Enclaves of Learning: A Commentary on the Papers in the Section on “Spiritual Communities”

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One of the principal goals of comparative study of past societies, besides verifying the validity of common assumptions about similarities and differences, is to identify hitherto-unsuspected points of interest and to explore ways of integrating these into future research. In the present section on religious communities, identifying such points of interest is made possible because each contributor has offered very different answers to a set of questions deriving, to quote Rutger Kramer, from the concept of Enclaves of Learning as a “low-threshold, common sense approach to comparison” of religious communities across the Eurasian sphere.¹

The different answers can be explained in the first place by the varied nature and context of the religious communities, or enclaves of learning, under scrutiny. But an important additional factor is the significant difference in the typology, scope and discourse of the primary evidence, which necessarily gives the analytical approach of each paper a particular focus: intellectual exchanges with the outside world, learning, welfare, communal identity, spiritual self-understanding. When reading all the papers in succession, one cannot help but be struck by the way in which each contributes to the complex process of identifying the limits of the evidence relied upon in the other studies. Through exploring, understanding, and trying to address these limits, new opportunities for deepening our understanding of these communities will present themselves. This, in addition to the obvious merits of testing the semantic relevance of “communities” and “enclaves of learning” in the context of cross-cultural historical research, is what makes the comparative effort in this section such a resounding success.

In what follows, I want to single out a few such perspectives for further comparative research. Four levels of analysis seem particularly promising: first,

* I should like to thank the organizers of the VISCOM project for their invitation to provide this commentary. The references included in the footnotes are not intended to be comprehensive, only illustrative.

1 Kramer, “Spiritual Communities”, this volume.

that of the “others” and “otherness” in community formation; second, hierarchies within enclaves of learning; third, so-called “communities of practice”; and fourth, the individual and his/her shaping of, and response to, the religious community to which he or she belongs.

Community and the Other

Community, as Christina Lutter aptly states in her paper, is a particularly useful transcultural concept to “compare interrelated social and symbolic categories of identification and belonging that are at work at diverse social levels”.² It allows us to study up close, through contemporary testimonies of those who participated in these communities, and to document, the process of the “making and un-making” of social groups.³ Strategies of self-identification and discourses of social, religious, or ethnic demarcation not only allowed communities to shape a cohesive and operational (in an ideological sense, but certainly also in a social one) understanding of self, but also to draw functional lines between that self and the outside world. In this drawing of lines, across all the cultures under review a great deal of attention was paid to how one’s community or enclave relied for its existence on a state of mutual interdependence with the outside world. As various authors have argued, such interdependency could be defined in political, socio-economic and ideological terms, or, more often than not, a combination of all three.

This attention paid by medieval commentators to the position of enclaves in the world allows us to identify an opportunity to expand VISCOM’s collective reflection on community: that of investigating the outside world’s otherness as an operative category for defining community and of looking at how such otherness impacted on the specific choices communities made when engaging with the outside world. In the current focus adopted by the project members, the degree to which both of these strategies and/or perspectives contributed to the shaping of a cohesive understanding of the outside world remains, for the most part, an open question. On the one hand, communal identities could only be established on the basis of a more or less clear vision of what society outside of these communities represented; on the other, communities’ views of the outside world also depended upon the processes underpinning their mutual interdependency. Trying to reconstruct and explain this dialectic—that is, between the pre-existing notions of the other and the

² Lutter, “Vita communis”, this volume.

³ Ibid.

experiences based on the creation of relations of interdependence—would surely benefit our understanding of how these enclaves saw themselves and allow more detailed reconstruction of how groups' ideas and *habitus* guided their interaction with the outside world.⁴ Admittedly these notions are hinted at in the papers included in this section,⁵ but they deserve to be singled out for closer scrutiny and explicit discussion.

