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Stone, wood, wattle and daub: Locating and interpreting building expenses in medieval monastic accounts

Harmony Dewez

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Short biography

Harmony Dewez is associate professor in Medieval History at Poitiers University and the Centre d'Études Supérieures de Civilisation Médiévale (France).

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Abstract

'Stone, wood, wattle and daub: Locating and interpreting building expenses in medieval monastic accounts'

From the late twelfth and early thirteenth century onwards large monasteries in England produced complex series of obedientiary and manorial accounts in which various building expenses were included, from granges and stables to cathedral churches and clocks. The well-documented case of Norwich Cathedral priory will serve to illustrate how specific building expenses are sometimes difficult to trace and piece together from different series of accounts. The status and treatment of building expenses, whether involving stone or otherwise, shall be considered, as well as the seemingly minor importance of this type of expense in administrative accountability, in contrast to twelfth-century records such as Suger's *De Administratione*.

Keywords:

Accounting, monastic administration, agricultural buildings, clock accounts, obedientiaries, pragmatic literacy, Norwich.

STONE, WOOD, WATTLE AND DAUB:

LOCATING AND INTERPRETING BUILDING EXPENSES IN MEDIEVAL MONASTIC ACCOUNTS

INTRODUCTION

In 1341, Robert of Donewic, master of the cellar at Norwich Cathedral priory, left his office. Before doing so, he ordered his scribes to make a copy in book format of all his yearly accounts, and on the last page he composed a memorandum listing the achievements of his administration.¹ He informs us that one serious setback to his seven-year-long success in reducing debt was a fire in a malt-kiln in which £30 worth of malt perished, not to mention the damage to the building itself. Buildings represented a heavy burden on monastic finances, for cathedrals or conventual buildings of course, but also for the upkeep and the potential hazards associated with agricultural buildings. In the Middle Ages, construction work depended more than other types of activities on a salaried workforce and a specific organization of labour, which resulted in singular accounting practices.²

¹ NRO, DCN 1/1/38.

² Beck, Bernardi, Feller (dirs), *Rémunérer le travail au Moyen Âge*, p. 9.

Before the last quarter of the twelfth century, while accounts were rendered orally or with the support of more temporary records, written accounts were not systematically archived by monasteries; however other records such as administrative memorials existed which were associated with local reforms in estate management. In Suger's *De administratione* for the abbey of St Denis, the extraction of wealth from monastic estates is directly linked with the building of magnificent shrines for divine worship: effective estate management provided the necessary wealth for the construction of fine churches.³ This emphasis on improving management and increasing income begs the question of how far the development of accounting practices might directly or indirectly be the consequence of greater building expenses: these may have worsened monastic debt and fostered the need for good administration, as in the twelfth century stone churches and their ornamentation with gold and precious stones grew ever more magnificent.

With the growth of pragmatic literacy, written accounts become more commonplace, with the first series of manorial account rolls for estates appearing around the mid-thirteenth century, followed by obedientiary – or domestic – accounts some decades later. The cost of buildings is revealed both in manorial and obedientiary account rolls which contain different but complementary information about construction work and reparations. What, therefore, was the status of buildings and construction work in medieval, and particularly monastic, accounts? Were buildings important, and did different types of constructions receive different treatment, depending on whether they were made of stone or wood, or destined for monastic or agricultural purposes?

When we examine the records, the most notable feature is how building expenses can be accounted for in a variety of ways. Sometimes they are collated in a building account, and on other occasions they are included with other expenses. The whole picture of paying for the construction and repair of buildings is a complex one and is more often than not incomplete, because accounts have subsequently been lost or destroyed. The question of how to locate building expenses in medieval monastic accounts is thus not only about understanding the place occupied by construction work in the medieval mind; it also poses a problem for historians.

The rich archives of Norwich Cathedral Priory offer a broad picture of how its accounts were organized, but we must bear in mind that the administration of accounts and obedientiaries varied from house to house. Norwich Cathedral Priory has one of the best-preserved sets of accounts, both obedientiary and manorial, for thirteenth- and early fourteenth-century England.⁴ The priory's principal obedientiary was the master of the cellar who managed the office of the prior's chamber and was in charge of sixteen manors providing grain for the bakery and brewery. Up to nine other obedientiaries produced account rolls which are still preserved, though rather inconsistently, from 1264/5 onwards: these were the cellarer, precentor, sacrist, chamberlain, refectorer, communar, pittancer, infirmarer and gardener, to which must be added an account for the treasurers. Manorial accounts are preserved from 1255/6 onwards for the manors of both the prior and the obedientiaries.

This wealth of parallel accounts provides insight into the organization of finances as a whole, and construction work in particular, but one complexity arises from the fact that monastic offices were not permanent bodies, and could be created, regrouped or suppressed according to needs. Because of this flexible system, building expenses for the priory were distributed

³ Suger, *Œuvres; Abbot Suger on the Abbey Church of Saint-Denis and its Art Treasures*, ed. by Panofsky.

⁴ Dewez, 'Connaître par les nombres'; see also Slavin, *Bread and Ale for the Brethren*; Saunders, *An Introduction to the Obedientiary and Manor Rolls of the Norwich Cathedral Priory*.

between several offices, including those of the commoner, pittancer, and sacrist. Building expenses for the manors were recorded in manorial accounts, but are also found in those of the master of the cellar and of other obedientiaries, resulting in layers of complexity which are characteristic of some monastic houses.

Despite this extensive fragmentation of information in account rolls, other monastic records from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, such as administrative memorials of abbots and priors, summarize and give prominence to building expenses, highlighting their importance for the accountability of heads of religious houses.

