

The Domesticity of Nuns: Family and Household within the Convent

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Godstow Abbey, outside Oxford, was founded in the early twelfth century and soon became one of the more prominent and successful houses of nuns in England. Within a few decades it achieved both royal patronage and an income that placed it just below the top tier of nunneries in terms of wealth and prestige. For most of its 400-year history it housed between fifteen and twenty-four nuns. This paper will examine how those women organized themselves domestically, looking particularly at two issues and time periods that are well documented at Godstow: blood kinship in the twelfth century, and the division of the convent into so-called households in the fifteenth.

Family makes its first appearance as a factor in religious life at Godstow in the convent's foundation legend, recorded in its early fifteenth-century cartulary. Ediva of Winchester, the founder and first abbess, traveled to the Oxford region in about the year 1115, after a series of dream-visions directed her to do so. But, as I have argued elsewhere, her choice of this location was almost certainly related to the presence of her son (and possible another male relative) as a monk in the general region of Oxford.¹ Nor was Ediva without family company at Godstow itself. Her two daughters, Emma and Hawise, entered the cloister with her and were important members of the new community, serving successively as the first two prioresses under their mother.² Thus, from the beginning, whether intentionally or not, Ediva had established a distinctly family-friendly workplace. The pattern would be repeated again and again in the twelfth century.

The names or family identities of about thirty other women who were nuns of Godstow during the twelfth century are known, mainly from their entrance charters, and the great majority of these had close blood relatives at Godstow at the same time. (I'll run through these family groups quickly.) From nearby Wytham, in the earliest years, came the three daughters of Robert of Wytham, the local lord.³ A generation later, two nieces of theirs, daughters of their brother Vincent, joined the Wytham women already at Godstow.⁴ Thus there may have been as many as five women from a single local family in residence at Godstow at one time. Also among the earliest entrants were the wife and three daughters of Ralph fitzWaifer of Hampshire.⁵ Before the 1139 dedication came Mary and Cecily Wadell, who were sisters.⁶ Rose Labanc and her daughter Cecily probably entered Godstow somewhat later.⁷ Perhaps around 1160, the two daughters of William and Alice de Venuz entered Godstow together.⁸ Roger d'Aumary and his wife Hawise sent their two daughters.⁹ A widow named Anneis entered the convent together with her granddaughter Margery, the entrance gift being provided by Margery's parents.¹⁰ Ralph Bloet's sister, whose name is not recorded, became a nun, probably in the 1190s; at some point in the thirteenth century, if she was still alive, she was joined by a younger relative, Emma Bloet, who would become abbess of Godstow in 1248.¹¹ And there may have been additional family groups among the twelfth-century nuns, for whom conclusive evidence does not survive.¹²

The presence of family groups within the convent was highly significant: almost all of the nuns whose identities are known had some close relative in the convent with them. To be (or to have been at some point) part of a family group (however small) was the norm at Godstow. This undoubtedly affected the dynamics of convent life. The monastic ideal may have been a community in which all were sisters in Christ, and any blood ties disappeared, replaced by the much stronger bond of spiritual kinship.¹³ But in reality these women came from a society where

lineage and blood kinship were of the utmost importance. Families expected that their relatives in the cloister would serve family interests, at least through prayer, and they sometimes made special gifts—the most common example is a clothing allowance—to ease the life of a nun or monk.¹⁴ No one outside *or inside* the convent expected family relationships to be ignored in the religious life. When a group of sisters entered the convent together, they would naturally cling to each other emotionally, and when a girl or young woman entered alone but had an aunt or grandmother already in the cloister, it would be normal for the older woman to look out for the new arrival. The Benedictine ideal had no place for such special relationships, but the nuns did not always live strictly according to that unworldly model, and human relationships were undoubtedly one of the areas where they often departed from it.

We do have some glimpses of domestic relations at Godstow in this early period. Near the end of the twelfth century, one Edmund, a monk at nearby Eynsham Abbey, wrote a report of his miraculous visions, which included some comments on the nuns of Godstow. In this work, Edmund tells of an unnamed abbess of Godstow, either the second or third abbess, who died around 1181. She looked after her relatives, he says, but not with an ordinary sort of nepotism: although she drew her nieces and nephews into the religious life, she took care not to show them any favoritism, instead treating her relatives more strictly than others.¹⁵ Yet Edmund's praise makes it clear that favoritism would not have been unusual: an abbess might well have been expected to use her position to benefit her relatives, most likely by advancing them in the religious life. We see another hint of such activity in the record sources: the next abbess of Godstow, Agnes, may have drawn a young kinswoman into the convent, when Amphelisia, a future abbess herself, came all the way from Kent to become a nun of Godstow. The witnesses to Amphelisia's entrance charter suggest a family connection with Abbess Agnes, and her later

career suggests a privileged position in the convent.¹⁶ Monastic life always included a strong element of internal politics, and in this area too, of course, family ties had a large part to play.

