CHAPTER ONE
THE FOUNDING OF PLYMPTON PRIORY: BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

A crucial time in the lifespan of any religious community was the period surrounding its foundation. In the twelfth century, as the “new orders” flourished across Europe, members of the Church hierarchy and lay society who possessed sufficient means established religious houses of their favoured orders. This chapter will explore the circumstances surrounding the foundation of Plympton Priory in 1121 as well as the larger context in which foundations of English Augustinian houses occurred.

The priory of Saints Peter and Paul at Plympton took the place of an Anglo-Saxon collegiate church which had been located on the same site. In order to gain a clearer understanding of the transformation from collegiate church to priory, we will begin with a survey of what is known about the history of the church at Plympton before its refoundation as a house of Augustinian canons. Although the evidence, sadly, is not as complete as one might wish, from the documents which do survive we can gain some insight into the size of the college’s endowment and its status at the time of the refoundation in 1121. This chapter will also examine the first step in the conversion of college to priory: the royal gift of Plympton minster, along with several other churches, to the bishop of Exeter in the early twelfth century. As the authenticity of the charters concerning this gift has been questioned, some attention will be given to the difficulties surrounding these documents.

The second step in the transformation was the decision of William Warelwast, bishop of Exeter, to disband the collegiate church and to institute Augustinian canons in the place of the secular canons. Bishop William Warelwast was one of several bishops who founded Augustinian priories in this period and consequently this chapter will consider the popularity of the regular canons among episcopal—as well as royal and curial—patrons. We will also examine the connections between the Gregorian Reform, in particular the campaign for clerical celibacy, and the spread of the Augustinian canons in England in the twelfth century. The oft-accepted explanation for the growth of the
canonical order in twelfth-century England is that founders expected the regular canons to undertake the cure of souls in their districts or in the parishes of churches given to them. It will be suggested that this theory is problematic, due to the lack of supporting evidence, and that another possible explanation for the favour given to the regular canons might have been the widespread admiration for their pursuit of the *vita apostolica* and their avowal of celibacy. Of course, if we are to discern contemporary expectations of the Augustinian canons, we must look at the statements made about the canons by founders and other supporters in the twelfth century. While the documentary evidence does not tell us the whole story for the popularity of the canons, it reveals that the reasons for the numerous foundations of houses of this order may have been more complex than has been heretofore thought.

The Pre-conquest Minster at Plympton

A minster, or college, existed at Plympton by the first half of the tenth century. Leland reported that the college was a “free chapel of the foundation of Saxon kings” and that the college consisted of a dean or provost with four prebendaries. The earliest documentary reference to Plympton minster is in a charter of King Edward the Elder dated between 889 and 909. This document records a gift of the king to Asser, bishop of Sherborne, 23 hides of land in Wellington, Bishops Lydeard, and West Buckland in Somerset in return for the minster of “Plymentum.” This would seem to imply that a bishop of Sherborne had been either the original founder of the minster, or had received it as a gift at an earlier time. However, there has been some suggestion

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1 Jeffrey H. Denton (*Royal Free Chapels 1100–1300* [Manchester, 1970], p. 2) distinguished between minsters (Anglo-Saxon foundations where clerics lived communally) and colleges (post-Conquest houses where the clerics had their own prebends). Others, however, use the terms more generally: John Blair states that in the eleventh century “*mynster* and *monasterium* could be used for any kind of religious establishment with a church” (“Introduction: from Minster to Parish Church,” in *Minsters and Parish Churches: the Local Church in Transition, 950–1200*, ed. John Blair [Oxford, 1988], p. 1). Other authors of the essays in *Minsters and Parish Churches* use the terms “minsters” and “colleges” interchangeably. The present writer will do so also for the words “minster,” “college,” and “collegiate church.”


3 *DB: D*, vol. 2, notes to #1, 17.