EXPENSES FOR MONASTIC BUILDINGS

Norwich Cathedral was founded in 1096 and a Romanesque building with an unusually long nave, measuring 132 metres, was erected.⁵ Additions and restorations were made in the Gothic style.⁶ In 1272, Norwich Cathedral priory suffered a violent uprising from the townsmen resulting in a great fire and extensive damage to the cathedral and monastic buildings.⁷ After the fire, the damaged sections were rebuilt, and in the early fourteenth century a new clock was installed, which may have been an early example of a mechanical clock.

Despite this intense building activity, Norwich never really had a dedicated office for building work. There was no *custos operum* in charge of construction work, nor was there a single office managing these expenses, as there was at St Swithun's in Winchester, for example.⁸ As a result, building costs were dispatched and moved around at the same time as sources of income, meaning that the system was relatively flexible and could adapt depending on who was responsible for which building work. Expenditure on monastic buildings and the cathedral was to a large degree divided between the communar, pittancer, refectorer, hostilar, and sacrist, but could also be found in the accounts of other obedientiaries such as the master of the cellar.

The communar, the pittancer, and the subprior: juggling expenses for the priory buildings

Following the 1272 uprising and consequent fire damage, the priory came under the king's jurisdiction and a new prior, William of Kirkby, was appointed. A heavy fine of £2000 was imposed on the city, to be paid in regular twice-yearly instalments of £166 13 s. 4 d. A new office, that of communar, was created to collect the money and spend it on the reconstruction of the damaged priory buildings. These payments continued for ten years after the fire, until 1282/3.⁹ The equation we find in the communar's account roll for that period is a very simple one: income was derived from the fine paid by the city, as well as from Catton church and from money handled by the cellarer; the expenses section detailed the building work, week by week.¹⁰

⁵ Generally speaking, see Atherton *et al.* (dirs), *Norwich Cathedral*.

⁶ Atherton and Fernie, 'The Building: An Introduction', p. 48; Heywood, 'The Romanesque Building', p. 73-108, Woodman, 'The Gothic Campaigns', p. 158-96.

⁷ See also *The Early Communar and Pittancer Rolls of Norwich Cathedral Priory*, ed. by Fernie and Whittingham.

⁸ *Compotus Rolls of the Obedientiaries of St Swithun's Priory, Winchester*, ed. by Kitchin; Snape, p. 30.

⁹ NRO, DCN 1/12/1. Tanner, 'The Cathedral and the City', p. 261; Dodwell, 'The Monastic Community', p. 250. This number of instalments would however have meant that the fine was repaid in only six years. See also *The Early Communar and Pittancer Rolls of Norwich Cathedral Priory*, ed. by Fernie and Whittingham. The long introduction to this edition deals with the evolution of the communar and pittancer's offices and the phases of reconstruction of priory buildings.

¹⁰ NRO, DCN 1/12/1.

The following year, 1284, the fine was lifted, but buildings still had to be built. The office of communar was maintained but new sources of income were found and redirected from the prior's chamber and the cellar to the communar.¹¹ This can be seen in the account for 1288/9, which paid for the repair of the chapter house, and continued until at least 1294/5: the communar received the O's or ollerries (a yearly contribution of £12 paid by the obedientiaries for pittances during Advent) from Catton, amongst other income, and paid for construction work all year round.¹²

As Eric Fernie and A. B. Whittingham have shown, after 1295 building expenses continued to be paid by the communar, long after the completion of repairs to the damage from the 1272 fire.¹³ The office of communar was often, but not always, amalgamated with the office of pittancer, possibly in order to combine its income. These officials' duties were constantly changing: one example of this was travel expenses, which accounted for a significant proportion of a monastery's common outgoings, especially when there was a need for litigation; these became an important feature in the communar and pittancer's expenses.¹⁴ In this period, the complex relationship between the communar and the pittancer makes for a less than straightforward picture of how buildings were financed.

Behind these somewhat confusing account rolls there was probably a mastermind allocating funds and deciding what should be paid by whom. This may well have been the subprior, who was heavily involved in the allocation of the communar and pittancer's expenses: from Hilary 1335 to Hilary 1337, the *opus claustris* – work on the cloister – was managed by the subprior in a separate account, possibly because the former communar, John of Worstead, had quitted his office, leaving the subprior to pay for his overdraft.¹⁵

Repairs to the priory buildings damaged by the fire were funded firstly by the fine levied on the burghers, and then by a variety of common funds taken not from a single obedientiary but from a collection of them (the O's and pittances) or from specific resources (Catton). This income was managed by a complex interplay between communar, pittancer, and subprior. As we have seen, in the communar's rolls, building expenses were recorded every year, week by week. At some point a separate cloister's account was kept by the subprior.

The sacrist: invisible accounts for the cathedral church

The cathedral, on the other hand, was the responsibility of the sacrist. At Norwich, in the sacrist's rolls, building expenses were sometimes accounted for in a single pluriannual account instead of on a yearly basis. In his account roll, there at first appears to be no trace of these expenses, until suddenly the pluriannual building account is added to the main account roll: hidden expenses had been running for years, distorting the real financial balance of the office, and the modern historian would be left completely in the dark if the final account roll had been

¹¹ These new sources of income were as follows: part of a manor (the manor of Catton), as well as a yearly contribution of £12 paid by the obedientiaries for pittances during Advent and called the O's or ollerries.

¹² NRO, DCN 1/12/5. Includes income from the *communaria* (less than £3), miscellaneous payments, and the O's, and details expenses by week for salaries, then by material. Catton is added on the reverse of the document and paid, among other things, for the procedure of confirming the election of the new prior, Henry of Lakenham.

¹³ *The Early Communar and Pittancer Rolls of Norwich Cathedral Priory*, ed. by Fernie and Whittingham, p. 27-43.

¹⁴ NRO, DCN 1/12/6. His account is said to be that of the common, with income from the *pitanciaris* and the O's.

