JULY WAS HAY MONTH IN THE YEAR 1000.
It was the first great harvest of the year, a time of worry about the weather and the need to get the grass cut and dried before the rain could spoil it — and all to feed the animals, since the midsummer harvest produced no food for humans. Hay was fodder to keep the livestock going through the winter. So when the arduous work of haymaking was done, the medieval cultivator found himself facing another stretch that was harder still — the toughest month of the entire year, in fact, since the spring crops had not yet matured. The barns were at their lowest point and the grain bins could well be empty. Tantalisingly, on the very eve of the August harvest, people could find themselves starving in the balmiest month of all. July was the time of another phenomenon quite unknown to us in the modern West — "the hungry gap."71

In Piers Plowman, the late medieval fable of the land, we read how July was the month when the divide between rich and poor became most apparent. The rich could survive on the contents of their barns, and they had the money to pay the higher prices commanded by the dwindling stocks of
food. Grain and bread prices could soar to exorbitant levels. But this scarcity made July the month when the poor learned the true meaning of poverty. As Piers sleeps in the fable, Patience comes to him in a dream, showing him how the poor suffer as they try to survive through their annual midsummer purgatory, grinding up the coarsest of wheat bran, and even old, shrivelled peas and beans to make some sort of bread.

Midsummer was also the season when that other sardonic observer of peasant life, the Flemish artist Pieter Brueghel the Elder, painted his famous tableaux of crazed rural festivals. At the very end of the Middle Ages, Brueghel depicted countryfolk wrapped up in fits of mass hysteria, and the historical accounts of these rural frenzies have explained the delirium in terms of the slender diet on which the poor had to subsist during the hungry gap. People were light-headed through lack of solid food, and modern chemistry has shown how the ergot that flowered on rye as it grew mouldy was a source of lysergic acid — LSD, the cult drug of the 1960s.

This hallucinogenic lift was accentuated by the hedgerow herbs and grains with which the dwindling stocks of conventional flour were amplified as the summer wore on. Poppies, hemp, and darnel were scavenged, dried, and ground up to produce a medieval hash brownie known as “crazy bread.” So even as the poor endured hunger, it is possible that their diet provided them with some exotic and artificial paradises. “It was as if a spell had been placed on entire communities,” according to one modern historian. There are no accounts from the years around 1000 to match these descriptions of “colossal somnolent vertigo” which have been explained in terms of mind-bending substances, but who can tell? It is nice to think that, by accident or design, the poor of the year 1000 were tuning into transports of delight that matched the pleasures of their betters carousing in the great hall.

Social theory in the year 1000 divided the community into those who worked (the peasants, traders, and craftsmen), those who fought and administered justice (the kings and lords), and those who prayed. This last group obviously included, as it would today, the parish clergy with their pastoral duties of care to the laity. But in the Middle Ages there was an even larger group of holy folk who did nothing but pray — the men and women who had dedicated their entire lives to God, and had gone to live in monasteries. In the year 1000 there were thirty or so monasteries dotted across the English countryside from Carlisle in the north down to St. German’s in Cornwall, and they were the economic centres of their communities. They employed local labourers to work in their fields, but the monks carried out certain agricultural tasks themselves, since the combination of practical and spiritual was the essence of the monastic life as laid down by St. Benedict in the sixth century. Trying to formulate a routine that would keep good order in his own community of monks at Monte Cassino in southern Italy, Benedict produced a Rule that became the model for monasticism all over Christendom.

It was Benedictine monks who brought the word of God to England in 597. They ran the great cathedral churches at Canterbury, Rochester, Winchester, and Worcester. Their dormitories, refectories, libraries, and chapterhouses were part of the straggle of holy buildings that made up the
religious campus around each cathedral, and their haunting plainsong chants set the tone of the services, echoing around the choirs and off the pillars of England's principal houses of God.

The chant was the heartbeat of religious devotion in England in the year 1000. It was the channel by which man spoke to his God, either directly or by catching the ear of Mary or one of the saints. Its rhythmic beauty was an act of homage as well as an enticement to the divine listener, and as each monk made his music, he knew that he was practising for the glorious day when he would stand as a member of one of the choirs of angels in Heaven, and raise his voice in the very presence of God Himself.

