FORMS OF CONSTRAINT

A History of Prison Architecture

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Before the early modern period, imprisonment was almost always an interlude between court appearance and ultimate punishment, usually torture or death. Prison quarters tended to be opportunistic, occupying structures built for quite different purposes. Contemporary prisons, however, are designed by specialists to hold convicted men and women as punishment. This book traces the development of prisons between these two points. It is a history of buildings used for the confinement of persons convicted of breaking the law. It is not an account of penal treatment worldwide—such a study has yet to be written.

Most histories of punishment barely mention the buildings where confinement took place, other than to describe the conditions within. Like economics—sometimes called “the dismal science”—the history of incarceration and its structures often has been dismal and frequently disappointing, even when the best of intentions have been present. Some excellent studies have begun to appear that deal with prison architecture and the uses of imprisonment in a single country during a limited time period. Other research frequently centers on a single important prison. Until now, however, no single history of prison architecture from earliest times to the present has been available.

The functions and goals that a prison structure is intended to realize have varied from one epoch to another and may include several or all of the following:

—Custody and safekeeping of inmates and defense against outside force
—Punishment
—Systematic supervision of both prisoners and their keepers
—Prevention of corruption of prisoners as a consequence of their association with one another
—Maintenance of prisoners’ health
—Reformation of prisoners by various measures, such as religious instruction, solitude, labor, vocational and academic instruction, and therapy

Throughout the evolution of prison architecture, competing philosophies of punishment and theories of prison design resulted in a preferred type of layout that was thought capable of accomplishing the goals of imprisonment in one era, only to change in the next. As these goals and the consequent demands on the physical structure changed, new templates for the ideal prison emerged. I hope to chart these changes over time and from one country to another.

In 1975 Michel Foucault’s Surveiller et punir: La naissance de la prison appeared in its first edition. Foucault’s grand theory of social change was to become influential among some historians of architecture and penology. His approach is in many ways enlightening and insightful, using prison architecture as a metaphor of social change, particularly from about 1800 onward in France. He traces the rapid shift of punishment strategies from corporal and capital punishments and detention of minor offenders, such as vagrants, to the use of imprisonment for nearly all law-breakers, a shift from power exerted by the state over the body of the criminal to power over his or her behavior, mind, and morals. For Foucault, the public execution of Robert
Damiens in 1757 after his attempt to kill Louis XV symbolized the former strategy. (Already by that date such brutal, drawn-out public executions were highly unusual.) Control over behavior of the institutionalized criminals was accomplished by the use of rigid timetables of prisoners’ activities derived from monastic and military routines and by means of constant, unseen surveillance over inmates. Foucault writes:

A whole problematic then develops: that of an architecture that is no longer built simply to be seen (as with the ostentation of palaces), or to observe the external space (cf. the geometry of fortresses), but to permit an internal, articulated and detailed control—to render visible those who are inside it; in more general terms, an architecture that would operate to transform individuals: to act on those it shelters, to provide a hold on their conduct, to carry the effects of power right to them, to make it possible to know them, to alter them.

Jeremy Bentham’s circular prison plan, which he called the Panopticon, becomes for Foucault the symbol of the state’s new power or means of control. As will be described in chapter 4, Bentham’s plan must be seen as an unsuccessful mutation, one of many schemes of the time (the 1780s) for exercising state power over the bodies of the prisoners. Moral instruction and education were also to be carried out. Only a handful of these circular prisons were built. Instead, radial plans—which I define as any grouping of cell wings emanating from a central point—predominated into the early twentieth century. Later, other plan types evolved and it was not until the late twentieth century that renewed efforts were made to observe some inmates directly, now again confined to their cells and controlled by means of electronic surveillance and restraint devices. Between 1790 and 1980 it was rare for the prison plan to facilitate direct observation of inmates in their cells. And, in spite of the writings of theorists and the never-built plans of architects, most prisons, even in France in the period Foucault has analyzed, were simply rectangular.

Foucault concentrates on control emanating from the state as the motive for changes in prison architecture and internal regimens. However, accounts of successive failed systems of internal prison management present a somewhat more complex picture. In prisons, even those of the Inquisition, a sub rosa social system established by prisoners themselves—sometimes with the complicity of guards—has regularly subverted the state’s goals and exercised alternate controls over inmates’ activities. A historian would not study the Nazi occupation of European countries during World War II without considering the resistance movements and the ways that ordinary people got around their masters. By the same token, a picture of prisons derived almost entirely from official sources is incomplete.

Foucault saw the history of penal treatment as marking a shift in the use of state power. For him, this power dimension seems to explain everything. This is not the place for a detailed consideration of his theory; excellent critiques already exist. However, it should be noted here that many of the reformist efforts from the seventeenth century onward did aim to ameliorate harsh prison conditions without denying the need to control the inmates’ behavior. A realistic history of prisons—as opposed to a theoretical one that mistakes the rhetoric of the state and of educated elites for administrative practice—must document actual prisons, their goals, their methods, and their successes.

The purpose of my own research is to describe prison buildings over a period of time, the sources of inspiration for their design, and, in some cases, how well they worked. This history is not neatly linear but has cycles, bursts of creativity and innovation as well as periods of stagnation and the continuation of traditional planning. A realistic account of the development of prison architecture is untidy.

The Scope of This Study

Although the reach of this book extends beyond North America and Europe, it does not give the same sustained consideration to prisons in some Asian and African countries. In addition, the sheer scale of the massive prison-building programs that have been carried out worldwide since World War II makes it impossible for an individual researcher to cover all of them in detail. In the present study I describe primarily those prisons intended for punishment of major offenders, but I also consider earlier prisons that were usually only for those awaiting judgment by the courts and, somewhat later, for those serving short sentences for minor crimes. I do not include more recent places of confinement that are exclusively for juveniles or those in pretrial detention, except when an institution has been influential on other forms of prison construction. These distinctions are complicated by the fact that
many prisons have housed different sorts of offenders at different times. Some writers have given a great deal of attention to proposed plans for prisons—usually by prominent architects—that were never built or that had no significant effect on later construction; I will not discuss these extensively.

Researchers usually must rely on the written record of the goals and effectiveness of a particular prison provided by social theorists, architects, and government officials. The picture that emerges, however, may little resemble the realities of that institution. It may exclude the everyday experiences of prisoners at the hands of their jailers and fellow inmates or the degree to which a prison and its structure carry out its purposes. Unfortunately, these “official” sources are usually all that have been available to me. Writings by prisoners and studies by sociologists may present a more balanced view of the operation of prisons, but such additional sources do not exist for most penal establishments. I have made no systematic attempt to evaluate the effectiveness of prison buildings described in this book except when a prison has been abandoned or modified because it had proved unworkable. What must be remembered is that prison structures very often, perhaps usually, do not function as well as intended and that in consulting most sources, one must interpret euphoric judgments with some caution.

For convenience, throughout this work I have referred to most prisons by the name of the city where they were located, along with the date of construction. In large cities, such as London, Paris, or Berlin, when the prison was identified by the street or district where it was located, I will use such a designation. A particular institution may be titled a prison, a penitentiary, a correctional facility, a correctional center, or a diagnostic and treatment center in the United States. Similar variations in nomenclature exist in other countries as well and, in fact, some of these terms could not easily be rendered in English without lengthy explanations. Therefore I have used the term “prison” rather than the exact title or its English equivalent, which also would almost certainly have changed over time.

The first chapter in this book deals with early prisons in castles, other fortified sites, and civic buildings. Prison quarters were seldom considered worthy of recording at the time, except by briefest mention, so evidence is scattered and incomplete. Through the Middle Ages and down into the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, prisons were located in the most massive, inaccessible, and usually subterranean portions of such buildings. Used primarily for detention, these facilities usually herded prisoners together indiscriminately. Almost no attempt was made to separate men from women, the old from the young, the convicted from the untried, or the diseased from the healthy. Chains and torture were common. Food, water, and light were at a minimum and did not always permit survival. The implicit philosophy was unambiguous and punitive: people were to be confined under conditions most convenient for those in authority and least comfortable for those imprisoned.