¹⁵ NRO, DCN 1/12/19. For example £10 in 1299-1301; NRO, DCN 1/12/9. And in 1329-30, the O's, until then in the communar's income, were used in a treasurer's account involving the subprior to finance multiple trips by the sacrist to Avignon, London and Canterbury.

lost. We will now examine two examples of this practice: for the construction of the cathedral tower between 1291 and 1297, and that of the cathedral clock between 1322 and 1325.¹⁶

The sacrist's account roll for 1296/7, under the priorate of Henry of Lakenham (1289-1309), includes the account for six years of building expenses for the 'great tower', beginning on the 29th of June 1291.¹⁷ The sums total £248 1.25 d., excluding food and drink, and were deduced in a lump sum from that year's income, as if everything had been paid at once, leaving a deficit of over £37. This indicates that parallel or invisible accounting had been in operation for six years: during this period, the balance of the sacrist's account increased considerably, from less than £60 in 1291/2 to over £100 in 1292/3 and £190 12 s. in 1295/6. Far from indicating that the office was generating wealth, this artificial surplus probably corresponds to what had been raised for building expenses.¹⁸ The sacrist had to find extra money to fund the tower: in the final year of the construction work, he scraped together an extra £7 6 s. by selling a chalice, two phials and two silver vessels belonging to a former bishop.

In the years after 1298/9, the expenses for the tower were included in the main yearly account in a separate sub-total recorded after the sacrist's own expenses, then disappear in the 1310s. Why did the method of accounting change? It is hard to tell, but a historian might look at the sacrist's accounts in the 1290s and marvel at his large excess of income, unaware that he was simultaneously paying for building work on the tower; if the 1297 account had been lost, we would never have known the whole picture. These expenses represented a substantial strain on monastic finances, often leading to a yearly deficit. Barbara Dodwell raises the question as to why the sacrist should have shouldered all these costs when they occasioned so much debt; the reason may have been that he had access to the treasury funds, and could therefore resort to the sale of valuable objects should the need have arisen.¹⁹

In the early 1320s,²⁰ the sacrist paid for a new cathedral clock: this was probably a mechanical timepiece, though it is difficult to establish this with certainty.²¹ In the second half of the thirteenth century, clocks of this kind were becoming one of the focal points of monastic architectural prestige and expenditure. Around 1270, Humbert of Romans, a visitor from the Dominican order who felt strongly about the increasing luxury of monastic clocks, declared that they should keep accurate time, but should not give an impression of luxury nor be fitted with superfluous accessories.²² Complex water-clocks had become more widespread in the twelfth century and had gradually established themselves as a required feature in ecclesiastical and monastic contexts. The invention and diffusion of mechanical clocks somewhere between 1270 and 1330, and the addition of bells, introduced a new device into the visual and auditory landscape. In 1283, a new clock was installed on the rood screen at Dunstable; in 1292 Henry of Eastry spent the vast sum of £30 on a large clock for Canterbury Cathedral.

Payment for the Norwich clock is recorded in one of the earliest English clock accounts, running over three rolls between Christmas 1321 and 1325; there are no accounts for the years between 1325 and 1328/9, when we find a single payment of 16 d. for a rope for the clock, suggesting

¹⁶ As we shall see from the sacrist's accounts, building an overview of construction work at Norwich cathedral is by no means straightforward, requiring close inspection and depending on the chance survival of many records.

¹⁷ NRO, DCN 1/4/12: '*Compotus expensarum turris magne*'.

¹⁸ Maybe spilling over in the yearly account: in 1292/3, out of £29 3 s. 3.5 d. of domestic expenses in food, £8 1 d. are deduced without motive: could this be the cost of feeding the builders of the great tower? NRO, DCN 1/4/10, 11, 12.

¹⁹ Dodwell, 'The Monastic Community', p. 251.

²⁰ In 1321/2, again, and until 1324/5 at least

²¹ NRO, DCN 1/4/19-23, 23b.

²² Lindberg and Numbers (dirs), *The Cambridge History of Science*.

that work on the timepiece had been completed by this time.²³ The clock's instigator was Thomas of Plumstead, who became sacrist at Christmas 1321. He made the initial payments, but died the following year and was succeeded by Richard of Hecham, under whose auspices work on the clock was completed.²⁴ Thomas had been cellarer under the previous prior, Henry of Lakenham, himself a learned man and long-term sacrist.

Here again, the monks had to adapt their accounting practices to accommodate the important and ongoing expense of the construction of the clock. Obedientiaries usually tried to balance their yearly accounts and match receipts and expenses, but building costs sometimes proved a hindrance. In Thomas of Plumstead's first set of accounts (Christmas 1321-Michaelmas 1322), his balance was still in excess of over £1 despite expenditure of almost £5 on the clock. In his following and final accounts (Michaelmas 1322 until his death on 21 March 1323), he had debts of £7 0.75 d. of which £6 13 s. 9.25 d. was due to the clock.²⁵ Ralph de Hecham, who completed the accounting year until Michaelmas 1323, increased the indebtedment of his office to £19 18 s. 4.75 d., though not listing any expense related to the clock.

The account for 1323/4 has not survived, but in 1324/5 the sacrist Ralph de Hecham separated his ordinary expenses and those for the clock: he drew a first balance with expenses excluding the clock (*preter orologium*), which was in excess of 30 s. 9 d., then a second one including them – this time with a deficit of £39 5 s. 3.5 d. Even though it is not explicitly stated, these expenses covered the two years and forty weeks from when Ralph de Hecham became sacrist. Ralph had clearly been keeping a parallel account for the clock. Here, we see how the clock expenses were first included in the main account (under Thomas of Plumstead), then separated into a parallel account when the office's balance drops significantly under the financial burden (under Ralph de Hecham).

