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Vita Communis or Separate Houses?

Where did Canons Live in the 10th and 11th Centuries?

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Abstract

There is a common assumption that canons of cathedral and collegiate churches living according to a rule (e.g. *Institutio Canonicorum*, Enlarged Rule of Chrodegang, or, in Upper Lotharingia, the Rule of Chrodegang itself) tended to live communally down to the late 11th and sometimes down to the middle of the 12th cent., with shared dormitories and refectories. However, the rules mentioned above allowed exceptions to this, giving permission to individual canons to own their own houses, preferably in the church precinct. Charter evidence, though its survival in this period is patchy, suggests that the use of individual houses may have been widespread from early on in France, while Domesday Book provides evidence for individual houses for numerous canons in England in the later 11th cent. The aim of this paper, which ranges geographically across northern France, England and Germany, is to comment on the living conditions for canons in cathedrals and collegiate churches, and to outline the consequences of the choices they made.

In about 1188 Stephen of Tournai, later bishop of Tournai 1192–1203, wrote to the dean of Rheims, Master Ralph of Sarre (Luscombe 1985, 140), complaining that Rheims cathedral, hitherto ‘terrible as an army with banners’ (Song of Songs 6,4) was about to lose its high reputation by dissolving its ‘brotherly communion’ of eating and rest, in other words its communal refectory and dormitory

(Desilve 1893, 202). Stephen remarked that a ‘sisterly’ Germany, stronger about maintaining common life, would start to pity Rheims for allowing its gold to dim (Lamentations 4,1). Generally, there is a perception that medieval cathedral communities often practised some sort of common life in the earlier Middle Ages and that this broke down in the central Middle Ages, earlier in France, especially western France, and later in Germany (Feine 1954, 334; Kempf 1966). There is some truth in this, but in practice the situation in cathedral communities down to ca. 1100 was complex. Not only was it possible for some elements of *vita communis* to coexist with some of the community having separate houses, but also the phrase *vita communis* itself needs reflection, because it was used much less in the earlier Middle Ages than is normally assumed and when its use revived, particularly from the late 10th cent. onwards, it was closely tied up with the agenda of the Augustinian canons. So the purpose of this paper is to look at how use of the term *vita communis* evolved, and then to examine evidence for houses and other forms of accommodation for canons of cathedrals and collegiate churches, concluding with a few wider reflections on inheritance and also on the prebendal system. The paper will concentrate on northern France and on England, but will range a little more widely as well.

Since the middle of the 11th cent. the term *vita communis* in the Western Church has principally been associated with the clergy: from the mid-11th cent. it was held out as an ideal of behaviour to all clergy (Cowdrey 1998, 45 f.), and was used to describe the type of life led by regular canons, chiefly those following the Rule of St Augustine. But the term *vita communis*, whose origin lies in

Acts 2,44 ‘And all that believed were together, and had all things in common’ and in Acts 4,32 ‘but all things were common to them’, was not originally an ideal of behaviour for the clergy alone, but for all believers in the early days of the church in Jerusalem; moreover in the Eastern Church ‘common life’ (*koinos bios*) was applied to the monastic life from at least the 4th cent., whence the Latin word *coenobium* and in turn derivatives in other western languages such as ‘cenobitic’. In the Western Church the first move to apply common life to clergy came in the 5th cent.: Augustine in one of his sermons (sermon 355) criticised some of his clerics for trying to dispose of their property individually rather than handing it over to the community, and said that whoever deserted the society of the common life once he had accepted it was falling away from his vow (Migne 1865, 1573; Ladner 1959, 359–365, 386 f.). However, it was only much later that it came to be normal to apply it specifically to clergy in the West. Very few historians have tried to look at the history of this process; instead, many have assumed that *vita communis* can be used straightforwardly as a concept when discussing clerical communities in the West before ca. 1000 (Dickinson 1950; Violante 1962; Zacherl 1970; Bertram 2009).