I describe in chapter 2 the systematic use of imprisonment as punishment in Christian monastic establishments. In light of dogma that forbade the church to spill blood and which held the welfare of the soul as the prime concern of worldly efforts, monastic prisons offered solitary enclosure plus work and meditation to bring about a change of heart in offending monks and clergy. Punishment was to serve the higher aim of bringing about moral regeneration. These small monastic prisons provided a model of individual cellular isolation to bring about contrition, which ultimately displaced the widespread use of the death penalty or corporal punishment. Coexisting with these ecclesiastical prisons and their fairly enlightened goals were the prisons managed by secular authorities. Here older traditions continued, for example, the use of impromptu prison quarters and congregate housing for all types of prisoners. The only aim of the internal regimen was to hold inmates securely with the least expenditure of funds.

Chapter 3 concerns several outstanding prisons that appeared in the early modern period. They represented early attempts to reform inmates and to create new forms of buildings to accommodate an increased use of imprisonment as punishment. Some prisons achieved recognition not by their rehabilitative goals or their internal architecture, but because well-known architects lavished their attention on the prisons’ facades. A great number of prisons of this period differed little in internal arrangements and exterior style from other structures that had traditionally housed prisoners.

In chapter 4 I trace a dramatic surge in public and governmental consciousness of prison conditions and the amelioration of those conditions through an architecture that ostensibly permitted a
careful scrutiny of both the inmates and their keepers. Prisons, like mental hospitals, began to take distinctive forms—crosses, circles, and semicircles—that were to solve the grievous health problems and curb the disorderly behavior and corruption of the occupants. It was during this period, roughly between 1780 and 1835, particularly in Britain, that a self-conscious prison architecture finally evolved, although as yet no clear-cut philosophy of penology underlay the designs.

In the nineteenth century, the reform movement continued to emanate from Europe but now came also from the United States. In chapter 5 I delineate the growth of penal systems in the United States and Canada with particular emphasis on the competing systems of penal treatment developed in Pennsylvania and New York.

Chapters 6 and 7 are about the diffusion of prison design and ideology from the United States to Europe, Asia, Latin America, and North America. A radial layout dominated prison planning until the early years of the twentieth century, except in the United States. Construction diminished until accelerating again in the 1940s, when other prison layouts found favor. For example, some prisons, notably in France and the United States, were designed on a pavilion or “telephone-pole” plan. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, penal treatment began to change. Efforts to isolate each prisoner had proved too costly and inconvenient. Industrial production and vocational training became important and were expected to result in character reformation.

The final chapter sketches broadly some of the trends in prison design following World War II. The telephone-pole plan began to be adopted worldwide, but by the 1960s, basic prison designs began to vary from country to country as nations in Europe, Asia, and Latin America developed their own distinctive prison architectures. While nineteenth- and early twentieth-century incarceration placed increasing emphasis on rehabilitation, penologists and the public grew disenchanted with its strategies and results. There was a return to the traditional aims of imprisonment, especially in the United States and England. Increasingly fractious inmate populations have led to distinctive architectural plans calculated to allow greater control. New prisons with a level of security above “high security” are being built with internal routines not seen for 140 years. Contemporary technologies now permit a new level of control in these supersecure institutions.
CRIMINAL law has today four principal functions: to enact justice; to incapacitate the criminal; to deter crime by making society aware of the punitive consequences of wrong-doing; and to reform the criminal or to modify his or her subsequent behavior out of fear of further sanctions. Human societies have from the very beginnings of group life developed seven primary punitive strategies in response to individuals’ undesirable behavior: death, physical injury, deprivation of liberty, disgrace, forced labor, financial penalties, and banishment. Not all societies have used all of these techniques in any given period, and it would be impossible to date the first use of any of these fundamental methods of societal intervention. The involuntary confinement of individuals as punishment—as distinct from slavery, also a deprivation of liberty—by some constituted authority has certainly existed in most societies at most times.

The Uses of Imprisonment

Nearly all prisons before the end of the sixteenth century were expected to fulfill a limited number of functions, primarily the secure detention of suspected wrong-doers until the guilty among them could be executed or subjected to corporal punishment or exile. Imprisonment was used to curtail temporarily the liberty of high-status persons who had fallen out of favor or simply to get political opponents out of the way, sometimes permanently. It was used also for common criminals, as well as for slaves and prisoners of war condemned to forced labor. In an unknown proportion of the cases imprisonment itself was the punishment. Living conditions in prison quarters usually were barely sufficient to sustain the lives of the inmates. Such quarters were not expected to be healthful or to provide for the rehabilitation of prisoners. As the resources of governments seldom permitted purpose-built prisons to be erected, incarceration took place in existing structures, usually portions of castles or military fortifications. The building of prisons with a particular purpose and architecture still lay largely in the future.

Secular and religious writings mention prisons as existing during very early periods of civilization. The Shu Ching, a collection of Chinese poetry, history, and philosophy, edited by Confucius, notes the building of prisons by the Emperor Fuen VIII around 2000 B.C.E., and the same work records that the Emperor Yao punished three political offenders with exile and a fourth with strict imprisonment. The Greek historian Herodotus recounts that in the eleventh century B.C.E. the Ethiopian King Sabacos, when ruler of Egypt, substituted forced labor, presumably coupled with detention, for the death penalty. There is some evidence that the idea of rehabilitation of the criminal was occasionally a goal of imprisonment. For example, a stone tablet unearthed in Xian province in China, dated 723 C.E., stated that Buddhist temples were to be set up near prisons so that prisoners could be helped to a better way of life. There must have been other isolated examples of early attempts at bettering prisoners, although actual practice may have been quite different than these intentions.

In ancient Greece, free citizens of Athens could be imprisoned only for the crimes of high treason or
debt to the government. The law carried no provision for life imprisonment, or in fact imprisonment of any sort, as a penalty. However, incarceration was used not only for detention pending trial, but also to coerce debtors into paying their debts. In addition, it provided an opportunity to exhibit prisoners prior to mutilation or the infliction of some other penalty. In *Laws*, Plato had proposed that the state should have three prisons: a public one near the marketplace for the ordinary offender, one called the "reform center" near where the Nocturnal Council would meet, and another in the countryside in a solitary spot and with a name that would convey the notion of punishment. He suggested sentences of varying lengths up to life, depending on the crime, the circumstances, and the nature of the criminal. There is no evidence, however, that Plato's vision of the ideal prison system found expression in the places of detention during his day.³

Roman law originally recognized only the death sentence and monetary fines. Later, under the empire, exile and forced labor were added.⁶ Although the law did not specify imprisonment as punishment, incarceration was regularly used for detention and sometimes became a form of punishment in practice, especially in the private imprisonment of slaves by their masters. On occasion, as in Greece and Rome, *carcer privatus*, the private prison, was used to force reluctant debtors either to pay or to give their labor as virtual slaves. The public prisons were used ostensibly for detention before trial or pending execution, but as the magistrate determined the time of the execution, the detention could be extended to become a life sentence. Some authorities have suggested that while the law did not formally acknowledge imprisonment as punishment, it allowed its frequent use as a short-term sanction for lesser offenses.⁷ O. F. Robinson writes that Roman prisons were sometimes places of punishment for certain offenses, and he cites a case of a slave's sex crime involving a free-born boy.⁸ The jurist Ulpian in the third century C.E. complained that governors customarily sentenced men to prison as an alternative to other penalties, such as exile or labor. It seems, however, that imprisonment was rarely officially recognized.⁹

The Theodosian Code (438 C.E.) mentions prisons for the accused, who were separated by sex.¹⁰ While fighting in the arena, labor in the mines, and branding were used as penalties along with death, less-serious offenses resulted in deportation and fines, and perhaps assignment to the workhouses and breadmaking establishments of Rome.¹¹ Passages in the code reveal that frequently there were long delays in carrying out the penalties laid down by the courts, during which time the prisoner would remain in prison, in chains. If a prisoner had been incarcerated for the entire period that he was to have been exiled, no additional action was to be taken.¹²

**Ancient Prison Structures**

Some early criminal codes have survived and occasionally a picture of legal practice can be pieced together from scattered sources. No drawings or plans of ancient prisons are known, however, so that the structural details of those buildings can rarely be determined.¹³ Many early settlements have been completely covered by or virtually reduced to sand, destroyed by vegetation, or, in the case of Rome and other major cities, buried beneath succeeding layers of buildings dating from later construction. Archaeologists have found evidence of temples, building walls, and boundary walls but not intact structures that might be definitively identified as prisons. However, prison rooms built underground are occasionally discovered relatively intact.