To summarize the twelfth-century evidence, we can conclude that Godstow was rich in the emotional and patronage aspects of family life.¹⁷ Family ties did not necessarily have any impact—as far as we can tell—on the physical arrangements of domestic life, and twelfth-century Benedictine practices limited their impact on economic arrangements. All of this would change in subsequent centuries.

In late medieval England, some female monastic communities (and fewer male ones) were said to contain multiple *familiae* or “households.”¹⁸ It is important not to assume too much from this word. Most of the evidence for these units comes from episcopal visitation records, where the references to *familiae* are brief and problematic. It is clear from the records that the *familiae* were closely connected with eating, and that they were not normally connected with other activities that we might expect, such as sleeping.¹⁹ Historians have tended to see the *familiae* in one of two ways: either as distinct groupings of nuns who ate together,²⁰ or as distinct places within the convent where meals could be taken—the refectory, the misericord (which is the second dining room), the superior’s lodging, the infirmary.²¹ But these have been assumptions, and there has been little explicit discussion of what the *familiae* were, of how they functioned, or indeed, of the contradictions in the evidence. For in fact, even within a single diocese and a single episcopate, some of the evidence supports one definition of the *familia* and some supports the other.

A few examples drawn from elsewhere in Godstow’s own diocese of Lincoln will suffice to show the variety of ways in which the term *familiae* was used. At Elstow Abbey in Bedfordshire, in 1442, the abbess reported “that there are five *familiae* of nuns kept in the

monastery, whereof [the first] is that of the abbess, who has five nuns with her; the second of the prioress, who has two; the third of the sub-prioress, who has two; the fourth of the sacrist, who has three; and the fifth of dame Margaret Aylesbury, who has two.”²² These households seem to be groups of nuns. By contrast, at Gracedieu Priory in 1440, where the refectory had not been in use for the past seven years, the prioress reported that “there are only two *familiae* in the house, to wit her hall, and the infirmary, where there are three at table together.”²³ These *familiae* seem to be locations. So we need to keep an open mind as we approach the use of this terminology at different religious houses. Just as the use of the word varied, so practices may have varied—and indeed, the visitation records imply this, too. I would suggest that just as the modern academic department is an institution we all recognize in the abstract but one that may vary quite a bit from one college or university to the next, so the monastic household was an idea familiar to every visiting bishop but taking different forms in different convents.

At fifteenth-century Godstow, at least four *familiae* were said to exist. In 1432 Bishop William Gray ordered “that there be only three *familiae* of nuns in the monastery beside the household of the abbess; in every one of the which three *familiae* there shall be at least six, seven, or eight nuns, according to the number of the nuns in the convent.”²⁴ This wording implies that the households are groups of nuns, and this interpretation—as opposed to the eating-places definition—is reinforced by another injunction, in the same document, that “at least twelve nuns [should] take their meals every day in the refectory; and the same refectory be duly repaired with all speed.”²⁵ Thus the Godstow nuns may organize themselves into no more than four households of six to eight nuns each (except the abbess’s household, which may presumably be smaller), but twelve of these same nuns must eat in the refectory, rather than with their own households, each day. A rota for eating in the refectory, where the most restricted range of food

was available, was employed in at least some late medieval Benedictine houses,²⁶ so these two injunctions by Bishop Gray seem to accept the existence of separate households while requiring them to conform in part to the tradition of the refectory. The same evidence clearly tells us, though, that left to their own devices the nuns were dining elsewhere.

The 1432 injunctions also reveal that some or all Godstow's nuns had private rooms (*domicilia* or *camerae*) within the cloister. The bishop made no move to abolish these, but he stipulated that the nuns were not to sleep in them or use them to socialize with secular persons—both activities that had apparently been going on. An acceptable use of the private chambers, he implied, was as bedrooms for the children living at the convent.²⁷ Unfortunately Bishop Gray does not mention whether the private chambers were ever used for meals; the location of non-refectory meals does not concern him. He does, however, order all the nuns to sleep in the common dormitory, instead of in their private chambers. Clearly he thinks that maintaining a single common sleeping space is compatible with having separate households.²⁸ This accords with the evidence from other houses, where *familiae* generally were unrelated to sleeping arrangements.²⁹