Master Robert was Thomas of Plumstead's master clockmaker when work on the clock began around Christmas 1321. Robert was paid four times a year, 40 shillings in total, 10 shillings per term, which was equivalent to 9.2 pence per week. No separate salary, besides liveries, was paid to his son who worked alongside him. Robert and his son were the sole clockmakers until Ralph de Hecham became sacrist and hired an additional master clockmaker, Roger, who was better paid at 10 pence per week. Robert worked until the end of the year 1323 but was then replaced by Laurent, who was paid 8 pence a week, and became Roger's associate clockmaker for 1324 and 1325. The first sacrist paid his master clockmakers per term; the second paid them by year and by week: when Roger and Laurent received their wages for two years of work in 1324/5, in reality this covered the period from approximately Christmas 1323 to Christmas 1325 (the beginning of the year is not explicitly stated, but we may deduce that it was at Christmas).

These examples reveal the variety and fluidity of accounting practices relating to building expenses in the Norwich obedientiary accounts. Accounting methods might vary from one monk to the other; the hiring of artisans might follow different timetables; expenses might be kept undercover for years. Different systems for wages (per year, term, week or day) and deferred payment make it difficult to identify expenses for materials or to understand the chronology of the process. We should follow the example of R. H. Snape and approach obedientiary accounts with caution when attempting to build an accurate picture of monastic

²³ NRO, DCN 1/4/21-23, 23b, 25.

²⁴ NRO, DCN 1/4/21. This roll, for Robert of Langley's thirteenth year as prior, contains two accounts: the last account for old John of Stratton, until Christmas 1321; and the first account of Thomas of Plumstead, his successor.

²⁵ In the account, he states £8 4 s. 6.5 d., but this is an error: the accountant has forgotten to include £1 4 s. 5.75 d. in receipt from the previous account, though in addition this sum was erroneously recorded as £24 5.75 d. instead of 24 s. 5.75 d.

finances.²⁶ Specific expenses such as construction work may be divided among various offices, depend on parallel accounting which may not necessarily be preserved, or be summarized in pluriannual accounts. What would we have known of the Norwich belfry expenses if the sacrist account for 1296/7 had disappeared? What other works have left no trace? Even though, as the accounts demonstrate, the need to pay for buildings was a huge constraint on monastic finances, the status of buildings did not seem to differ from other expenses such as travel or legal fees.

Other obedientiaris: pay for your own buildings

Despite the existence of the communitar and the sacrist, other obedientiaris also paid for priory buildings. Indeed, the choice made at Norwich seems to be that common buildings were financed by common offices; the cathedral by the sacrist; and particular buildings by the relevant obedientiaris.

The master of the cellar, responsible for the office of the prior's chamber, paid for buildings associated with his office: in 1291/2, he oversaw construction of a new bakery and a new wall.²⁷ The refectorer endorsed building expenses, but in an irregular manner: in 1296/7 and 1297/8 these amounted to little over £4, but rose to £13 and then £17 in 1299/1300 when construction work was recorded, before dropping again to less than £4 the following year.²⁸ In 1322/3, he paid £5 for the building of the cloister, and he contributed occasionally to unspecified common expenses.²⁹ The hostilar also paid for construction work. In addition, a further distinction was made between large building operations and everyday repairs, or small investments: minor expenses were usually included in the accounts of the obedientiaris in question, for example a fountain which the infirmarer had built in 1312/13.³⁰ An overview of all construction work is thus impossible, and records of even major building work may be only partially reflected in the archives.

As is habitual, these entries do not provide much insight into the building process itself: for the new bakery in 1291/2, we know only which materials were purchased (nails, tiles, posts), who was paid for the work and for how long (carpenter, tiler, cement-maker), and which tools were repaired with metal. This is of course quite a substantial amount of information, but it does not go beyond basic information for costs. The true cost of buildings is even more difficult to calculate when we realize that certain expenses were concealed elsewhere, under other headings: in 1303/1304, under the heading *minuta* we see that seven pounds of candles were bought for 8.75 d. by the master of the cellar to provide lighting for carpenters as they worked.³¹ However, who these carpenters were or whether they were working on the manors or within the cathedral precinct remains impossible to know.

Under this set-up there seems to have been a good deal of flexibility between obedientiaris, since income was not completely centralized in the hands of receivers or bursars. Only the income from the sixteen 'manors of the prior' was under the central control of the master of the cellar, who managed the expenses of the prior's chamber. The priory's building expenses are found in the accounts of a number of obedientiaris, principally the commoner, but also the refectorer, the hostilar, and the sacrist, depending on who was responsible for the building, but

²⁶ Snape, *English Monastic Finances in the Later Middle Ages*, p. 51-52.

²⁷ NRO, DCN 1/1/11.

²⁸ NRO, DCN 1/8/9-13.

²⁹ NRO, DCN 1/8/27,28.

³⁰ NRO, DCN 1/10/1.

³¹ NRO, DCN 1/1/17.

also on which source of income was allocated. This was not the case in institutions where finances were centralized by a bursar or treasurer, or where, as at St Swithun's, Winchester, a specific office – a *custos operum* – was created. The relative lack of centralization at Norwich means that major building expenses might be located in a large number of different account rolls.

This is not always the case. Other institutions are renowned for their building accounts: Stephen Murray relied on such records for his study of Gothic cathedrals.³² Cathedral chapters often hold accounts of the works or 'œuvre' of the cathedral. Here, there was a constant juggling of responsibilities between the sacrist, the communar, the pittancer and the refectorer in the financing of part of the building work: when the communar stopped paying for building work on the tower, the sacrist took over the expenditure. This was not only the case with building expenses, but also occurred where major expenditure for the common good of the priory was concerned, such as on litigation and travel. Over time, the subprior appears to have intervened and begun managing parallel accounts which drew on the treasure and common funds; eventually, in the early decades of the fourteenth century, an office of the treasure was established.