An example in Rome may serve as an illustration. A number of large public prisons existed in that ancient city, some for slaves, others for military offenders, and still others for ordinary culprits. The only Roman *carcer* about which much is known, however, is the Mamertine prison, near the Forum. Although a portion survives, it is not certain when the oldest parts of this prison were built. Apparently it was constructed in stages between the third and first centuries B.C.E.¹⁴ After the church of San Giuseppe dei Falegnami was built over the site at the end of the sixteenth century, much of the prison remained covered and was forgotten. Historical descriptions of the Mamertine prison vary, particularly regarding its original parameters. Excavations in 1870 suggested to some historians that it had been a "vast system of Dungeons," constructed for the most part over the Cloaca Maxima, the main sewer of Rome. In fact, strangled corpses are said to have been dumped directly from a lower chamber into the sewer.¹⁵ Other writers, however, believe that a larger system of rooms erected between 70 and 40 B.C.E. near the existing remains of the Mamertine were probably slaves' quarters.¹⁶
In the existing construction are two chambers, one below the other (fig. 1). The lower chamber is conical and completely dark. It has a diameter of twenty feet and is less than six feet high, and was partly excavated out of the bedrock. Access to this lower chamber is by means of an aperture in the floor of a trapezoidal room above, which measures approximately twenty-two by thirty feet and is sixteen feet high. Light was admitted to the upper chamber only through an oculus, or hole, in its ceiling. Most accounts suggest that this upper portion of the prison was also partially underground. Confinement in the lower pit may have been used in lieu of the death penalty, the rooms above for sentenced men in irons, and the rooms in another level of the prison above ground for minor offenders. 17

Although historical accounts of punishment before the early modern period have concentrated on the use of execution, banishment, and corporal punishment, more recent research shows that imprisonment was sometimes used in lieu of other forms of punishment. Women and children were not likely to receive a death sentence and probably would have been imprisoned. Economic crimes, such as failure to repay debts, were also punished by incarceration. Sometimes imprisonment might be combined with corporal punishment. Even serious offenses such as murder occasionally resulted in a prison sentence, usually for life. 18 For crimes that would have called for the death penalty, conviction rates were low.

Pugh in his study of incarceration in medieval Britain insists that imprisonment was in use as early as the tenth century, though prisons were probably not numerous. 19 He suggests that most towns had small prisons by 1250, sometimes located in guild halls, sometimes in castles under a franchise arrangement, and sometimes in purpose-built structures. 20 Pugh found that by the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries there was limited use of imprisonment for debt delinquency, administrative offenses, and petty crimes.

Some of these prisons were constructed of wood, and most were small, with only one room; the largest seldom accommodated over thirty prisoners. Not much is known about the architecture of most of these establishments but the impression is one of makeshift arrangements and continual disrepair, probably due to the shaky financing of both construction and maintenance. Almost from the first, separate facilities were set apart for different sorts of offenders: felons and serious wrong-doers were frequently kept in underground chambers, and debtors, foreigners, clerks, and higher classes of prisoners were segregated from them. By the thirteenth century some jails had special rooms for women. There were also manorial prisons for the confinement of serfs. 21

**Prisons in Castles**

Considerably more information is available about castles than small makeshift prisons because of the interest they have held for antiquarians, art historians, and travelers, particularly during the nine-
teenth-century Gothic revival. The Victorian Gothic novel specifically and the nineteenth-century Romantic movement generally, aided and augmented by tour guides and travel literature, sparked the public’s fantasies and morbid curiosity about castles. It is necessary, therefore, to separate fiction from fact concerning dungeons and prisons in castles. The distinction is made complex because both the structures and uses of castles have changed constantly and considerably from at least the tenth century through the nineteenth, when castles ceased to have any true administrative functions.

The difference between castles and fortresses is far from clear. In the politically unsettled medieval period, government was vested in powerful lords whose fortified dwellings served military and defensive purposes. These residences became the administrative centers of their political spheres of influence. In times of trouble these structures also provided refuge for serfs and dependents whose dwellings sometimes were clustered about the stronghold. Originally built of wood in a manner not unlike the forts of the American frontier, early castles were usually placed astride earthen mounds or on natural rocky outcroppings with defensive advantages. Increasingly, in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, they were constructed of stone, although wooden buildings were still erected inside the enclosure and wooden partitions subdivided the stone portions.

A castle was almost always built, enlarged, and rebuilt by different patrons and master builders and therefore showed variations of plan due not only to site characteristics but also to changing political and social requirements. However, a castle usually had a strong stone wall with guard towers and a main entrance gate, perhaps with a drawbridge. Inside the enclosure was certain to be the donjon, or keep, a principal defensive structure of stone rising several stories above the level of the inner yard. Later, as political conditions became more settled, other structures were erected in the castle yard, or the keep was modified to make it more comfortable.

The image of the castle conveyed by popular romantic literature stressed color and pageantry but usually ignored the bleak living conditions endured even by the lords of the establishment. Although there was by necessity some source of water within the castle enclosure, either cisterns, wells, or natural streams, sanitation was minimal. Toilets were simply mural alcoves, often jutting out from the exteriors or wall and emptying into the moat (where the garbage might also be thrown) or else into cesspools on the lower levels of the castle.

Aside from living quarters for the lord’s family, retainers, and a few administrative functionaries, most of the remaining space within the castle was devoted to soldiers’ quarters and the storage of supplies needed in the event of a military siege. Many of the “dungeons” pointed out by eager tour guides in modern times were not originally prisons but storerooms. Other rooms that began as living quarters were later stripped of their meager furnishings and perhaps modified for prison use when the defensive purposes of the castle had disappeared.

From its earliest days, the castle was a center of governance. The lord or his deputies detained criminals or political enemies, judged them, and executed or confined them for political convenience. The constable of the castle was responsible for its military defense and supply, for extending hospitality to guests, and for the safekeeping of prisoners. Detention conditions varied considerably. Some prisoners had a great deal of freedom within the confines of the castle walls. High church officials and nobles were often permitted clerks and servants. Other prisoners were more harshly treated and some were kept in irons, remaining for long periods in miserable underground chambers. During periods of strife or religious wars, many prisoners might be accommodated temporarily within the castle. Following the civil wars in England, large numbers of political prisoners were held in castles even while members of the nobility resided there.

Confinement arrangements varied considerably. Some prisoners were kept in wooden or iron cages (fig. 2). Cages in castles and in other structures throughout the world have been used to restrain criminals, as in the case of China into the early decades of the twentieth century. The abbey of Mont-Saint-Michel, begun in the early eleventh century, served as a monastery, fortress, and prison of state. It was famous for its iron cages, some of which were suspended from the ceilings in small rooms and others arrayed in courtyards.

By the twelfth century, there were two small cells called “the Twins” in the lower level of Mont-Saint-Michel, in the portion known as the châtelet, built under Robert de Thorigny (1154–86). Zigzag passages to the outside provided air but originally there was no light (fig. 3). Later, cells were established below the chamber used for trials, with access
by trap door and ladder. By the fifteenth century enough dungeons existed for the fortress of Mont-Saint-Michel to be designated as a prison of state by Louis XI. In the early nineteenth century the whole structure became a prison for both common and state prisoners.