One of the few who has looked systematically at the use of the term *vita communis* was Charles Dereine, a Belgian expert on regular canons in the latter half of the 20th cent. He helpfully identified examples of use of the term by individual clerical communities from the late 10th cent. onwards, and also pointed out that it was zeal for common life, not so much the Rule of Augustine at first, that led some canons to look for apostolic poverty (Dereine 1946). What Dereine did not do, however, was to cast the net more widely and look out for earlier uses of the phrase in the west; furthermore his important observation that uses of *vita communis* quicken from the end of the 10th cent. onwards is worth revisiting in the light of new work on clergy and on the idea of ‘reform’ (Veyranche 2009; Barrow 2015).

Although Augustine, like some other late antique and early medieval bishops, wanted his clergy to live with him in a community, use of the term *vita communis* in the very early Middle Ages in a specifically clerical context is unusual.

Augustine criticised a priest in his community for having made a will although ‘professing common life’ (Migne 1865, 1570 f.); at the turn of the 6th and 7th cent. Pope Gregory I writing to Augustine, archbishop of Canterbury (Colgrave/Mynors 1969, 80), cited Acts 4,32 when saying that Augustine’s monks and senior clergy should live together holding things in common, though in fact Augustine probably split up his monks and his clerics between two separate churches (Brooks 1984, 89). In the 8th cent. common life occurs sometimes in monastic contexts, or contexts where the division between monks and clergy was blurred, for example in a charter of Bishop Widegern of Strasbourg for the abbey of Murbach in 728 (Bruckner/Marichal 1987, 8–11), and in a letter of Archbishop Boniface of 737/738 to the brothers of the church of Fritzlar (Tangl 1916, 65), while Chrodegang cited Acts 2,44 and 4,32 fleetingly in his rule (Schmitz 1889, 20–23). Common life also occurs in the decrees of the Council of Chalon-sur-Saône in 813, one of the provincial councils organised by Charlemagne to decide on a rule of life for clergy (Werminghoff 1906, I, 275), and in the Rule of Aachen of 816, though in the latter simply in a quotation from Augustine’s ‘De vita et moribus clericorum’ sermon, rather than in one of the passages with specific instructions for 9th cent. clerics to live by (Werminghoff 1906, I, 386). A firmer nudge towards getting clergy to think of common life was provided by the compilers of Pseudo-Isidore, put together in the 830s at Corbie (Zechiel-Eckes 2001). In a pseudo-decree attributed to Pope Urban I, opening with a commentary on Acts 4,32, the author(s) of Pseudo-Isidore urged clergy to live together, remarking that churches should be able to build up their endowments so that no-one leading the common life should be in need, but should receive everything necessary from the bishop and his officials (Hinschius 1863, 144 f.).

Thanks to Dereine’s article on *vita communis* and to the *Chartes originales* database we can map out a rough timescale for the slow take up in the use of the phrases *vita communis* and *vivere communiter* in sources concerning clergy of the 10th and 11th cent. In the 990s Richer, looking back on the pontificate of Archbishop Adalbero of Rheims, explained that in 975 he had taught them to live by the law of community *iure communitatis vivere*

instruxit (Hoffmann 2000, 183; Lake 2011, II, 30–33). A grant of 977 for the canons of Narbonne cathedral said this was to allow them to live in communal brotherhood in a canonry (Dereine 1946, 368), and not much later Bishop Natrannus of Nevers, setting up his anniversary in his cathedral in 986, made a grant that would allow his canons to ‘live communally’ (probably meaning ‘eat communally’) in their refectory (CNRS-IRHT 2012, no. 1863). In texts for monastic communities *vita communis* references turn up occasionally in the 10th and early 11th cent: in 928 for Saint-Julien, Tours (CNRS-IRHT 2012, no. 1518), in 985 for Saint-Marcel-les-Sauzet (CNRS-IRHT 2012, no. 1026), in 1005 in the will of Æthelmaer for Eynsham, where the phrase occurs in Old English, ‘gemaenlice libban’ (Salter 1907/1908, I, 19–28), and in 1047 for Fécamp (CNRS-IRHT 2012, no. 2697).