MANORIAL BUILDINGS: ORDER AND CONFUSION

If we follow the expenses recorded in the accounts, we are led to the conclusion that the priory's manorial buildings were mostly built of wood, wattle and daub, or *pisé* (rammed dry earth) rather than stone. There were many different types of buildings on the manor: the great hall, of course, and the agricultural buildings which included first and foremost storage space for grain and sheaves, and shelters for animal husbandry: granges and granaries; sheepcotes, cattle byres, stables, pigsties, pens, chicken coops, and dovecotes. A dairy, a larder, and a malt-kiln for making malt for brewing were all places where products were processed and stored. Carts may have been stored in a cart-house.

The grange was amongst the most important buildings on a manor, both symbolically and in terms of costs.³³ This was where the wheat, barley, rye, oats, and sometimes peas and beans were stored. These were either consumed as bread and ale, pottage, and horse fodder, commercialized, or sent to the lord's household. The grange was a powerful symbol of seignorial domination, especially for monastic lords who owned tithes. These buildings often dominated the landscape as they could be very large; some were wooden structures and others were built of stone, a famous example of this being the thirteenth-century tithe barn at Great Coxwell (Oxfordshire).

The place occupied by agricultural buildings in economic records depends on how the estate was managed – manors might be leased to a farmer, or they might be overseen directly by the lord – and who was responsible for their maintenance. In both cases, buildings mattered. For example, the manor of Sandon in Hertfordshire belonged to the cathedral chapter of St Paul's in London; it was overseen by a canon, but in the late 1250s the lease came at an end with the death of the farmer. To assess what was due, a general description of the current state of the manor was put in writing, including a complete account of the manorial buildings, with details

³² Murray, *Building Troyes Cathedral*.

³³ See for example Dewez, 'Stocker les céréales et les légumineuses dans les seigneuries anglaises (XIII^e - XIV^e s.)', and Dewez, 'Connaître par les nombres. Cultures et écritures comptables au prieuré cathédral de Norwich 1256-1344'.

of their size, and sometimes their condition. In total, twenty buildings including five granges, a granary, dairy, brewery, bakery and all kinds of pens, stables and coops are listed.³⁴

Fig. 1: The inventory of buildings at the manor of Sandon (London Metropolitan Archives, CLC/313/L/C/009/MS25324)

This kind of document, however, is concerned with the number, size and layout of buildings, but does not mention explicitly whether they are built of stone or wood.

At Norwich Cathedral priory, as elsewhere in England at that time, manors were under direct management (*demesne-farming*). The bulk of the priory's estates was composed of sixteen manors belonging to the master of the cellar. A lay steward was in charge of the entire estate, drawing income from the manors and rendering account annually to the master of the cellar.³⁵ Each of the sixteen manors was managed individually by a lay officer (the reeve) who rendered account of his income and expenses to the steward. This meant that there were two levels of accounts for each manor: the reeve's account (for each individual manor), and the steward's account (for the sixteen manors of the prior).

In practice, the costs of building and repairing manorial buildings could be paid either by the reeve or by the steward, which complicates the work of historians as expenses for agricultural buildings are to be found in the manorial accounts as well as in that of the master of the cellar. In the manorial account, building expenses were usually registered under a dedicated heading: *Domus*.³⁶ The organization of English manorial accounts of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries was highly standardized, and the heading for buildings is one of the first, coming immediately after expenditure on ploughs and carts. In the accounts of the master of the cellar, who was the priory's principal obedientiary, these expenses are listed alongside those for boats (*Expense domus apud grang'*; *Custus domorum et batellorum*) owned by the priory: it was clearly thought logical to put work on mainly wooden buildings in the same category as boats, as these were made of the same material.³⁷ Agricultural buildings may have been felt to have much in common with these vessels and other kinds of vehicles which were in fact akin to infrastructure: boats, ploughs, and carts or wagons, like buildings, were important investments, were mostly made of wood and metal, and were quintessential for the proper functioning of the estates. Here again, building expenses do not seem to be singled out symbolically in the layout of the accounts.

As was the case with the accounts relating to the installation of the Norwich Cathedral clock, the expenses listed are not very explicit in terms of the building itself. In the manorial accounts we find a long list of tasks and materials: bulk purchases of laths, plinths, rods, posts, nails, tiles, locks and other materials; the hire of craftsmen *pro tempora* for a range of work on all manorial buildings: roofing, ridging, making wattle for the walls (*cloyarum*), whitewashing, and creating threshing areas (*aer'*) in the granges. Walls were built, and woodwork was repaired or constructed. Renovation work was constant, the most vulnerable building, or rather the most prone to fire damage, being the malt-kiln. One or two pence was regularly spent on locks for granaries or granges. Occasionally, more ambitious repair work was required: re-

³⁴ London, London Metropolitan Archives, CLC/313/L/C/009/MS25324. An edition is in preparation.

³⁵ See Slavin, *Bread and Ale for the Brethren*.

³⁶ Sometimes costs are also found elsewhere, under *Commodum* or *Minuta*.

³⁷ For manorial headings, see *Manorial Records of Cuxham, Oxfordshire, circa 1200-1359*, ed. by Harvey.

thatching the roof (*arundinatio*) of the grange at Martham;³⁸ re-daubing the walls; building a new grange from scratch.

Most of the time, building expenses are listed indiscriminately and accounts do not generally differentiate between individual buildings, making calculations of expenses per grange impossible. For example, in one Martham account, 2 s. 1 d. was spent on rods for the repair of buildings and walls.³⁹ Craftsmen were often paid to work on several buildings at once: in 1309/10, at Martham, an artisan was paid 8 d. for two days' work covering the ridges (*crestant*) of granges and other buildings.⁴⁰ At Monks' Grange in 1334/5 a workman and his servant were paid for five and a half days' labour covering the pea grange, the malt-kiln building and other buildings.⁴¹ Later in the same year, these same men worked for a further three days on the rye and barley grange and on the sheepcote, and then seven and a half more days on the cart-house and the ridge on the grange.⁴² Neither salaries nor bulk purchases of nails or other materials can be systematically linked with one single building.

