G. Constable, J.D. Brady and D.C. Waddell (Corpus Consuetudinum Monasticarum, vi (1975), p. 55).

21 *Customary*, ii, pp. 146–7.

22 W.A.M. 6603; E.H. Pearce, *The Monks of Westminster* (1916), pp. 101–2.

23 W.A.M. 18883A; Pearce, *op. cit.*, pp. 107–8.

24 For examples, see W.A.M. 18724, 18727.

25 W.A.M. 33290, fo. 18 (a list of the items provided for William Breynt at his clothing in 1493). The 'coat' of this list was formerly the 'tunic'. The chamberlain's accounts show that the outer habit was always black.

26 W.A.M. 18727, 18789, 18883A.

27 For short accounts of the changes in secular dress referred to in this paragraph, see N. Bradfield, *Historical Costumes of England* (2nd edn, 1958), and J. Laver, *Concise History of Costume* (1969).

28 Pearce, *Monks of Westminster*, p. 107.

29 The long ell: W.A.M. 18739, 18749; cf. P. Grierson, *English Linear Measures* (1972), p. 12. Widths of blanket: W.A.M. 18723–4. The widths of serge have been inferred from the prices and price differentials in W.A.M. 18795 ff. In the mid-thirteenth century, an ell is defined at Westminster Abbey as four hands' length (*Customary*, ii, 147).

30 W.A.M. 18795 ff.

31 W.A.M. 18785 ff.

32 W.A.M. 33290, fo. 15, where, however, the name is given as 'James Martin'. In the same year, a tunic for the novice William Breynt, who was perhaps rather small, was made from only $2\frac{1}{2}$ yards of cloth and $4\frac{1}{4}$ yards of lining (*ibid.*, fo. 18).

33 W.A.M. 18719, 18721.

34 W.A.M. 18725 ff.

35 *Customary*, ii, p. 145.

36 *Chapters*, i, p. 80.

37 *Ibid.*, ii, p. 115; cf. pp. 121, 124.

38 *Customary*, ii, p. 141. No separate night-clothes are mentioned in the inventories of Richard Exeter's and John Canterbury's effects.

39 W.A.M. 33290, fo. 18. The garment was made from $2\frac{1}{4}$ yards of black cotton and $4\frac{1}{4}$ yards of lining.

40 *Customary*, ii, p. 146.

MONASTIC DRESS IN THE MIDDLE AGES

Precept and Practice

'In the Middle Ages, dress was highly symbolic: it signified feeling, intention, social status, and more beside'. Miss Harvey begins by applying this proposition to the clothes worn by Thomas Becket: the lice-infested hair-shirt discovered by the monks of Christ Church after the murder, the monastic habit expressing his devotion to the monastic ideal although he was never a monk, and the mantle and rochet of a canon regular – the outer garments which he assumed on becoming archbishop, to announce to the world that 'he had put off the courtier and put on the clerk'.

From this insight which the study of dress gives into one of the best-known figures of the Middle Ages, Miss Harvey goes on to consider monastic dress in general and – drawing on the records of Westminster Abbey – that of the black monks in particular. She shows how the claims of warmth and hygiene were gradually recognised in the provision of leather pelisses for winter wear and special clothes to sleep in, and how the official issue of clothing each year was supplemented by purchases from the monks' own resources. Much fascinating detail is provided on the kinds and measures of cloth, and the way in which its bulk purchase was undertaken. Yet the viewpoint is throughout that of the historian rather than the antiquary, and detail leads to generalisation. The lecture ends by considering how far the black monks still observed the rules of their Order on dress at the end of the Middle Ages, and what ideas governed their practice at that time.

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