The chanting of the liturgy was one of the centralising forces of Christendom. Today it is usually referred to as the Gregorian chant, from the tradition that it was developed by Pope Gregory the Great — the same Gregory who dispatched missionaries to England — and one can certainly imagine the good Pope singing with Augustine and his companions as they dedicated themselves for their mission to the distant islands of the northwest. But there is no evidence that Gregory himself was particularly involved in the collecting together of these mesmerising melodies which had their roots in the Hebrew chants that were taken over and adapted by the first Christians. The chant was the product of practice and elaboration by the countless churchmen and women of the first millennium whose lives were given meaning by this inspiring and transcendent sound.

The chant uplifted people spiritually — and it provided physical uplift as well. The decades following the year 1000 saw a significant growth in the building of monastic infirmaries, which were medical institutions in the modern sense of the word, but also offered refuge to the old and dying, as well as accommodation for travellers and pilgrims. "Let all guests who come to the monastery be entertained like Christ Himself," wrote St. Benedict, "because He will say, 'I was a stranger and you took me in.'" Many of these infirmaries were built on deeply symbolic thoroughfares, beside bridges or rivers, or much-travelled roads, and though they could offer rest and seclusion and simple herbal remedies to those who were sick, the main constituent of their healing regimen was the primeval resonance of the Mass and the deeply affecting rhythms of the chant.

The monks rose in the middle of the night to sing their first prayers. Signing up for the monastic life meant saying goodbye forever to a full night's sleep, since two hours after midnight was the time set for the night office. Many monastic buildings had a staircase that went straight down from the dormitory into the chapel to ease the pain of going from sleep to their work of prayer in the cold and dark of a winter's night. This service in the small hours was called Matins, and afterwards the community went back to bed and slept again for three hours, before rising for good at 6 o'clock to sing Prime. Five other prayer times punctuated the day — T/erce, Sext, None, Vespers, and Compline, which was said at 7:00 P.M. in winter and 8:00 P.M. in summer, after which everyone went straight to bed.

Study and contemplation were the guiding themes of monastic life between prayer times. Every refectory had a pulpit or lectern from which one of the brethren would read while his comrades ate in silence — and a document
of the time sets out the signals and sign language with which the monks were taught to communicate in the absence of speech. St. Benedict insisted in his Rule that monks should be silent for as much of the day and night as possible, but he also ordained that they could communicate with signs, and the details of these signals have come down to us through an Anglo-Saxon manual of monastic sign language from the cathedral at Canterbury.

The manual was almost certainly produced in the same Canterbury writing studio as the Julius Work Calendar, and at about the same time, and it provides some rich insights not only into the lives of monks, but into many practical details of daily existence in the years around 1000 A.D. So you would like a little wine? Then make with your two fingers as if you were undoing the tap of a cask.” Pass the butter? “Stroke with three fingers on the inside of your hand.” A little pepper perhaps? “Knock with one index finger on the other.” Salt? “Shake your hands with your three fingers together, as if you were salting something.” Reading the 127 different signs set out in *Monasteriales Indicia*, one gets the impression that mealtimes in a Benedictine refectory were rather like a gathering of baseball coaches, all furiously beckoning, squeezing their ear lobes, meaningfully rubbing their fingers up and down the sides of their noses, and smoothing their hands over their stomachs.

We learn of the hierarchy inside the monastery. The sign for the abbot was to put two fingers to one’s head and take hold of a hank of hair, as if tugging the forelock — and indicating, perhaps, that below the bald patch of the tonsure, monks grew their hair quite long. The provost, or bursar, was indicated by a single index finger raised over the head, the sign of the ox, because he was the provider of such things, while the cellarer was indicated by a circular turning of the hand and wrist, as if unlocking a door with a key. The sign for the “master of the boys” (putting two fingers to one’s eyes and holding up the little finger) reminds us that the monasteries were educational establishments — the only schools in the England of 1000 A.D. — and also suggests how the learned and humorous Aelfric of Cerne Abbas would have been referred to by his colleagues. Signs 47 and 48, however, also provide a reminder of how Aelfric would have kept discipline in the classroom, since these two instructions explain how to call for the cane or the scourge — the cat o’ nine tails — in accordance with St. Benedict’s instruction: “Let the abbot restrain the badly behaved, and the inflexible and proud, or the disobedient, with blows or chastisement of the body.”