Additional obstacles to assessing the true average cost of repairs per agricultural building are the fact that the cost of maintenance varied considerably from year to year, and that where manorial accounts for a certain year are preserved, the accounts for the master of the cellar for the same year have not necessarily survived. In 1299/1300 the master of the cellar spent £9 8 s. 2 d. on laths for the granary at Sedgeford, large nails or spikes (*midelspiking*), nails for laths and plinths, hinges, wages for a carpenter for a new building in Hindolveston, tiles for the walls and the roof, pegs or pins for roofing or decking (*tilpinnes*), wages for roofing workers, and trays of lime.⁴³ In 1302/3, costs almost doubled due to the construction of a sheepcote and a house for the servants at Monks' Grange, and two houses at Plumstead.⁴⁴ By contrast, the following year expenditure dropped sharply to £5 5 s. 10 d. including for carpentry on a stable at Taverham.⁴⁵ Generally speaking, between £5 and £20 for expenditure on manorial buildings were entered by the steward under this heading in the master of the cellar's rolls.

Phil Slavin, in his study of Norwich grain provisioning, attempts to evaluate the cost of storage; however the detail of his data is imprecise.⁴⁶ For example, he does not specify whether costs from the master of the cellar's accounts are included, and the source of the data – «Manorial accounts database» – suggests that they are not. He states the total cost per decade for storage on the demesnes, but inevitably these are incomplete as record survival varies widely from one decade to the next.⁴⁷ For the decade 1270-1280 (rather than 1271-1280, as stated in the study), there must have been 160 account-rolls for the sixteen manors of the prior, of which only sixteen remain (ten per cent).⁴⁸ How the cost of storage can be calculated with certainty from these rolls is unclear: in the case of the manors of Hindolveston, Newton, and Monks' Grange, building costs for the decade in question do not have their own heading but instead are listed in the *Minute* section of the accounts, either at the beginning, at the end, or in the middle (repairing the malt-kiln, purchase of nails, building a wall, repairing the door of the grange and other

³⁸ NRO, DCN 60/23/21.

³⁹ NRO, DCN 60/23/10.

⁴⁰ NRO, DCN 60/23/12.

⁴¹ NRO, DCN 60/26/24.

⁴² NRO, DCN 60/26/25.

⁴³ NRO, DCN 1/1/15.

⁴⁴ NRO, DCN 1/1/16. Costs are 17 l. 13 s. 4,75 d.

⁴⁵ NRO, DCN 1/1/17.

⁴⁶ Slavin, *Bread and Ale for the Brethren*, p. 119-139.

⁴⁷ Slavin, *Bread and Ale for the Brethren*, Table 6.1, p. 123.

⁴⁸ See Dewez, 'Connaître par les nombres', p. 501-521.

buildings, thatching, buying a lock...).⁴⁹ At Sedgeford, however, as at Martham, there is a *Custus domorum* heading, although minor repairs (to the malt-kiln), locks, palisades, fences, or hedges are listed in the *Minute* section.⁵⁰ At Eaton, one account has a heading, the other does not.⁵¹ As a result, scouring the rolls for building costs is a meticulous task, and poses the question of where to draw the line: should one include the building of unspecified walls, hedges or fences? The digging of ditches?

For the whole decade of 1270-1280, total building costs from the sixteen remaining manorial account rolls add up to £16 17 s. 6 d. To these, one must add the expenses of the master of the cellar, in the rolls of the *Camera prioris*. From 1278/9 these are to be found under the heading *Edificiis et molendinis* (then *Custus domorum et batellarum* from 1282/3), but before this date they are difficult to identify as there is no separate account for building expenses.⁵² Excluding mills, this could add at least £7 3 s. 10.5 d. from four account rolls, bringing the total to £24 1 s. 4.5 d.⁵³

Fig. 2: Estimate of annual building expenses for the prior's manors in 1270-1280 (ten years)

From manorial accounts		From master of the cellar accounts		Total from all accounts	Estimated yearly average
Total	Record survival rate	Total	Record survival rate		
£16 17s. 6 d.	10%	£7 3s. 10.5 d	40%	£24 1s. 4.5 d.	£18 13s. 5.6 d.

If we extrapolate the numbers from the surviving documents, we calculate an average yearly expense of £18 13 s. 5.6 d. for all manors, very close to Slavin's estimate of «annual storage costs» of £18.8 for the decade 1271-1280. However, the term «storage costs» is inaccurate as these expenses include money spent on coops, pens, stables, the malt-kiln, the bakery and the brewery, and even the mills: the entire cost of building maintenance can hardly equate the cost of grain storage.

Indeed, throughout his analysis, Slavin talks of «barn works», but barns are very seldom separated from other agricultural buildings in the accounts: costs are for manorial buildings, not granges alone. Whereas he gives an average cost of «barn maintenance and repairs» of £1 17 s. 1.5 d. per year before the Black Death, our calculations give a total of £1 1 s. 10 d. for the sixteen accounts - excluding those of the master of the cellar - in the decade 1270-1280, for all manorial buildings, for storage purposes or otherwise, including some fencing, hedging and walls. The conclusion is that such precise numbers, although not necessarily disproportionate, are highly debatable. It is impossible to distinguish between buildings for grain storage, other agricultural buildings, or costs of other work on the manor.

Slavin goes on to provide, per decade, the ratio of storage costs per quarter of threshed and unthreshed crop. This ratio is an interesting way of dealing with the variation in record survival,

⁴⁹ NRO, DCN 60/18/5, 6, 7.

⁵⁰ See especially NRO, DCN 60/33/6.

⁵¹ NRO, DCN 60/8/3, 4.

⁵² NRO, DCN 1/1/4, 6.

⁵³ NRO, DCN 1/1/2-5.

but here again his calculations are questionable. Indeed, peas and beans were often stacked outside, and the cost of covering them was registered elsewhere.⁵⁴ He then converts unthreshed grain into hypothetical quantities of threshed grain to give «approximate storage costs for one quarter of threshed crop», which he then compares with the grain storage costs calculated for London by Jordan Claridge and John Langdon.⁵⁵ However, the maintenance cost of urban granaries is not comparable with the cost of upkeep of rural barns.