Specifically constructed prison chambers began to appear more widely after the twelfth century and were to accommodate small numbers of dangerous or important prisoners at a time. Prison rooms in castles and châteaux, whether newly built or adapted from storerooms and other spaces, were commonly located on one of the lower levels of the keep, the outer wall, and the towers. The towers’ lower levels were most often used for this purpose and the prison chambers there were sometimes referred to as “pits.” The lowest levels were for prisoners of low social status or those who had committed the most serious crimes. The massive walls of towers and keep were intended to prevent breaching by siege engines or battering rams, and lower rooms in these locations needed little modification to serve as secure prisons. Despite the destruction of castles through battle or weathering, these lower portions have often survived, so that numerous well-preserved examples still exist.

The great twelfth-century château of Pierrefonds, partially destroyed on orders of Cardinal Richelieu in the seventeenth century, remained a ruin until the nineteenth century when Napoleon III engaged the great architect Viollet-le-Duc, a specialist in medieval architecture, to restore it. Four of the eight towers contain prison rooms. Each chamber is about fifteen feet in diameter and has a vaulted stone ceiling about twenty feet high. Each contains a “necessary,” or toilet. The arrangement was similar to many others of the time. The upper-level room has a tiny slit window about seven feet above the floor level, but due to the great thickness of the wall, little air or light could enter. The lower-level room, which has neither light nor ventilation, can be reached only by means of a circular hole in the floor of the chamber above (fig. 4). All the prison rooms are below the surface of the inner courtyard of the château but above the ground level outside. They are reached by a circular staircase from the upper floors of each tower and separated from the stairway by a set of double doors.

In the surviving lower parts of a castle, one occasionally encounters structural features alleged to have been oubliettes (from the French oublier, “to forget,” “overlook,” or “neglect”). An oubliette was usually an open circular shaft in the floor of a lower room, into which prisoners were thrown to their deaths. This is the grotesquely irresistible source of

Figure 3. Prison rooms, Mont-Saint-Michel. “The Twins” are indicated at J and J’; other cells are at B and M. Paul Gout, *Le Mont-Saint-Michel*, vol. 1 (1910), 570.
legends, and it was probably inevitable that many castles with evil reputations, especially those serving as prisons of state, were rumored to containoubliettes. A few authentic examples exist: one tower cell at Pierrefonds has an open shaft forty-five feet deep; in 1862 when the château was being restored, a number of skeletons were found at the bottom. Viollet-le-Duc claimed to know of only three bona fide examples of oublieètes and admitted that two of those might have been constructed for ice storage or sewage disposal. Many times wells and water reservoirs, latrine shafts, or holes used to draw up supplies and timbers from underground storerooms in towers have been mistakenly called oublie\'ettes.

When the Bastille was stormed and destroyed during the French Revolution, searchers looked for skeletons in its reputed oublie\'ettes but none were ever discovered. The shafts had probably been used to store ice.\textsuperscript{30}  

Tower prison rooms existed in many castles, for example, at Aigues Mortes in France, the castle at Steinberg in Germany, Edinample Castle in Scotland, and Conway Castle in Wales, where they remain relatively well preserved. Usually cells were on two levels, occasionally on three or four. Some of these prison rooms had light slits and air shafts piercing walls that might be twelve feet thick. Some were provided with a toilet. However, as many quar
ters originally had been storerooms and were later converted to prison use, they lacked adequate light, air, and sanitary facilities. Access from upper levels might be by staircases located within the external walls of the tower, but more commonly entry was through a trap door in the floor of an upper story. An entrance might even be from the courtyard, as at Caesar’s Tower at Warwick Castle in England.

Although most tower dungeons were in the lower levels of a tower or keep, occasionally—possibly for security reasons—they were on the upper levels, as at Gripsholm Castle near Stockholm and Dunshogly Castle near Dublin. Ladder access from the roof or upper deck was common.

John Howard (1726–90), the English prison reformer, described a castle tower prison of a somewhat different sort in his *Account of the Principal Lazarettos in Europe*, published in 1789. The castle was located on an island near Toulon, France, called Port Cros, and is identified by Howard only as Portman Castle (fig. 5). At the top of the round tower was a chamber twenty-two feet in diameter and divided into four rooms, three of which were used for prisoners. Small windows that opened into the fourth room, which served as an anteroom, provided light and ventilation.31

I have been describing relatively large castles. But smaller baronial fortified dwellings were probably more numerous in Britain, at least, and usually had a small prison, or “pit,” as it was known in Scotland. The location of these pits varied, but those in the lower levels seem to have been for the worst offenders. Some prison rooms were as large as thirteen by twenty-two feet; others measured only about two and a half by seven and a half feet. Entrance was usually by a hatch above, and although there was customarily a toilet, there was seldom a window or any other source of natural light (fig. 6).32

With the development of more powerful and sophisticated guns and other changes in military strategy, the importance of castles began to erode. By the end of the fifteenth century, they had lost much of their military importance in the West. Castles now were designed less for actual defense and more for luxury and display. The castle was, in the words of one writer, “the proper residence of a landed gentleman, a center of local government, a precaution

Figure 5. Upper-level tower prison, Portman Castle, off the coast of France. John Howard, *An Account of the Principal Lazarettos in Europe* (1789), opposite 56.

against thieves and pirates, a place to hold local disturbance in check.” Rooms in the keep or other parts of the castle might still house prisoners. But unless the entire castle was turned into a prison of state, only a few cells would be provided.

**Prisons in Gatehouses**

Beginning in the thirteenth century, greater attention began to be paid to the outer defenses of castles and less to the keep or donjon itself. This resulted in a strengthening of boundary walls, towers, and gatehouses. The gatehouse, a structure providing a measure of control over access to the castle enclosure, would usually include quarters for the guards. Frequently a small prison cell was adjacent to the guard room on the level of the passageway itself, thus enabling the guard to serve as both gatekeeper and warden at the same time. As towns grew up around medieval castles, they too had to be defended, and curtain walls with one or more gatehouses enclosed the settlement. Like castle gatehouses, civic gatehouses might have prison quarters on the same level as the entrance or above. A few examples remain of what once must have been a large number of these gatehouses with cells. The most famous for the English-speaking world is London’s Newgate. A gatehouse existed at that site since Roman times and by the thirteenth century it was being used to house prisoners. Between 1423 and 1432 the old gate was demolished and a completely new prison was built with funds bequeathed by the Sir Richard Whittington, Lord Mayor of London (fig. 7). State prisoners as well as regular criminals were herded together in rooms on several levels, in both the fifteenth-century Newgate and a third Newgate erected in the seventeenth century, until a new, freestanding prison of the same name was built nearby.

Some of the elaborate town gates that were built somewhat later—during the sixteenth century in Italy, for example—also contained small prisons. The Porta Nuova in Verona, begun in 1533, had two little rooms off larger chambers flanking the main passageway. One of these was used as a guard room for prisoners (fig. 8). The prison rooms were guarded by the normal contingent of guards who controlled the gate itself. Because of the massive defensive character of gatehouses, quarters for prisoners were frequently located in them, even in small towns.

**State Prisons and Fortresses**

The castle prison quarters I have discussed thus far have been minor or ancillary features of residential, military, and administrative structures. As central governments established themselves more firmly, it was natural that the sovereign would use certain castle-fortresses primarily as royal prisons and for

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Figure 8. Porta Nuova, Verona. Eric Langenskiöld, *Michele Sanmicheli: The Architect of Verona, His Life and Works* (1938), fig. 52, 127.
the detention of important political figures. Although these buildings were few in number, they gained sinister and far-reaching reputations.

In the West, the Tower of London is perhaps the most well known of the old prisons of state. It served as a royal residence, and within its encircling walls much of the business of government was carried on for many centuries. Increasingly its structures were used for the incarceration of various types of prisoners. The initial building, the keep of the fortress, a roughly rectangular structure 107 by 188 feet known as the White Tower, was begun by the Normans almost immediately after the conquest, making it one of the oldest castles in Britain. The lowest of four levels, the vaults, is underground and has some slits for light and air. Here pirates, rebels, and Jews were sometimes imprisoned. One of the chambers, darker and damper than the others, is known as “Little Ease.” With walls twelve to fifteen feet thick, it has been used as a powder magazine as well as a prison. The main floor and the upper two levels of the White Tower have from time to time housed political prisoners, although the tower ceased to be a general prison when the War of the Roses came to an end in 1485.