Otherness as an analytical concept is also relevant in a further sense. Since the self-understanding and behaviour of these communities was deeply influenced by feedback from the outside world, there is also a need to explore the degree to which different communities in this outside world (aristocratic and urban ones, to name but two) were also impacted by this process. How did it change the way in which they thought of themselves, and how in turn did this shape their interactions with other communities? As Rutger Kramer has shown, in Carolingian times, monastic enclaves boasted about their service to the secular rulership in communicating principles of good government based on the pursuit of an ideal Christian society. And they seem to have been successful in this service, as there is sufficient evidence to argue that their influence in determining rulers' behaviour was real and directly influenced contemporary justifications of royal and imperial authority.⁶ In her discussion of Buddhist learning in Tibet, Pascale Hugon also remarks that, even though the "open networks" of learning she observes were exclusive to a particular social elite, there are strong indications of indirect benefits for a much larger section of society.⁷ For these and other societies, however, our understanding of such benefits and impact is still relatively limited, particularly as regards their significance for the shaping and transformation of non-religious group identities. There lies a vast, if methodologically challenging, area of investigation still waiting to be explored systematically and comparatively.

Hierarchies in Communities, Hierarchies in Learning

Hierarchy has also been touched upon, but often only in passing, as a relevant parameter in assessing the shaping and experience of group identity. From an analytical point of view, the term can be made operational on two levels.

4 The concept of *habitus*, mentioned only in Lutter's paper, warrants further exploration as regards the interactions of enclaves with society; Lutter, "Vita communis".

5 Kramer, "Teaching Emperors", this volume.

6 Kramer, "Teaching Emperors".

7 Hugon, "Enclaves of Learning", this volume.

The first relates to the question of hierarchies within these enclaves of learning. In the Buddhist communities of Tibet, Mathias Fermer notes how intellectual and spiritual learning was compartmentalized in specific, specialized “subgroups”.⁸ This raises the question of whether such subgroups originated exclusively on the basis of a hierarchy in intellectual and spiritual activity, or whether these hierarchies were also designed to accommodate the differences in intellectual and spiritual proficiency of group members. Common sense tells us the latter, and, as such hierarchies must have existed in enclaves of learning across the different cultures under scrutiny, the question of whether these impacted on the identity and self-perception of such communities seems absolutely relevant. In almost all the cases presented in this volume, the primary evidence compels us to consider questions of self-perception and social positioning almost exclusively in monolithic terms, simply because we can only observe these communities from the perspective of one, or at most a handful of, commentators. But these testimonies by default fail to convey the impact of intellectual and spiritual hierarchies on group formation and a community’s understanding of self. This is so whether these hierarchies are based on the capabilities of each member or on specialized subgroups within a community.⁹ Put differently, there is a need to ask three questions: Did authors address the natural hierarchies within enclaves of learning? If they did not, how do we explain the fact that they thought of intellectual or spiritual “divisions of labour” as a problem in representing community? Finally, is there a way of finding out how these hierarchies nonetheless impacted on the way in which views of monastic communal identity—and also and most especially, a community’s *habitus*—were shaped?

The second level on which we can bring hierarchy to bear in our analysis is by looking at how hierarchical relations between similar religious enclaves impacted on the self-understanding of each. As we have seen in several of the contributions in this section, there could be a tendency to either support, or implicitly reject, a notion of a “larger” community based on this unity in purpose and identity. Remarkably, in some cases the communities that attempted to describe and define such a “super-community” were not those who were looking to address issues that were jeopardizing their existence, but precisely those that were flourishing and were seeking to capitalize on their prosperity. This appears to have been the case in Diarmaid Ó Riain’s *Schottenklöster*,¹⁰ and it would not be surprising at all if further research showed that such perceived

8 Fermer, “Among Teachers”, this volume.

9 For this I refer to Snijders, “Textual Diversity”.

10 Ó Riain, “The *Schottenklöster* in the World”, this volume.

hierarchies also explain some of the centrifugal and centripetal dynamics in the emergence of the new monastic orders of the European West in the later 11th century and beyond. The question of whether such ideas for a “super-community” were realized is, of course, relevant. However, so is the mere existence of such ideals, and how different communities in different hierarchical positions—based, for example, on social standing, or religious or intellectual prestige—reacted to them.¹¹