In conclusion, despite giving an impression of clarity, numbers must be handled with caution. They do, however, provide valuable information, especially in the cases where individual buildings can be identified. For instance, the communar John of Worstead recorded the expenses for the building of a new grange at Catton in 1327-1330.⁵⁶ The total amounts to £14 7 s. 10.5 d. for beams, nails, straw and other materials, as well as wages for carpenters, thatchers and daubers, with salaries representing thirty-one per cent of the total.

BUILDING EXPENSES AND MONASTIC ACCOUNTABILITY

So where does this leave us in terms of the place of buildings in accounts? At Norwich Cathedral priory, building expenses do not appear to occupy a significant or symbolic place in the yearly practice of accounting. There is a sense that they belong to common expenses in the case of monastic buildings; they receive a good measure of attention in the case of manorial buildings. But the rationale for accounts is found elsewhere: they are a means of keeping control, guarding monks against the sin of *proprietas*, assisting the abbot or the obedientiary in the struggle against debt and providing evidence of the financial state of the monastery.

There is a slight difference between the accountability of abbots and that of obedientiaries. In the twelfth, thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, there was pressure on the heads of religious houses to demonstrate that they were effective administrators, and this can be clearly seen in other types of records, for example administrative memorials.⁵⁷ These documents are scarce and few examples survive. They are memoranda books in which an abbot or prior, or occasionally even an obedientiary, made a summary of certain aspects of his time in office in order to demonstrate how effective his administration had been, and to list the changes he had introduced: perhaps he even thought that this little book might prove useful to his successor.

William of Colerne, for example, was abbot of Malmesbury from 1260 to 1296 and towards the end of his time in office he compiled a memorandum of which six folios survive.⁵⁸ It was probably written between 1291 and shortly after his death. It highlights William's administrative achievements as abbot and aims to provide evidence of his good practice during his lengthy time in office. It is composed of short texts, copied from existing records or extracted *ad hoc* from manorial and obedientiary account rolls. Each begins with a rubricated

⁵⁴ Dewez, 'Stocker les céréales et les légumineuses dans les seigneuries anglaises (XIII^e - XIV^e s.)'.

⁵⁵ Slavin, *Bread and Ale for the Brethren*, p. 125 ; Claridge, Langdon, 'Storage...'

⁵⁶ *The Early Communar and Pittancer Rolls of Norwich Cathedral Priory*, ed. by Fernie and Whittingham, p. 110.

⁵⁷ Publication pending on the subject.

⁵⁸ BL, Add. MS 38009. The current manuscript is thirteen folios long, but both surviving modern foliotations indicate sixteen folios. There is no medieval foliotation and nothing indicates when the first six folios were bound with the other texts, which are other miscellaneous administrative texts relating to the Abbey of Malmesbury. Between the first and second foliotation, the order of the folios has been changed, correcting mistakes in the order of the content. See also *Registrum Malmesburiense*, ed. by Brewer; *Charters of Malmesbury Abbey*, ed. by Kelly.

title explaining its contents, which gives the whole document a feeling of homogeneity. The information has been researched, gathered and reframed as a new document: this secondary use of pragmatic records represents a reflection on administration and accountability by the men of the time. However, the manuscript is modest in size and in appearance: originally it was probably not much longer than the surviving six folios and its only distinguishing feature is the rubrication of the titles.

Fig. 3: The memorial of William of Colerne: new buildings built during his time in office (BL, Add. MS 38009, fol. 2r: 'De edificiis factis infra abbathiam et extra per diversa maneria')

The first item in this document is the valuation of manors, which is then followed by specific categories of expenditure. The first of these is a list of expenses for purchasing ornaments for the abbey church (*ornamenta ecclesie*), a traditional type of disbursement often found in accounting treatises, which give an insight into how churches were embellished and equipped with adequate liturgical material.⁵⁹ This is followed by a list of expenses "for pleas and other various businesses", belonging to the contemporary category of "necessary expenses" found in accounting treatises. These were compulsory payments imposed on the community by the abbey's business, such as pleas, or by the king or the church, and which should be counted as such when assessing the abbot's administration. In the same vein, the next entry is a year-by-year list of the house's cereal expenses in the first twenty-one years of William's abbacy, between 1260 and 1280.⁶⁰

Another common feature of such administrative memorials, also found in William of Colerne's collection, is the inclusion of a list of expenses for constructing or repairing manorial and conventual buildings during the prelate or officer's time in office. These lists are often ordered by manor and, within each manor, by year, reflecting the scribe's work of collating information extracted from the yearly manorial court rolls found in the archives. According to this list, William of Colerne supervised the construction of halls, a chamber, and a kitchen on the abbey grounds; he renovated the abbey's larder, built ovens for the convent's kitchen, created a herb garden (*herbarium*), planted vines and an orchard (*pomeria*) in the abbot's garden; on the estates, he had the churches and other buildings repaired, ordered the building of granges, dovecotes, mills, walls, gates, stables, and a number of vineyards etc.⁶¹ These building works emphasize how he helped improve the abbey's infrastructures and justify the expenses incurred.

A similar list of repairs or construction work is to be found in a much more prestigious example of this kind of memorial, the *memoriale multorum* of Henry of Eastry, prior of Christ Church, Canterbury (1285-1331).⁶² Once again, this memorial was probably written towards the end of Henry's priorate and refers explicitly to his time in office. Under the title *Nova opera in ecclesia et in cur' tempore Henrici prioris*, we find lists of church ornaments and vestments, as well references to construction work.⁶³ For the monastery and the church during Henry's priorate total expenditure amounted to £2214 (the years 1285-1290 are dealt with all together; expenditure is thereafter listed on an annual basis).⁶⁴ Even though he may have not been a great

⁵⁹ BL, Add. MS. 38009, fol. 1^v.