The towers erected on the outer and inner walls of the Tower of London have also frequently housed important political prisoners, although it is not likely that any were built for that purpose. The Bell Tower has a lower-story room with early thirteenth-century vaulting, a fireplace, a toilet room, and four narrow windows. At two inches wide and forty-four inches long, the windows are suitable for firing crossbows but are too narrow to allow escape. Beauchamp Tower has been one of the principal prisons in the complex. The ground floor provided space for keepers and servants. The second floor had a spacious room with windows and a fireplace (fig. 9) for nobles and churchmen, who might be allowed to bring possessions as well as their own servants. Off this room on one side, a corridor leads to the stair. On the opposite side there are two small rooms, one with a medieval-type toilet. Above, on the level below the roof, were quarters for servants of great lords and for nobles of lower rank. Common criminals might be confined to the underground vaults. The Devereux, Well, Cradle, Martin, Constable, Salt, and Broad Arrow towers also were sometimes used as prisons. By the time of John Howard, the Tower of London was the only remaining state prison in the country for prisoners of rank, and prisoners could be confined in any one of the nineteen warders’ houses within the enclosure. Bars were attached to most of the windows but prisoners were allowed into the yard and roof areas for exercise. The Tower of London was used for prisoners of war in the First and Second World Wars.

The royal jails in France in use before the Revolu-

tion deserved their sinister reputations. The château of Vincennes, outside Paris, had nine great outer-wall towers and a central keep of considerable height. Built by Philip VI of Valois in the fourteenth century, the keep ceased to be used as a royal dwelling after about 1600. Although some prisoners had been kept at the château earlier, from the time of Louis XIII until 1784 it was used only as a state prison, primarily for persons of importance (fig. 10), who were supported with funds from the royal treasury. Ordinary prisoners were kept there also and they paid fees similar to those required of inmates in English jails of the period.40 Many notables, such as Mirabeau and Diderot, were confined at Vincennes under the ancien régime. Although high-status prisoners often had servants and enjoyed larger quarters and more freedom than ordinary prisoners, most were detained in chains, especially in buildings that were in disrepair and where escape might be possible. During the revolutionary period, mobs stormed the château of Vincennes and tried to destroy it, but from 1808 until 1814 it was again used as a prison. After that time it fell into disrepair.

The fortress at Vincennes was surrounded by a moat with two drawbridges. Access to the structure was through three successive heavy doors, the last of which could be moved only by one man outside and another one inside the door. The five levels of the keep each had large royal apartments in the central portion, which was about forty feet long, with four or more smaller circular prison rooms in each of the four towers at the corners of the rectangular building. Some of these prison rooms were large, with high, vaulted ceilings, a fireplace, windows with double bars, and a small cubicle containing a toilet. One authority describes these cells as having triple doors. “These doors acted one on the other. The second barred the first and the third barred the second, and none could be opened without knowledge of secret machinery.”41 At the present time only double doors separate the prison rooms in the towers from the main halls. The lowest room in one of the towers contains a deep circular shaft that has two openings at the bottom. It does not seem to have been part of a medieval latrine but was probably a well, not a place to throw unfortunate prisoners, as legend suggests.

Perhaps the most famous of all fortified châteaux-prisons was the Bastille in Paris. A fortified gate known as Bastille de St. Antoine, part of fortifications built to defend Paris from the English, marked the early site of this prison. In 1370 the builder Hugues Aubriot began the massive structure that would figure so prominently in the last days of the ancien régime. Charles VI added four towers, and it remained in nearly this state until captured and destroyed by revolutionary mobs in 1789.42

Eight towers, one hundred feet high, with a connecting wall nine feet thick and a water-filled moat twenty-five feet wide, marked the perimeter of the Bastille. The ground floor of each tower served as a reception ward for the upper rooms, which were octagonal and twenty feet in diameter. Ceilings in some rooms were too low to permit one to stand upright, except in the very center. Some of the upper rooms had stoves, but little light found its way into the interiors because the walls were ten feet thick in places and the double-barred windows were small. Some prisoners were allowed to exercise on the walls

Figure 10. Imprisoned nobleman, Vincennes fortress, Paris. F. de Fossa, *Le château historique de Vincennes*, vol. 2 (1903), 47. Courtesy of Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library, Columbia University in the City of New York.
or roofs of the prison, but others were confined to six-by-eight-foot iron cages in chambers on the lower levels. Each tower had underground cellars with dungeons. These rooms were without windows, and ventilation came only from air that might get through the double doors of each cell. Sanitary arrangements consisted of the usual small hole in a mural alcove that emptied into the surrounding moat. Important prisoners of state and serious offenders such as François Damiens and the Marquis de Sade were confined in the Bastille. In the early days of the Revolution, its few remaining prisoners were set free. In 1790 it was torn down and its stones sold as souvenirs.

Prisoners were kept not only in castles and châteaux, but also in fortresses that were part of defensive works surrounding cities. The greater financial resources available to governments during the Renaissance, as well as increased efficiency of cannon, resulted in the elaboration of military architecture and the building or rebuilding of defensive works around most larger towns. Unlike the often haphazardly built castles, the new military architecture tended to be more formal, with geometric layouts of ramparts and bastions. Some of the early czarist prisons in Russia illustrate the use to which these large fortifications could be put. Petrovlovsk in St. Petersburg, begun in 1703, served as a fortress, monastery, and prison. It included six diamond-shaped bastions as well as two triangular enclosures, similar in layout to most of the fortresses of the period. Some of the bastions had rooms for the storage of guns and ammunition, but others had outside prison cells opening onto an inner corridor, the whole forming a self-contained unit around a courtyard.43 Underground dungeons are found in the Kremlin in Moscow (fig. 11). In the course of repairs carried out during 1895 and 1896 on the Trinity (Troitskaia) Tower, which was begun in the late fifteenth century under Ivan the Great, workers discovered a two-story underground structure containing “black holes” and dungeons.44 Trap doors in the floors of the upper chambers led to lower rooms, and the whole was quite separate from the tower overhead.

Although not so well documented as in European countries, military buildings were also utilized for prisons of state in other parts of the world. At least two Indian fortresses, at Amber and at Gwallor, north of Agra, were so used.45

Aside from castles and military structures, various more or less expedient locations have been used to house prisoners, particularly in smaller communities. In Scotland these might have included abandoned toll houses (later, “tolbooth” became a generic term for small jails there), church steeples where prisoners were shackled, and even abandoned houses. Because of their massive construction, both bridges and town gates were used for incarceration in early times. John Howard, in the third edition of his State of the Prisons, describes such a bridge-jail in Scotland:

In one of the piers of the stone-bridge at Inverness, there is a vaulted room intended for a prison. This room was constructed in 1684, when the bridge was built. . . . Near the wall of the bridge there is a trap-door twenty-two inches square, and a few steps down from it, an iron door (two feet three inches wide and two feet and a half high), from which there is a descent of a few steps more to the room just mentioned, which is ten feet four inches by seven feet six inches and six feet high. On the sides there are a stone seat, a small window, and two apertures to dip for water, etc.46

Whether prisoners were confined in castles, châteaux, gatehouses, or fortresses while they awaited punishment, their detention was seldom legally part of their punishment. Prison quarters merely provided secure custody for a relatively small number of people at any one time. Nonetheless, detention, with all its terrors, must have been intended to discourage future crime by the inmates, if they survived, and to remind the general populace that violation of the law had serious consequences. Little attention was paid to the health and well-being of the prisoners, and the punitive conditions in early makeshift prisons were not expected to foster the true reform of the occupants. The issue of reform would be introduced by the church.
Religious and Monastic Imprisonment

THE Catholic church was the first institution in the West to use imprisonment consistently for any avowed purpose other than detention as a practical way of handling disciplinary problems among all people within its jurisdiction. Not only was imprisonment calculated to bring about suffering as retribution for sin, but it was hoped that such suffering would better the heart of the wrong-doer. Misery and solitude were to result in meditation and contrition. Jean Mabillon, writing in the seventeenth century, expressed the Christian ideal behind the church’s use of imprisonment: “Charity, compassion and mercy should rule. . . . That is the reason why, in the choice of punishments, which the ecclesiastical judges should employ, the latter are obliged to prefer those which are most capable of filling the hearts of sinners with a spirit of compunction and penance.”¹

Actual practice in ecclesiastical prisons deviated considerably from these ideals, as borne out in descriptions of malfeasance and in the rules laid down in various church councils to prevent abuse. The ideals of reform and of cellular isolation in church prisons were not reflected in secular prisons and were only rarely present in penal practice during the early modern period. It was only at the close of the eighteenth century that civil authorities, searching for a substitute for the usual penalties of death, mutilation, or exile, began to use imprisonment on a large scale as punishment, often inspired by church teachings and isolated examples from the past.