We cannot know whether, having heard the new injunctions read to them, the nuns themselves thought their separate households and other domestic arrangements had been left sufficiently intact. But they seem to have conformed to the bishop's orders regarding *familiae* to a large degree. Thirteen years later, in 1445, Godstow was visited by Gray's successor, Bishop William Alnwick. From this visitation we have not only the bishop's injunctions but also the *detecta*, his records of the nuns' own testimony. The nuns reported that there were now only four separate *familiae* in the convent—the number that Bishop Gray had specified.³⁰

Bishop Alnwick, however, took a more negative view of households than his predecessor. Remarking that “there are many . . . and separate households of nuns in your said monastery,” he declared that this practice harmed the nuns’ reputation and their way of life, and he ordered all the nuns to eat together, either in the refectory, or in the infirmary, or in the abbess’s hall or chamber; thus he placed a higher value on communal meals than on the use of the refectory *per se*. In the same sentence, he ordered the abbess to pay for the nuns’ meals out of “the common goods of the house, . . . out of one cellar and one kitchen, to their competent sustenance, so that all the nuns sit together at meat and at supper. . . .”³¹ Here we have a link between households and the funding of meals, and this is a crucial point.

By the late Middle Ages it was a widespread practice in Benedictine houses, male and female, to pay individual allowances to monks and nuns for their food and clothing.³² While some of this money was in the form of “wages” from the common funds of the house, at many houses, including Godstow, the individual religious also relied on individual endowments or private resources for a significant portion of their support. Such resources were not limited to the food and clothing allowances that had long been given by relatives outside the cloister, though these certainly existed. Although the evidence is scanty at Godstow, there are a few examples of private financial resources. In 1297, the nuns of Godstow granted their ex-abbess a commercial property in the city of Oxford; most of the revenue of this venture would be hers to spend during her lifetime.³³ In the early fourteenth century, other individual nuns of Godstow are found paying rents on businesses in Oxford—properties from which, presumably, they benefited financially.³⁴

Reliance on private resources led to noticeable inequalities among Godstow’s nuns. In 1432 there was a chest in the convent containing a special fund for the assistance of “needy nuns” (*egencium monialium*);³⁵ this would not have been necessary in a community where

everyone's needs were sufficiently supplied from the common property of the house, whether through the simple distribution of goods or through a "wage" system. (Ironically, the chest entered the written record because its contents had gone missing.) The very idea that some nuns were poorer than others and needed financial help from their sisters would have been nonsensical to St. Benedict. But the household system (equally foreign to the Rule) may have helped to alleviate such inequalities. If the members of each household pooled their financial resources to pay for meals, the wealthier nuns within the *familia* would have been subsidizing their poorer sisters. Whether this happened, and whether it was in fact an intention of the household system, is open to question. But that the *familiae* had economic meaning, at least at some houses, is certain. At Elstow Abbey, in the early 1430s, Bishop Gray actually ordered "that each *familia* in the said monastery have and receive henceforward, of the common goods of the house, one cart-load of fuel per year, beyond that which it was formerly accustomed to have."³⁶ Here the episcopal authority intervened to reinforce the role of the household in distributing the convent's resources to the nuns. Such arrangements could also be disrupted by the bishop, as Bishop Alnwick did (or attempted to do) at Godstow in 1445, abolishing households in favor of commonly funded meals from "one cellar and one kitchen." After this, there is no evidence for separate *familiae* at Godstow, but then Alnwick's visitation is the last one recorded in any detail.

We must not overestimate the significance of separate *familiae* in the convent. They were not, as some recent scholarship has argued, fully independent households within the monastic community, nor do they indicate a rejection of communal life.³⁷ Instead the *familia* were limited in function, being something more akin to dining clubs. They also differed from one monastic house to another, and they were flexible enough to be rearranged, for example, when external authorities required change. But they are significant in being one of the ways in which religious

women, far from renouncing the blood ties and domestic relationships that characterized secular society, preserved or replicated them within the monastic community. Rather than form a monolithic unit of sisters in Christ, they participated in multiple familial groups and referred to these secular models in organizing key elements of the monastic life, including the domestic economy.

 Notes

¹ *The Latin Cartulary of Godstow Abbey*, ed. Emilie Amt (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), xxii-xxiii.

² *Latin Cartulary of Godstow*, xxiv.

³ *Latin Cartulary of Godstow*, no. 21.

⁴ *Latin Cartulary of Godstow*, no. 21.

⁵ *Latin Cartulary of Godstow*, no. 113.

⁶ They were the daughters of Simon Wadell. *Monasticon Anglicanum*, iv. 366.