More than half a dozen gestures for different types of candle, taper, wick, lantern, and lamp bear witness to a world lit only by fire. Signs for a bedcover and a pillow (“Stroke the sign of a feather inside your left hand”) suggest that the monks slept quite comfortably between prayer times, while signs 91 and 92 make clear that the brethren put on both slippers and socks when they rose in the night to go down to the chapel. Sign 102 (“Stroke with your two hands up your thigh”) tells us that the brothers wore underpants under their black Benedictine habits.

Towards the end of the manual are two signs that refer to the king and to the king’s wife, and it might seem strange that tenth-century monks received instruction in how to hold their hands over their heads with all their fingers splayed out in the shape of a crown (sign 118 — king), or to
stroke their scalps in a circular fashion and then pat their
pates (sign 119 — queen). But these secular signals help
explain why English monasteries were so healthy in the
year 1000. The entire generation of monastic settlement
inspired by St. Augustine and his successors in the seventh
century was wiped out by the Vikings in the waves of
attacks that were finally checked and reversed by King
Alfred in the 890s, and it was only in the tenth century that
there had been a rebirth of the monasteries. This had been
accomplished by an alliance between the church and the
crown, symbolised by the solemn anointing of King Edgar
at his coronation in 973, the first time that a king of all
England had been blessed with this sacrament that was
jealously reserved by the Roman church. The kings of Scot-
land had to wait for it until 1331. The coronation of Edgar
raised English kings to the level of emperors, and it initiat-
ed the mystical and sometimes almost sacerdotal status
with which the English royal family was to wreak itself for
centuries to come.

It was a two-way deal, since Edgar was anxious to assert
his royal authority, while Dunstan of Canterbury and other
reform-minded clerics were keen to revitalise the church.
So the bishops inserted prayers for the royal family in their
liturgies, while the royal family deeded lands to the church,
thus enhancing the grandeur of England’s cathedrals, and
also making it possible to reestablish a network of monastic
settlements across the land. All of England’s monasteries
in the year 1000 had been founded or refounded in the pre-
vious fifty years. Crown and church had a common interest
in strengthening national respect for institutions of author-
ity, and the monasteries were the crucial factor in fostering

Alfred’s secret ingredient for national success: the monks
spread knowledge through their schools, and they also
amplified knowledge through their effective monopoly over
the written word.

In the scriptorium, or writing studio, of every monastery
the brethren dipped their sharpened goose quills into their
phials of coloured acid and bent over their transcriptions of
ancient manuscripts. The writing stand of each monk held
two books, the manuscript on which the scribe was work-
ing and the volume from which he was copying, for to be
learned in the year 1000 was to copy. You did not innovate.
You learned by absorbing and reproducing the wisdom of
earlier authorities.

It does not seem creative by modern standards, this
relentless consigning of old authorities to the deep-freeze
cabinet, but the monasteries of the first millennium were
creating the cultural Noah’s Ark on which our own un-
derstanding of the past is based. It is thanks to their copy-
ing — and to the documents preserved by the Arabs who
controlled the Mediterranean — that we can today read
the words of Plato and Aristotle or Julius Caesar. And from
copying came, slowly, what we would nowadays describe as
creativity.

The Julius Work Calendar is an example of this. There are
similar calendars dating from late Roman times in which
each month is illustrated with a particular practical task,
and the lilting, sing-song text of the Julius calendar of 1020
can be traced back a century earlier to the reign of Ethel-
red’s great-uncle, King Athelstan. Sometime in the 920s,
the king, who inherited his grandfather Alfred’s love of
books, commissioned some work on a beautiful psalter —
an illuminated book of the psalms — which had found its way into the royal library from the diocese of Liège in the Low Countries.