What were the antecedents of the church’s approach to those who violated civil law or religious regulations? One was the right of sanctuary. Since the time of William the Conqueror in Britain, it was the custom of the church to grant asylum or sanctuary to fugitives and criminals, except those accused of treason. The person who presented himself at the gate of some religious precinct was to confess his crime, take an oath of obedience to the abbot, wear special clothing, and consequently be sheltered from the immediate action of the law. After a limited stay in the confines of the church property, he was to receive safe conduct to a port and leave the country. Large numbers of individuals sought refuge in this manner, especially in religious houses in London, and it has been suggested that the provision of special quarters for those felons and minor miscreants was one reason for the establishment of ecclesiastical prisons annexed to religious sites.² Another antecedent was the confinement of saintly persons away from society. Although this confinement was voluntary, it established a precedent for cellular seclusion and for personal betterment through penitence and contemplation.

Recluses, Anchorites, and Hermits

A strong element of asceticism and antiworldliness dominated the early church. Isolation of individuals in conditions of minimal physical comfort and nourishment was thought to encourage spiritual values and provide a corrective for evil thoughts and sinful behavior, leading ultimately to salvation. As a consequence, men and women in the earliest years of Christianity volunteered to live in nearly complete solitude, usually in the Egyptian desert or in
Greece. Some of these religious cut themselves off from human contact as much as possible, though others met periodically for worship. Later, in the West, hermits sometimes taught, preached, guarded shrines, gathered alms, cultivated gardens, and kept up roads, bridges, and lighthouses. Some inhabited caves, deserted islands, or forests, but others lived in more accessible places, even in large towns where passers-by could easily make contributions of food and converse or consult with the recluse.

Individuals might lead the contemplative life in structures known as anchorite cells, anchorages, or anckerholds in Britain and as reclusoirs in France. Although both the hermit and the anchorite chose relative isolation under constraining conditions, anchorites seldom if ever left their cells, confining themselves, perhaps with a fellow anchorite, more or less permanently in their small quarters. These quarters were usually attached to the outside of a church but sometimes to monasteries, religious hospitals, or bridges.

In England the cells built against a church wall were sometimes two stories tall. Occasionally they were located within the thickness of the wall. Aper- tures allowed the occupants to view the altar. A shuttered cell window covered with a cloth opened inward toward the choir or outward, making communication possible. Other cells were located within the church, constructed of wood near the high altar. The authority to live in such a fashion was given by the local bishop. Even priests and women of rank, sometimes along with their maids, would have themselves confined in this way. In fact, women were more numerous than men in these cells. Both men and women were installed during a solemn church service that included parts of the burial service, as the anchorite was literally bricked into his or her little prison and henceforth considered dead to the world, the cell like a sepulcher. Sometimes the recluse lived over an excavation already made for his or her own tomb and upon death, the cell would be broken open, the recluse buried, and the cell cleaned and made ready for a new tenant. Provisions were made to feed the anchorite and money was bequeathed for his or her maintenance, but there was usually no heat, no bed or blankets, and little light. The cell often was wholly or partly underground. Some occupants gained a reputation as an oracle or a gossip; others were known to give charms and potions and were even consulted occasionally by kings and used as confessors. Some were enclosed for as long as thirty or more years.

These anchorite structures were particularly common in England, Ireland, Wales, and Scotland from the thirteenth century until the fifteenth, when they began to fall into disuse. In France they were less prevalent but existed by the twelfth century. In the fourteenth century, the town of St.-Flour had an abode of this sort on a bridge. Church officials had the key and opened it only when the occupant’s dead body had to be removed and a new anchorite installed. Two examples should be sufficient to show the nature of these anchorite cells. Records show that at the church of St. James, Shere, in Surrey, erected about 1190, there was an anchorite cell by 1329. Located on the north side of the chancel, the little room contained a squint allowing a view of the altar and a quatrefoil through which the occupant received the sacrament. There was a grating that opened to the outside through which food could be passed. An anchoress named Christine broke out and was reenclosed in 1332. The church of St. Anne, Lewes, in Sussex, also has a mural anchorite chamber in the corner of the walls forming the south side of the chancel and the transept. In the thickness of the wall, a casket-shaped space the height of a man has squints permitting a view of the altar. In the wall of the transept, a small hatch for food connects with the chapel. The two remaining walls were wooden, now gone.

Monasticism

By the third century some of the faithful set up small communal units to better carry out their goals. By the fifth century, monasticism spread to Europe. At first, monastic institutions formed a loose federation of largely autonomous houses. By the ninth century most houses adopted the rules that had been formulated by St. Benedict in 528. Since the church traditionally prohibited the death penalty or other punishments that shed blood, numerous administrative sanctions were developed to maintain discipline and prevent sinful behavior. These rules specified various forms of social isolation and ostracism short of confinement for minor offenses. For more grievous transgressions, however, the rule suggests:

Let the brother who is guilty of a weightier fault be excluded both from the table and from the oratory. Let
none of the brethren join him either for company or for conversation. Let him be alone at the work assigned him, abiding in penitential sorrow and pondering that terrible sentence of the Apostle where he says that a man of that kind is handed over for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord. Let him take his meals alone in the measure and at the hour which the Abbot shall consider suitable for him. He shall not be blessed by those who pass by, nor shall the food that is given him be blessed.  

Imprisonment was not mentioned in these rules but was recommended later for serious offenses, as was whipping. The object was not simply to punish but to provide conditions under which penitence would most likely occur.

In the following discussion of church uses of imprisonment, I will consider, first, monastic living quarters, in which confinement was possible in orders that did not use dormitory housing; second, penitential chambers in monastery churches; third, prison rooms in monastic buildings; fourth, larger prisons in bishops’ palaces; and finally, prisons built during the Inquisition.

Confinement to Monastic Living Quarters

The living arrangements, governance, and discipline in monastic establishments varied considerably among the several orders, and sometimes even within one order. The Benedictine order provided living quarters in a series of dormitories, which were sometimes equipped with cubicles. Even the abbot lived in the common quarters initially. These buildings were connected by a covered walkway facing an inner quadrangle, a plan later adopted by other orders. In spite of ancient rules stating that monks must not have separate chambers or cells, first fine trellis work and later solid partitions and doors became more common. If the monastery had solid doors there might be a small “Judas hole,” or peep-hole, which allowed observation by the abbot while giving the monks a measure of solitude for contemplation and study. The rooms were sparsely furnished with little tables for books and lamps that could be burned all night.

For minor offenses such as “freshness” a monk would be locked in his own cell or dormitory or would remain there voluntarily as punishment. This was the mildest disciplinary action available to the abbot, but little evidence exists as to how extensive-ly it was used.