⁷ *Latin Cartulary of Godstow*, nos. 101, 103, 106. Two thirteenth-century charters concerning lands in King's Clere were also witnessed by men with the Launceleve surname: *Latin Cartulary of Godstow*, nos. 107, 120.

⁸ *Latin Cartulary of Godstow*, no. 272.

⁹ *Latin Cartulary of Godstow*, no. 50.

¹⁰ *Latin Cartulary of Godstow*, no. 55.

¹¹ *Latin Cartulary of Godstow*, no. 144.

¹² Amphelisa, daughter of Alan de Leghe and his wife Matilda, brought lands in Kent as her entrance gift, and several clerks from Godstow traveled to Eynsford in Kent to witness the legal recording of this grant. Amphelisa may have been connected with Abbess Agnes of Godstow, whose nephew Thomas also witnessed the grant. *Latin Cartulary of Godstow*, no. 788. 'Amphelisa' was an unusual name; this is probably the same Amphelisa who became abbess of Godstow herself in 1225. A family connection with Abbess Agnes would help to explain the arrival of a new nun from as far away as Kent.

¹³ This is implicit in the Rule of St. Benedict, chs. 2, 59, 63.

¹⁴ *Latin Cartulary of Godstow*, xxx-xxxiii.

¹⁵ *Eynsham Cartulary*, ii. 361.

¹⁶ *Latin Cartulary of Godstow*, no. 788.

¹⁷ Another aspect of domestic life in the convent, and one in which, again, the monastic household resembled the secular one, was the presence of small children, to whom the nuns served as surrogate parents. By the late twelfth century the practice of child oblation was dying out, but the practice of committing children to the care of nuns was alive and well. Children were placed in the convent by their families, and by other parties who had responsibility for them. In the account of his visions, Brother Edmund of Eynsham slipped in a criticism of Abbess Agnes of Godstow for having neglected a young boy (possibly Edmund himself) who had been placed in her care by the bishop; *Eynsham Cartulary*, ii. 355. It is impossible to generalize about the quality of care that children received in the convent, or about the affective relationships between the nuns and their small charges, but we can note that surrogacy itself was a further similarity between monastic and secular families.

¹⁸ For the English, see, e.g., *Visitations*, iii. 350.

¹⁹ In the fifteenth-century evidence, multiple households are often found alongside the use of a common dormitory, and I have so far found no cases where the common dormitory has fallen into disuse in a house that has *familiae*.

²⁰ This view is implicit in the discussion by Eileen Power, *Medieval English Nunneries* (1922), 317-19.

²¹ Thus A. Hamilton Thompson, in *Visitations* i. 68 n. 6; also Nancy Bradley Warren, *Spiritual Economies: Female Monasticism in Later Medieval England* (Philadelphia, 2001), 19-21.

²² *Visitations of Religious Houses in the Diocese of Lincoln* (Publications of the Lincoln Record Society), ii. 89.

²³ *Visitations* ii. 119.

²⁴ *Visitations* i. 68. There is no evidence for the exact number of nuns at Godstow at this point, but this injunction assumes a headcount of at least 20 or 21.

²⁵ *Visitations* i. 66.

²⁶ E.g., Barbara Harvey, *Living and Dying in England, 1100-1540: The Monastic Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 41.

²⁷ *Visitations* i. 67.

²⁸ *Visitations* i. 67.

²⁹ Roberta Gilchrist, looking for the "architectural implications" of separate *familiae*, proposed that at least in some cases the households lived in separate buildings that replaced the traditional claustral facilities. One of the two specific cases briefly considered by Gilchrist is Godstow, where she linked the three households mentioned in the episcopal visitation records with three buildings that were still standing in the seventeenth century; Roberta

Gilchrist, *Gender and Material Culture* (1994), 123. Unfortunately, there is no evidence whatsoever to connect the three households mentioned (for the last time) in 1445, nearly a century before the Dissolution, with those three buildings, chance survivals that happened to be drawn 130 years after the Dissolution. (Nor is there any reason to suppose, as Gilchrist does, that the absence of traditional claustral buildings in Godstow's mid-seventeenth-century ruins typified the layout of the fifteenth-century cloister.)

³⁰ *Visitations* ii. 113-114.

³¹ *Visitations* ii. 115.

³² David Knowles, *The Religious Orders in England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957), ii. 240 ff. Knowles briefly addresses private chambers and domestic arrangements on pp. 244-5.

³³ *Latin Cartulary of Godstow*, no. 488.

³⁴ *Oseney Cart.* iii. 140, 147, 162.

³⁵ *Visitations* i. 68.

³⁶ *Visitations* i. 53.

³⁷ See Gilchrist, *Gender and Material Culture*, p. 168.