Aethelstan seems to have decided to enlarge and personalise this handsome volume from Liège with a metrical calendar of the saints, and thus came about the earliest surviving version of the 365 lines of verse that later found their way into the Julius Work Calendar. Aethelstan’s list of saints’ days had no illustrations, however, and the list of feast days included an unusual number of saints that were associated with the Pas de Calais, the long-settled farming area just across the English Channel. This suggested that the poem itself, or the scribe who composed it, came from northern France, though his list of saints also included a surprising number of Irish saints and feast days. This added to the confusion — to the modern way of thinking at least — but this was the essence of the medieval system of learning through precedent and accretion: a beautiful Flemish book of psalms, embellished with a list of saints from northern France, turned into verse, quite possibly, by an Irish monk, or a scribe who was looking at a list of saints from Ireland — and all this under the patronage of an English king in Winchester.

A hundred years later, the Julius Work Calendar took the process of elaboration one stage further. Perhaps Canterbury borrowed the Aethelstan Psalter, with its 365 lines of verse, under one of the many exchange schemes by which England’s newly reestablished monasteries lent each other texts to reconstitute their libraries. We know that Canterbury happened to possess in these years another beautiful illuminated document, the so-called Utrecht Psalter, created around 830 in the diocese of Rheims in northern France, and characterised by vivid and almost impressionistic sketches of daily life. These lifelike drawings took their theme from ancient illustrations, and later versions had brought the classical prototype up to date with such contemporary details as the latest weapons and farm implements, as well as current fashions in clothing.

The novelty of the sketches in the Utrecht Psalter was clearly the inspiration of the dramatic line drawings that bring such life to the Julius Work Calendar. We can imagine the Canterbury scribe with the old rhyming catalogue of saints from Winchester on his copying stand. What could he do to enhance the list and make it particular to Canterbury, the headquarters of the English church? Somewhere in the writing studio were lying the parchment leaves of the Utrecht Psalter, quite possibly unbound at that date, so their catchy, challenging, and very modern style of sketching could also be propped up in front of him. Outside in the southern English countryside, where he was expected to work regularly as part of his monastic duties, were the haymakers swinging their scythes. So the scribe set to work sketching, catching the fatigue and sweat on the brow of the bald-headed reaper pausing for breath on the right hand side of his July drawing, while, on the other side, another of the reapers stood back to sharpen his scythe with his honing stone. Today we admire the drawings of this talented but unknown artist for what they tell us about life in early eleventh-century England, but his fellow scribes and monks probably praised his illustrations for their rootedness in the tradition of the Utrecht original, with all its classical precedents.
The glory of medieval manuscripts lies in the drawings which are aptly described as illumination. Their sense of colour and sinuous inventiveness bring light to what would otherwise seem dark and routine — and that is certainly the case with the sketches of the Julius Work Calendar, which have no added colour at all. Their life derives from the vigour of their line and from their sharpness of observation. Look at the drawing for the month of May, with the baby lamb suckling its mother. On the hillside beside the sheep the two shepherds lean together chatting, deep in gossip and conversation, while one of them scratches the back of his head. This is reportage based on firsthand observation. The drawing for the month of February shows the pruner tackling the tree on the left by cutting upwards from below, which was the correct way to lop off a heavy branch.

To the modern eye these drawings are secular. There are no halos or crosses. There is absolutely nothing otherworldly about them, for while the words of the calendar are looking heavenwards, these drawings focus on man in a profoundly humanist fashion — and on that group of men who, for the most part, occupied the humblest and least privileged ranks of society.

It must be assumed that the monk who illustrated the Julius Work Calendar with such lively interest and compassion was a believer. Everybody believed in the year 1000 — especially the pagans and those whom the church condemned as heretics. The sin of the heretic was to believe the wrong thing. But the modern viewer can sense a change of emphasis in these very human monthly labours. There is something of the agnostic detachment which was to alter