The configuration of Carthusian monasteries by the eleventh century allowed effective incarceration of erring brothers. One of the best preserved of these houses is Mount Grace in Yorkshire, England, founded in 1398 (fig. 12). Surrounding a great inner court measuring 379 feet by 296 feet is a cloister joining a series of walled enclosures, each 27 feet square. In each enclosure was a small two-story house for a monk; a covered walk along one wall; an outhouse, or “necessary”; and a little garden. The ground floor of each house was divided by wooden partitions and had a small anteroom, a ten-by-sixteen-foot living room with a fireplace, a bedroom, and a very small chamber for study. The upper story was a workroom. Each cell or monk’s house also had a piped water supply. An opening in the wall facing the cloister made it possible for food and work materials to be passed in without any viewing or other communication with anyone on the inside. An erring monk might confine himself to his house or be locked in by the abbot for varying periods of time.

Monastic establishments in the Egyptian desert to this day still preserve some of these living arrangements. Two described in 1961 consisted of about thirty little houses on two streets, arranged much like a small village, each monk generally occupying a separate cell.

It must be kept in mind that, particularly during the early period of monastic development, disciplinary measures and suffering were quite voluntary. Sometimes, in fact, rules were established to prevent too much self-punishing zeal. Thorsten Sellin quotes the sixth-century saint John Climacus, who describes a contemporary prison of a monastery he had visited, where monks voluntarily submitted to many forms of penance. “They often begged . . . their superior . . . and their prior . . . to put chains around their necks and wrists and put their feet in stocks, as is done with criminals, to remain there until they were ready for the grave.”

Later, punishments became obligatory, and some were enacted in public, such as whipping with a rod in the chapter house. However, the monks could always leave the order.

In troubled times great numbers of dissatisfied and, in some cases, disturbed types sought asylum within the monasteries. Considerable discipline was therefore probably considered necessary. Many curi-
ous accounts exist of criminals who entered as fugitives only to be rehabilitated by the order.16

Penitential Chambers

A more severe form of punishment than voluntary restriction to a monastery cell was confinement in a so-called “penitential cell,” usually located within an abbey church. Small recesses within the thicknesses of walls often have been mistaken for penitential cells, where monks were confined so that they might observe the altar through small apertures and meditate on their sins. However, many such chambers were actually barred church treasuries, hermits’ cells, vestries, or unused spaces intended for tombs or other purposes. For example, a small mural chamber, about two feet wide and seven feet long, on the north side of the crypt of Gloucester Cathedral, under the choir, is not a penitential cell but a room prepared for the remains of a church official.17

Other spaces do seem to have been true penitential chambers. One of the best extant examples is at the Temple Church in London, built by the Knights Templar between 1185 and 1240. At the juncture of the church’s circular nave and rectangular choir is a circular staircase. Two feet above the twenty-first step, or fifteen feet above the barred doorway at ground level, an opening leads to an irregularly shaped room about twenty-six inches wide and four feet seven inches long. There are two small slits about four feet high and six inches wide, one looking directly up the north aisle of the nave and the other providing a partial view of the nave.18 It is here that Walter de Bachelet, the Grand Preceptor of Ireland, is said to have been starved to death for dis-
obedience to the Master of the Temple. Penitential chambers exist at Canterbury Cathedral, Gloucester Cathedral, and the Collegiate Church of St. Mary in Warwick. Edward King, the early nineteenth-century authority, in his Munimenta Antiqua, described freestanding penitential towers in Scotland and Ireland. These were of similar dimensions, approximately fifteen feet in diameter and from seventy to ninety feet tall. Entrances were high above the ground and access from floor to floor was by means of ladders, for security. The towers date from as early as the ninth century in Europe, and earlier in the Middle East, and were sometimes constructed by the hermits themselves. A number of other supposed penitential chambers have been mentioned by historians and other commentators but many of these claims are questionable; the chambers often turn out to have been hermit cells, treasuries, or tomb enclosures.

Monastic Prison Rooms

For serious offenses in monastic institutions, the monks might be placed in prison rooms designed for that purpose and intended to house inmates for longer periods of time. The philosophy of treatment as well as the conditions of such imprisonment varied considerably from one monastery to another and over time as well. It is difficult to say when such imprisonment was first used, but a sixth-century church prison was described by St. John Climacus, who noted that one monk was sentenced to the “house of penitents” because of his use of injurious language. The prison had no fires, wine, or oil; sustenance came only from bread, herbs, or roots. Each prisoner was in a separate cell and slept on a leaf matting, and he was not freed until there was some proof of divine pardon. By the ninth century, imprisonment was described as though commonplace.

The Constitutions of Lanfranc, a compilation of continental usages intended for Benedictines in Britain, defined three levels of offenses. The most serious transgression was by monks who were arrogant in their disobedience and persistently unrepentant. They were to be placed in special quarters with a brother companion who alone could talk to them. This was a provision for detention with the aim of bettering behavior, but if the monks gave no evidence of penitence and continued to deny their guilt, they were placed in a harsher prison with apparently no further attempt at correction.

When specific monastic orders emerged, each had its own internal government and rules, despite some local variation. Imprisonment was usually specified for offenses against the rules and good order of the monastery. At Cluny, rebellious monks were to be placed in a carcer, a dark, vaulted room accessible only by a ladder lowered through a door in the ceiling. Peter the Venerable (died 1158), a Cistercian, described the penal philosophy of his time by comparing the prisoner to a dead man. The prison would logically, then, resemble a grave—subterranean and dark—which would remind its inhabitant of his crimes and his own wretchedness. Such imprisonment was often referred to as vade in pace, or “depart in peace.”

In the twelfth century, the Cistercians ruled that a monk convicted of murder would be imprisoned for life on bread and water. The Dominicans and Carthusians eventually mandated prisons in their establishments. The Carthusians ruled in 1261 that every house of the order must have a sufficient prison in which criminals and all those who threatened murder or arson were to be shut up to perform penance. Priors were required to imprison those fugitives from the order and even those who were thought likely to run away. Not all monastic establishments may have had separate prison quarters, however.

In addition to prescribing punishment, church authorities recognized that punitive measures could sometimes be too harsh. To counteract excesses and abuses in punishment, a gathering of Benedictine priors at Aix-la-Chapelle (Aachen) in 817 set standards and forbade torture. Each monastery was to have a separate place of habitation for culprits. It was to be heated, lighted in the winter, and provided with separate workrooms. If corporal punishment was to be used, the object should be correction. The council also decreed that there must be a separate house, or ergastulum, for those who were regarded as potential escapees or who had committed serious misdeeds.

But these humane conditions were rarely provided, and as late as the seventeenth century the French Benedictine Jean Mabillon complained of underground, unlighted dungeons where monks subjected to the vade in pace were kept in unhealthful conditions, without work, without medical attention, and with little spiritual support. He suggested that to be left completely alone for so long was harmful to the prisoner, especially if his heart
was contrite, and he recommended that the inmates be allowed to take occasional walks in the open, hear Mass in a safe place, and have workshops and a little garden connected to their cells.  

Pugh suggests that increasingly, from the end of the thirteenth century, errant monks might be transferred to another house, usually if they persisted in their disobedient behavior. The new establishment might be of equal status or a satellite house of the founding monastery. Pugh writes, “Thus small cells [establishments] far distant from the mother house and lying in secluded places, became in certain instances and at certain times little better than prisons.”

No prison rooms in nunneries have been described and none have been discovered, but there are records of sentences of imprisonment for nuns. Nuns also were transferred to other establishments to serve their terms of imprisonment.

A dual system of courts, ecclesiastical and secular, existed in England and on the Continent during the Middle Ages. Aside from committing offenses involving monastic regulations, a person associated with the church, such as a priest, a clerk, or even a person of relatively high rank, also might commit crimes resulting in his arrest by civil authorities, even serious offenses such as murder, rape, highway robbery, and cattle stealing. The accused might claim immunity through “benefit of clergy.” Even if found guilty in a civil or king’s court, he might be turned over to the canon courts for sentencing, where treatment was much more lenient. For serious crimes he could be confined to a monastery or a bishop’s prison for a definite term of years, or perhaps for life. Although this may seem severe by modern standards, civil courts at the time routinely meted out sentences of brutal corporal punishment or death. Further, jury verdicts in the civil courts and judgments by the ecclesiastical courts were frequently nullified by the process of “purgation,” wherein the bishop’s court heard a number of sworn witnesses who testified that the accused was telling the truth when he denied the charges. After hearing any opposing witnesses, the court could then restore his status or “good fame,” and there would be no further imprisonment.