Communities of Practice

A third perspective for further research concerns the notion of communities of practice. As an analytical tool, this is useful in that it allows us to view the transmission of knowledge, expertise and attitudes not so much as a top-down, institutionalized process, but as a participatory one. In a community of practice, teachers and disciples all contribute equally to a situation where such skills, expertise and attitudes are transmitted not through theoretical instruction, but through actual practice.¹² Creating a context where disciples engage actively with a master in spiritual reflection while gaining technical knowledge or skill in intellectual procedures constitutes a step up on a social and cognitive level from settings where information is transmitted strictly in an ex-cathedra fashion. This is a phenomenon that emerges from Mathias Fermer's discussion of Buddhist communities in Tibet,¹³ where enclaves of learning could in some circumstances exist in the first place as groups of individuals centred on the figure of a charismatic leader. Eirik Hovden has made a similar point in his discussion of the early Zaydi communities in Southern Arabia.¹⁴ In both of these cultures, we see that charismatic leaders and their disciples were regarded not as the membership of the community of learning, but as the community itself. And from a Western medieval viewpoint, scholarship on education and the transfer of cultural capital in monastic contexts has of late argued persuasively in favour of shifting attention away from institutional settings (e.g. cathedral schools and monastic reform centres) to focus instead on clusters of like-minded individuals grouped around one or several charismatic

11 Also see Hovden, “Competing Visions” this volume.

12 For the notion of “communities of practice” and its relevance to learning processes and contexts, see Lave/Wenger, *Situated Learning*; also, among numerous others, Hughes, ed., *Communities of Practice*.

13 Fermer, “Among Teachers”.

14 Hovden, “Competing Visions”.

teachers.¹⁵ Similar trends are noticeable in the study of the transmission of leadership attitudes and expertise.¹⁶

Applying the concept of communities of practice systematically in a comparative analysis of enclaves of learning in different societies would undoubtedly reveal much. To begin with, it would make clear how our natural tendency to focus on institutions as the primary means for sophisticated societies to transmit intellectual and spiritual knowledge (a tendency strongly influenced by modern modes of education and the professionalization of science), while useful in many ways, should not monopolize the discussion. In medieval times, individuals acquired knowledge and expertise not, primarily, by being a member of a particular school or institution, but by participating actively in contexts where knowledge and expertise were concretely applied. One could, of course, maintain that such applications were strictly determined by consolidated rules, as has traditionally been argued for Western monasticism. But recent studies of the bewildering variety in internal practices in 10th- to 12th-century cloistered communities have suggested that even the seemingly rigid normative framework of Western monastic groups intentionally left a great deal of room for intellectual, spiritual and ritual creativity based on a community's specific context, experiences, and customs.¹⁷ Secondly, allowing for communities of practice to play a role in our analysis would also make it possible to provide a significant additional dimension to previous explanations of the reason why enclaves of learning could display such vast hierarchical differences in terms of the production of intellectual texts, spiritual resonance and ability to engage with the outside world in mutually beneficial ways. Such a perspective will remain out of reach for as long as historians continue to systematically prioritize the institutional aspects of these enclaves.¹⁸

15 Jaeger, *The Emy of Angels*; Ferzoco/Müssig, eds., *Medieval Monastic Education*; Münster-Swendsen, "The Model of Scholastic Mastery"; and Steckel, *Kulturen des Lehrens*. Also see the case study by Lutter, "Ways of Knowing".

16 Münster-Swendsen, "Medieval Virtuosity"; also Vanderputten, "Communities of Practice".

17 For instance, I remain doubtful of the idea that the reformers of the 11th and early 12th centuries developed very clear procedures for renewing liturgical practice, discipline and other aspects of the conventual *habitus* before they actually implemented their reformist ambitions in concrete, institutional settings; on this see Vanderputten, *Monastic Reform*. Also see the extensive literature on the emergence of the monastic orders of the 12th century and their normative output, discussed succinctly, with ample references, in id., "The 1131 General Chapter".

18 Fermer, "Among Teachers", relies on a notion very similar to that of communities of practice to reconstruct how Buddhist groups shaped a sense of community.