In charters for clergy, there is a lull in the use of the phrases *vita communis* and *vivere communiter* until about 1040, though there is some use of the term *communis* at Saint-Hilaire Poitiers in 1000 and 1016 (CNRS-IRHT 2012, nos. 1175, 1201; Jones 2016), and the epitaph of Bishop Letbald or Liébaud II of Mâcon (993–1016) said he taught his clergy to live communally (Dereine 1946, 368; Bouchard 1987, 398). According to his *Vita*, written in about 1020, Archdeacon Aderaldus of Troyes noted that the canons of Troyes cathedral did not have enough resources to live communally (Dereine 1946, 368). In 1032, Bishop Hugh of Langres issued a charter for a group of canons serving the seigneurial church of Vignory, which a little later, in the mid-11th cent., became a dependent priory of the Benedictine abbey of Saint-Bénigne, Dijon: Bishop Hugh commented that Guy, lord of Vignory, had asked that clerics be installed there who would devoutly submit themselves to live communally by the canonical rule and who would relieve the people from the weight of their crimes by the assiduity of their prayers (Chevrier/Chaume 1943, II, 89 f.). The rule in question was presumably the Rule of Aachen, though the clerics may already have been conscious of new developments. From 1040 onwards, Dereine notes a marked increase in references to *vita communis*, and from then on these are almost exclusively in documents concerning regular canons, a group newly emerging in the fourth decade of the 11th cent. At first,

the references exclusively concern Italy, Southern France and Catalonia, as we would expect, but from the 1060s onwards Northern France features as well (Dereine 1946; 1948). In 1066 Bishop Lietbert of Cambrai was arranging for the collegiate church of Saint-Aubert in Cambrai to be turned into a community of regular canons and was making provision for those canons ‘who did not want to live communally there’ (CNRS-IRHT 2012, no. 379; Dereine 1946, 374). The distinction between canons of traditional type, holding their own property (what were later to be termed secular canons) and their regular counterparts is underlined in a charter of 1080 in which the secular canons of Saint-Hilaire Poitiers made a grant to brothers wanting to live more religiously, and communally, in the church of Saint-Laurent-des-Aubats, in other words as regulars. The charter also underlined the fact that the canons of Saint-Laurent were going to avoid having individual property (CNRS-IRHT 2012, no. 1253). In contrast, the canons of Saint-Hilaire had individual as well as communal property (Jones 2016). References to the Rule of St Augustine increase as well, especially from 1067 on (Dereine 1946, 375–385; CNRS-IRHT 2012, nos. 40 f., 64, 183, 1311, issued between 1067 and 1100).

Revisiting Dereine’s chronological framework shows that early interest in *vita communis*, in so far as it was popular in the medieval West, was largely monastic, sometimes extending, as under Gregory I, to clergy as well. The turning point was the forged decree of Urban I in Pseudo-Isidore (Hinschius 1863, 144 f.). Even after this, however, it was only from the 970s that *vita communis* language was used in a programmatic way for clerical communities: at this point, it seems to have been used as a way of tightening up observance of the Rule of Aachen (Dereine 1946). From ca. 1040 onwards, *vita communis* references increase and from this point were almost exclusively used for communities of regular canons. Meanwhile, although the phrase was used in some documentation for monastic communities in the 10th and earlier 11th cent., the Benedictines began to avoid it from the 1040s as the Augustinians started to make it their own.

Tracing the phrase *vita communis* helps us see some of the ideological framework in which canons operated. We need to see how far it translated