⁶⁰ BL, Add. MS. 38009, fol. 2^v.

⁶¹ BL, Add. MS. 38009, fol. 3^r.

⁶² BL, MS Cotton Galba E. IV; transcribed and commented by Hogan, 'The Memorandum Book of Henry of Eastry, Prior of Christ Church, Canterbury'.

⁶³ Fol. 101^r ff.

⁶⁴ Hogan, 'The Memorandum Book of Henry of Eastry, Prior of Christ Church, Canterbury', p. 310.

architect, Henry had a new room built for the exchequer, made improvements to the prior's lodgings and the chapter house, and oversaw reparations to the cloister and the installation of the great clock in 1292. He was also responsible for many new outbuildings, including stables, a brewery, a bakehouse, storehouses and a gaol⁶⁵ as well as commissioning numerous new ornaments and precious objects for the cathedral.

This is followed by an entry for each manor, listing building work carried out in chronological order. These expenses focus on all kinds of manorial buildings – barns, stables, granges and pens, as well as mills – but they do not represent the total expenses for building maintenance: ordinary maintenance was budgeted annually by monk-wardens and is not included.⁶⁶ What are included are ‘major additions and improvements made on the various manors, purchases of new land, marsh embankment, drainage and sea defences. These are items of capital investments calling for the consent of the prior and his council and as such they lay outside the competence of the individual custodians’. Buildings also included chapels on most manors, and shops in market towns and cities such as London, Southwark, Canterbury, Walworth and Newington.⁶⁷ Mills were expensive to build and maintain: the biggest investment in this survey is for the mill at Lydden, which cost £143 13 s. The prior's memorial demonstrates his ability to properly maintain the priory and to be an effective administrator of its estates. The buildings on the manors represented 16.6 per cent of all extraordinary and legal expenses over the course of the thirty-seven years of Henry's priorate, or £3739 4 s. 6 d.⁶⁸ Expenditure on buildings represents the third greatest disbursement after the payment of debts (21 per cent) and royal taxes and loans to the king (20.5 per cent), coming just before lawsuits (16.1 per cent) but far ahead of land purchase (5.9 per cent), an understandable difference considering the consequences of the statute of Mortmain.

As we have seen, buildings did have a place in the accountability of monastic heads of houses, although they did not occupy a central position. It seems in fact that the provisioning of food, especially bread and ale, and the reduction of debt, were more prevalent as a means for thirteenth-century abbots and priors to demonstrate good administrative skills than investment in buildings. Indeed, keeping accounts was a means of exerting control as well as being proof of effective administration, and it seems that the principle of Suger of St Denis, according to which money served for the glorification of God, had evolved to the point that good accounting and staying out of debt were now viewed as a virtue in themselves.⁶⁹ It should also be noted that the status of income and the concept of debt had evolved since the twelfth century. There now existed a notion of debt as something to be fought against: money must not be spent idly on buildings; expenses should rather be measured against the needs of the community. Moreover, after 1215, monastic income was taxed more heavily and more systematically. Pleading poverty was commonplace. Of course magnificent monastic buildings and churches continued to be built and accounted for, but the *ratio* of budget had changed.

Obedientaries were also subject to accountability, and a number of memorials compiled by these officials have survived. Such is the case of Robert of Donewic, master of the cellar of Norwich Cathedral priory. In 1341, before leaving office, he ordered his scribes to make a copy in book format of all his yearly accounts, and on the final page we find the memorandum mentioned at the beginning of this article detailing the results of Robert's sound

⁶⁵ Hogan, 'The Memorandum Book of Henry of Eastry, Prior of Christ Church, Canterbury', p. 310-11.

⁶⁶ Hogan, 'The Memorandum Book of Henry of Eastry, Prior of Christ Church, Canterbury', p. 313-14.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ Hogan, 'The Memorandum Book of Henry of Eastry, Prior of Christ Church, Canterbury', p. 299.

⁶⁹ See also Sabapathy, *Officers and Accountability in Medieval England, 1170-1300*.

administration.⁷⁰ In the memorandum, investments and necessary expenses are listed, year by year, the implication being that they were either not within his control, such as payments to the king or papal taxation, or were in the best interests of the priory. These ‘investments’ only included land purchased, with no mention of buildings, even though his yearly accounts state that, in seven and a half years, Robert of Donewic spent a total of £47 13 s. 11 d for the upkeep of manorial buildings, including boats. The buildings were mostly wooden, with some elements – probably the foundations – made of stone. This does not necessarily suggest that these buildings were held to be inferior in terms of durability and status, or deemed to be so in the basic accountability of obedientiaris; however, as these expenses can be easily consulted in the copy of the individual accounts, we observe that they do have a lesser value when compared with the acquisition of land.

CONCLUSION

Behind the apparent clarity provided by numerical data, understanding building works through monastic accounts is anything but straightforward and is limited both due to the inconsistent availability of records and the opacity of entries. It is however possible that the increase in building expenses was one of the factors contributing to the development of systematic accounting and the emphasis on reducing debt, as obedientiaris accounts provided an overview of a monastery’s finances and the logistical means to allocate funds where available. There does not seem to be a special emphasis on stone buildings through the medium of accounts; no special symbolic status is given to these expenses. On the contrary, expenses may be pragmatically distributed between a number of offices. This may be because these records deal first and foremost with accountability, focusing on the personal financial responsibility of monastic and lay officers and their role in reducing debt. Buildings did nevertheless contribute to the making of an effective administrator, whose duty it was to ensure that buildings were in good condition and well maintained: this is exemplified by the administrative memorials of abbots and priors in the late thirteenth century. This, however, is as true of manorial buildings as it is of conventual buildings: a good administrator takes care of his estates as well as of his flock.

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