Community and the Individual

A final point I want to highlight in this commentary concerns the individual's relationship to enclaves of learning. As various authors have indicated, one should not forget that, even in some of the most enclosed contexts of these medieval societies, individuals could, and often did, belong to multiple communities at the same time.¹⁹ To give one example, we know that Benedictine monks of the central Middle Ages, despite formally abandoning their worldly existence upon taking up their profession, throughout their lives often maintained intensive relations with, and belonged to, other communities. Leaving aside the specific problem of abbots' itinerancy,²⁰ the most obvious example is where, for reasons that were often inspired by the interests of their monastic environment, monks remained connected with their aristocratic relatives. Also, as the procedures of managing monastic economies became increasingly complex, and as specialization and division of responsibilities imposed itself on these institutions, numerous monks were sent away to manage distant estates owned by their monastery. A surprisingly large proportion of the monastic population at some point in their lives also actively engaged in the exchange of technical, social, intellectual and spiritual knowledge with non-group members, at least some of which belonged to other enclaves of learning. Once again it is common sense that tells us that for these enclaves of learning at least, membership was very heterogeneous in terms of individuals' participation in other communities.

At first sight, the "madrasas" in medieval Islam may look completely different from the other forms of community discussed in this section, primarily because their organization did not involve a form of physical enclosure and had university-like features, in the sense that most individuals participating a priori acknowledged that their membership of such communities was limited in time.²¹ However, a closer look at what was going on within the membership of some of the other enclaves studied in this section may well reveal that, while physical mobility may have been limited in some cases, in mind and likely also in behaviour, throughout their lives members could have very different experiences of community. Advanced network analysis could, as far as the primary evidence allows, give us a glimpse of the extent to which the

19 I refer to the comments at the end of Lutter, "Vita communis".

20 Bulst, "La filiation"; Rosé, "Circulation abbatiale"; and Vanderputten, "The Mind as Cell". More generally, see the papers in Cottier et al., eds., *Les personnes d'autorité en milieu régulier*.

21 Kramer, "Introduction", also Hugon, "Enclaves of learning".

communal identities projected in contemporary accounts overlapped with the views of individual members, both in regard to single identities and the collective.

Conclusions

All of the observations in this brief commentary do nothing to negate the significance of the VISCOM researchers' approach to enclaves of learning as a relevant category for comparative analysis. But they may point towards what could be an extra dimension to the research. While these enclaves functioned as nodal points for religious, intellectual, social and economic life in medieval societies, focusing on the complexity behind this function might take us still further.²² A closer look at the dialectics between individual and communal development, and at the other hierarchies at work in these communities, will undoubtedly reveal that these nodal points were not uniform reflections of collective interests and self-perceptions. Rather they consisted of clusters of smaller nodal points, some of which derived from the actions, connections, and interests of individuals, while others were collective.²³ And even among the collective interests and views a great deal of diversity is likely lurking below the sources' discourse of unity and uniformity.²⁴ In terms of impact and resonance, communities from any of the cultures investigated in this section did not have the same effect on all other groups with whom they interacted. They did not consistently implement their view of self and society in exactly the same way. They also certainly allowed their position to change over time—or were forced to do so.²⁵ What processes were behind these differences still awaits systematic investigation.

With various degrees of persuasiveness depending strictly upon the nature of the evidence, the papers in this session indicate that community functioned both as a social and an affective category, where representations of belonging were subject to a continuous, multi-level process of imagination and enactment.

22 An expression borrowed from Kramer, "Introduction".

23 I am referring to the comments on subgroups in Fermer, "Among Teachers", and Hovden, "Competing Visions".

24 On this see Hugon, "Enclaves". Surely the notion that "literate communities" may be studied as uniform entities, with no hierarchical differences or conflict-bearing dynamics fuelled by different interpretations of a shared written legacy, is one of the least fortunate (and unintended) consequences of Brian Stock's ground-breaking work *The Implications of Literacy*.

25 As pointed out in Kramer, "Introduction", and Lutter, "Vita communis".

As Rutger Kramer points out in the introduction, relying on the imperfect yet highly relevant notion of enclaves of learning allows scholars to place on the agenda a thorough investigation of other issues relevant to the study of medieval communities. It also enables them to identify cross-culturally significant opportunities for further research. I hope to have been successful in highlighting a few of these, and that some of them may be incorporated into the VISCOM team's further endeavours.

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