into everyday life. Here we should start with some more reflections on the rules written for clergy in the 8th and 9th cent., the Rule of Chrodegang for mid 8th cent. Metz (Schmitz 1889) and the 816 Rule of Aachen/*Institutio Canonorum* (Werminghoff 1906, I, 308–421). As we have seen, these say less about *vita communis* than we might expect, but they do stress communal living. In his Rule (chapters 3, 21) Chrodegang wanted his canons to have one dormitory and one refectory, in which the clergy sat at separate tables according to their grades of ordination (Schmitz 1889, 4, 12). The Rule of Aachen, less prescriptive, said that each precinct should have dormitories, refectories, cellars and other *habitationes* (houses) suitable for clerics in ‘one *societas*’ (Werminghoff 1906, I, 398: chapter 117). What is less often remarked is that both rules allowed some canons to have individual houses. Chrodegang said that the bishop might give special permission to some canons to live in their own houses within the precinct (*‘in claustris’* [chapter 3: Schmitz 1889, 4]), while chapter 142 of *Regula Augustini* said that canons were allowed to have their own houses (Werminghoff 1906, I, 417). Thus it is not surprising that there are several references to canons having their own houses in 9th cent. Francia: for example, as a young canon at the basilica of St Martin of Tours in the late 9th cent., Odo, later abbot of Cluny, had his own *cella* given him by his patron, Fulk, Count of Anjou (Barrow 2015, 287). While tracing the origins of the term *praebenda*, Émile Lesne gathered several 9th cent. references to canons’ houses (Lesne 1929, 244–248), for example a charter of Charles the Bald for Châlons in 859, which said that building such houses was according to ecclesiastical custom (*sicut mos est ecclesiasticus*), and a charter of Bishop Ragino of Angers for his canons granting them individual houses in the *claustrum* 882 x 886 (Robin 1970, 308). The sequence continued into the 10th cent., with Charles the Simple granting the canons of Cambrai the right to sell their houses to each other and allowing canons at the cathedral of Paris to live peacefully in their houses (Lesne 1929, 245). Rulers were asked to issue charters to protect the freedom of the clergy living in ecclesiastical precincts: canons wanted to be able to be free from arrest and churches did not want houses in their precincts to be demanded by lay relatives

of deceased canons. When in 1066 Count Baldwin V of Flanders issued a formal charter endowing his great collegiate church of St Peter at Lille, which he had in fact founded in 1055, he granted each canon a plot of land in the area around the town and within the town (here ‘*castrum*’) land next to their church on which they could build houses, thus allowing them to be farmers or landlords as well as having their own premises (Hautcoeur 1894, I, 4 f.). In addition, the canons of Lille had communal buildings, referred to as *officina* in Baldwin’s charter and described as a dormitory and a refectory in a charter of 1190 when they were being converted into high-quality accommodation for the provost (Hautcoeur 1894, I, 53 f.).

At Bayeux Cathedral, Conan the treasurer, who probably entered office in 1096 when his predecessor, Samson, became bishop of Worcester, and who had died by 1122, lived in a house which is mentioned in a range of 12th cent. sources. It is described in a poem by Serlo of Bayeux as having burned down in the 1105 attack on Bayeux (Wright 1872, II, 246), but before Conan’s death it had been rebuilt, evidently in stone, since the stone house that had belonged to Conan the treasurer is mentioned in a string of 12th cent. charters in the Bayeux cartulary (Bourrienne 1902/1903, I, 167, 298, 320, 323). Richard I of England granted it to Bishop Henry of Bayeux in 1189, together with gardens and a messuage, so it was evidently a sizeable property, and shortly after this Bishop Henry of Bayeux gave it to the dean (Bourrienne 1902/1903, I, 320, 323).

11th cent. England supplies us with a variety of information about the accommodation of canons: there were efforts in the diocese of York under Archbishops Ælfric Puttoc (1023–1051), Cynesige (1051–1060) and Ealdred (1062–1069), who tried to create communal buildings at the major minsters in the diocese of York, beginning with Beverley (Raine 1879–1894, II, 353 f.) and continuing with Southwell (Stenton 1970, 369) and York Minster itself (Johnson et al. 1990, 18 f.). However, since Domesday Book (1086) refers to the canons of York having houses the attempt to build communal refectories and dormitories may not have been wholly successful (Faull/Stinson 1986, I, fo. 298b). Indeed, Domesday is the richest source for individual houses for canons in 11th cent. England.

It is much more informative about minsters in royal patronage than it is about cathedrals, since canons of royal minsters stood in a direct relationship with the king whereas the estates of cathedral communities and their individual canons were lumped together with those of their bishops (Crosby 1994, 12–15). In Chester, St John's church, which belonged to the bishop of Lichfield, had eight houses for a *matricularius* and the canons, and St Werburgh's, in royal patronage down to the Conquest, had 13 houses for a *custos* and the canons (Morgan 1978, fo. 263ab), while in Stafford the priests of the borough had 14 houses (Morris 1976, fo. 246a). In Shrewsbury, where there were several minster churches, the bishop of Chester, who presumably represented the canons of St Chad's in Shrewsbury, had 16 houses, 16 burgesses and 16 canons (it is not clear whether the houses were for the burgesses or the canons), while the royal church of St Alkmund's had twelve canons' houses (Thorn/Thorn 1986, fos. 252b, 253a). St Fridewide's in Oxford had 15 dwellings, but eight of these were derelict (Caldwell 1978, fo. 154b).

In the case of cathedrals, Domesday supplies no precise information about the numbers of canons' houses, but it often tells us how many houses bishops owned in their cathedral cities. Thus in York it records that in 1066 the archbishop had had 189 houses, while in 1086 he had 100 houses plus his own *curia* and the canons' houses, which are not numbered (Faull/Stinson 1986, fo. 298b). In Lincoln Bishop Remigius had 81 dwellings in 1086, of which 20 were unoccupied (Morgan/Thorn 1986, fo. 336a); in Hereford Bishop Walter had had 98 houses in 1066, but Bishop Robert on his accession in 1079 had found only 60 (Thorn/Thorn 1983, fo. 181c). In Exeter the bishop had one church and 47 houses (Thorn/Thorn 1985, fo. 101d). Chichester is poorly recorded but the bishop of Chichester's manor of Selsey had six closes in the city (Mothersill 1976, fo. 17a); the entire city of London was omitted from Domesday so we have no information about the accommodation of the canons of St Paul's. Wells, Lichfield and Ramsbury were classified as manors, not boroughs, in Domesday and therefore no houses are mentioned, since Domesday does not mention individual rural houses, but only those in towns, where it was interested in burgage-tenure (Thorn/Thorn 1980, fo. 89b;

Morris 1976, fo. 247a; Thorn/Thorn 1979, fo. 66a). For York, Lincoln, Hereford and Exeter we can see that there was ample accommodation for cathedral canons, and many urban tenants besides: indeed, both the archbishop of York and the bishop of Hereford ran sizeable lordships within royal towns. The total number of York Minster canons in 1086 is not certain, though in 1070, following William I's Harrying of the North, only three canons remained out of what had been a tiny pre-Conquest total of seven (Johnson et al. 1990, 18 f.; Greenway 1999, xxi). The total for Hereford in 1086 can be calculated at 29 thanks to Domesday information about clerical landholdings on the estates of the church of Hereford, so they might have occupied about half the houses in Hereford belonging to the bishop (Barrow 1995, 35–40). The Domesday house-totals for some royal and episcopal minsters allow us to see total numbers of canons for these institutions, and it is surely safe to assume that the richer cathedrals would normally have had bigger communities than the major royal minsters.

Overall, therefore, canons in many communities in France 900–1100, and in England certainly by the middle of the 11th cent., had the opportunity to live in individual houses. In France these were often packed into precincts (Barrow 2015, 291; Esquieu 1995); precincts were rather less common in 11th and 12th cent. England, though St Paul's, London, provides a good example (Cragoe 2004, 141). Some of the precincts simultaneously had communal accommodation, which might be used for the very young, for those without the means to run their own households, and perhaps also for canons due to officiate at Matins and other early services. By the early 12th cent., there is some evidence for canons' houses in Lotharingia and further east in Germany as well (Bormans et al. 1893–1933, I, 51; Schmidt 1883–1889, I, 137) and this increases after the middle of the century (Barrow 2015, 288; Janicke/Hoogeweg 1896–1911, I, 259, 309). Evidence for these areas in the 11th cent. is scarcer: while Thietmar's Chronicle of the early 11th cent. suggests that strict communal living had been normal in Magdeburg cathedral in the late 10th and early 11th cent. (Holtzmann 1935, 110 f., 206 f., 504 f.), it is possible that the canons of Augsburg had individual houses by the late 11th cent., as suggested

by the phrase *fratrum habitacula* in the Annals of Augsburg for 1084 (Pertz 1839, 131).

Individual houses made a range of opportunities available to canons that communal accommodation did not supply, and the final section of this paper will reflect on some of these. The first was the possibility of maintaining a household, with servants and also with relatives, who might in some cases be nephews being brought up by uncle-canons as protégés (usually described in sources as *nutriti*, ‘nurselings’ or ‘fosterlings’), or in other cases might be a wife and children. For 11th cent. England, Normandy and Brittany, evidence for clerical marriage is rich, and many of the examples we know of were canons of cathedral or collegiate churches (Barrow 2015, 137, 139–145; Spear 1986; Thibodeaux 2015, 67–74; van Houts 2013). Indeed, clerical marriage was so entrenched in these areas that it was not until well into the 12th cent. that married households of canons finally disappeared from cathedral closes. At St Paul’s Cathedral in London, where a noticeable inflow of Norman canons occurred in the late 11th cent., no difference is visible between English and Norman canons in their family relationships and the prevalence of clerical marriage may have helped bridge some of the social gaps between the two groups (Brooke 1951; Greenway 1968, 4, 36, 79). In 12th cent. Lotharingia and Germany it was common for cathedral canons to bring up nephews who were schoolboy-canons in their own households (Barrow 2015, 132 f.). Canons able to run households were ideally situated to train up the next generation of clerics, whether nephews entrusted to them or their own sons.

This leads to another aspect of cathedral housing, the role it played in inheritance strategies. Strictly speaking, canons were not supposed to leave houses to their relatives; the houses belonged to the church, and were supposed to be redistributed among the community on the deaths of residents. But it is remarkable how many charters survive from 12th cent. France and Germany showing canons managing to pass on their houses to a chosen successor, very often a kinsman (Barrow 2015, 288 f.). This clearly was being done with the full approval of the rest of the chapter and it has implications for recruitment: canons were allowed, perhaps even encouraged, to invite

younger relatives to join them in the chapter. It also meant that canons could be loyal members of their families while simultaneously being loyal servants of their churches. Another of the factors we need to consider when studying the transmission of houses by inheritance or redistribution or episcopal collation is the durability of the house structure. As long as houses were principally built of timber the superstructure might be transmitted to heirs without affecting what happened to the house-plot, which would obviously remain church property. Once houses began to be made of more durable materials, or even if they merely had stone sills into which timbers could be slotted, this made it necessary to have a succession system that satisfied the canons’ families and also the church as a whole (Barrow 2015, 287 f.). Family transmission of houses from canons to kinsmen-canons was rarer in England, where bishops maintained a tight grasp on recruitment (Barrow 2000b, 35–39). Instead, 12th cent. canons might acquire houses, not necessarily on cathedral property, and then bequeath them to the church in return for anniversary payments that would be attached to the houses in perpetuity (Barrow 2015, 289, 291).

One final point concerns the chapter’s communal buildings. We should not view the existence of separate houses as precluding the existence, often over a lengthy period of time, of communal buildings. In 12th and early 13th cent. Germany there is evidence from Hildesheim (Janicke/Hoogeweg 1896–1911, I, 401, 714), Halberstadt (Brackmann 1899, 5 f., 11 f.) and Münster (Herzog 1961, 35), for example, of communal refectories and sometimes also dormitories long outliving the first appearance of canons’ houses. At Liège, although chapter legislation was allowing canons to bequeath houses in 1109 there were still attempts as late as 1203 to insist on the need to get permission from the dean if a canon wished to sleep outside the dormitory (Bormans et al. 1893–1933, I, 51, 132–135). Refectories were often maintained for anniversary feasts. Even more durable were chapter bakehouses and brewhouses, references to which often survive late in the mid 13th cent. and later (de Charmasse 1865–1900, II, 144 of 1230; Barrow 2000a, 34).

In conclusion we may note first that *vita communis* as an ideal is not necessarily a helpful term

for understanding how clergy lived in the earlier Middle Ages, and especially not the secular clergy, since it could be applied to communities that had a mixed form of individual and communal life. However, from about 1040 onwards, *vita communis* became the key to understanding regular clergy, since they used the term frequently for self-identification. Secondly, features of communal life such as dormitories and refectories could, and often did, co-exist with individual houses. Sometimes, however, we can see dormitories and refectories being converted into separate houses, especially in the 12th cent. Lastly, separate houses

allowed clergy a wider range of social activities than communal accommodation did – bringing up protégés, having their own families (until tighter regulations on clerical marriage made this impossible), displaying status and exercising hospitality.

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