Although originally a “cleric” was someone in the Holy Orders, by the thirteenth century the term applied even to individuals with “first tonsure.” In fact, some persons were given on-the-spot tonsures by accommodating jailers. By the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, however, literacy had become the main proof of church affiliation.

The portion of the prison in a monastery used for delinquent clergy was called the decaneta or carceres. It is not clear if such quarters were clearly demarcated from spaces used for imprisoned monks. Punishments seemed to vary according to the rank of the church official. For example, for wearing improper clothing or carrying arms, a superior clergyman might receive imprisonment with bread and water for thirty days; others would receive a whipping. The extent to which these punishments were actually carried out is not clear.

Not much is known about the appearance of ecclesiastical prisons. Like civil prison facilities, they were probably a given area for confinement selected on the basis of immediate practical considerations. Storerooms and odd corners were used, as were other quarters that were probably seldom planned for this purpose.

Although detention facilities were available in most monasteries, it is not likely that there ever was much of a prison population even in the largest abbeys. One room often sufficed, usually below ground level. For less severe cases there was a tiny cell just large enough for one, which was opened in the daytime. In the Cistercian monasteries of France, a small room with a barred window was located under the stairs leading from the cloister to the dormitory. Originally used as a parlor, by the thirteenth century such a space was almost always transformed into a prison. The statutes of the church had authorized abbeys to have prisons for sodomites, thieves, forgers, murderers, arsonists, and fugitives. In 1229 a directive was given to all establishments to have a “solid and secure” prison, and at this time it was usually the little room under the stairs.

In some English monasteries, such as at Westminster, the prison was made up of just one or two rooms opening off the cloister and probably located next to the chapter house, the seat of the local monastic government. Durham Abbey, now a cathedral, had such an arrangement: “Within ye said chapter house was a prisoun for the Mounckes for all suche light offences as was done amonges themselves.” There are several extant plans of the prison, which dates from the twelfth century, each varying somewhat from the others, but apparently
the prison room itself was about ten by twenty feet and vaulted. An adjoining chamber was divided into two portions, one of which contained a latrine, the other a sort of hatch for passing in food to the occupants.  

Another prison within the same monastery has been carefully described:

Within the infirmary underneath the master of the infirmary’s chamber, was a strong prison called the Lying House, the which was ordained for all such as were great offenders, as if any of the monks and those which were in holy orders had been taken with a felony, or in any adultery, he should have sat there in prison for the space of one whole year, in chains, without any company except the master of the infirmary to see that he were strictly locked to according to the orders of the house, and who did let down there meat through a trapdoor on a great cord, being a great distance from them. Other company had they none. If any of the temporal men, pertaining to the said house had offended in any of the premises aforesaid, then were they punished by the temporal law.

My classification of a penitential cell as distinct from a small prison room is somewhat arbitrary. I have considered the former to be a cell used for daytime confinement, often with an opportunity to observe the church altar. In other examples a prison room might be equally small but seemed to be designed or used for longer confinement. Unfortunately, the surviving evidence seldom permits a clear picture of the uses of these rooms.

One authority claims that ecclesiastical cells sometimes were located on the exterior of a church, at an angle of the transept. The collegiate church of Nesle (Sonne) and Notre Dame de Boulogne supposedly had such cells, and at Larchant this was the location of a fifteenth-century structure containing many floors of cells where mental patients were confined. As the angle of the transept is also the location of church treasuries, which have strong doors and barred windows, it is often difficult to distinguish one type of construction from the other. In contemporary written accounts, confusion also arises from the similarity between the chartre, “prison,” and the chartrier, “charter room,” of abbeys.

Because some monasteries had extensive land holdings, many serfs and agricultural workers as well as monks came under the jurisdiction of the abbot and canon courts. Often the tribunal as well as the prison room would be located in the main gate of the monastery, as at St. Étienne at Caen in France, or at Tewkesbury and St. Alban’s in England. At the Benedictine priory of Ewenny in Glamorganshire a prison room was located under the tower of the south gate (fig. 13). As one nineteenth-century account recorded, “Passing through a strong doorway and along a gallery only one foot and a half in width, by two turnings at right angles, you arrive at a very deep dungeon only six feet in diameter, placed directly within the center of a very strong tower.”

A large, high vaulted room adjacent to the south aisle at Worcester Cathedral has been described as a prison for monks, although it is not certain that it was in fact a prison (fig. 14). Entry was by means of a steep stairway that angled up from the side of the aisle. There were strong doors at both bottom and top of the staircase. Two tiers of windows and a wall gallery, supposedly added during the reign of Henry VIII, provide light for the interior of the room. The windows and gallery were apparently separated from the prison room originally by an iron grill. The gallery provides access to a toilet, and in one wall of the main room is a small alcove with a diagonal shaft through the wall, which allows a view of the altar.

Some monastic prisons in Austria and Russia continued to be used down to the twentieth century. Like their western European counterparts, these prisons had cells, some of which were underground, and were originally used for drunken monks, wrongdoers who transgressed against church and government, and misdeemants of all sorts. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, political prisoners were kept there, watched over by monks. These structures had massive walls and large, elaborate towers like those of the Kremlin in Moscow.

Figure 14. Monks' prison, Worcester Cathedral. Top: general view of prison with gallery on the right wall. Bottom: a section of the wall in the main room with a shaft allowing prisoners to view the altar. Richard Taylor, Index Monasticus (1821), opposite 157. Courtesy of G. Holmes Perkins Collection, Fisher Fine Arts Library, University of Pennsylvania Library.
Larger Ecclesiastical Prisons

The constitutions of various synods directed bishops to provide space for the confinement of clergy being punished. Although most seats of church government contained such quarters, some had to rely on local civil prisons. As most ecclesiastical sites were partially fortified and of massive construction, towers and cellars were often the places where prison quarters were established. Viollet-le-Duc describes in some detail the accommodations for prisoners in the thirteenth-century archiepiscopal palace at Sens. Various detention rooms were grouped next to the room where judgments were made. There were three rooms of varying sizes, each with a toilet and a window as well as anchors for fastening the prisoners’ chains to the wall. The windows were located so that prisoners could not look out. A trapdoor in the floor of an anteroom to these small prisons gave access to a lower chamber next to the palace cesspool. This lower room contained a toilet and a diagonal shaft that allowed air and light to enter the dungeon (fig. 15).45

Bishops’ palaces in Britain also had prison quarters. Perhaps the outstanding example still in existence is Lambeth Palace in London, begun in the early thirteenth century. Two parts of the palace have been used at various periods as ecclesiastical prisons: the so-called Lollard’s (Water) Tower, completed in 1435, and Morton’s Tower, the entrance gatehouse of 1490.

The prison in the Lollard’s Tower was located on the fourth floor. The walls were of coarse planks, one foot wide, that formed part of an earlier structure on the site. Two barred windows twelve inches wide and twenty-six inches high provided light and ventilation and there is a large fireplace. Double doors of wood with iron straps open into a staircase. Except for the ceiling, which was destroyed by fire bombs in World War II, the rest of the room remains much as it was when used as a church prison in the past.46

In the entrance gatehouse, the Morton’s Tower, the prison quarters were located in the upper apartments of the eastern tower and were distinct from the rest of the building. A low doorway in the outer courtyard provided access. Originally, the warden could look through iron gratings to observe everyone passing up or down the stairs to the upper rooms. On the opposite side of a center room ran a

Figure 15. Prison rooms in Archiepiscopal Palace, Sens, France. Upper prison: A, entrance to palace; B, court; C, stair to upper floor; D, entrance to ecclesiastical court; G, entrance to prison; H, prison; I, opening connecting to cesspool below; K, stone basket; L, window; M, toilet; N, entrance to prison rooms; O, P, and Q, prison rooms; R, trapdoor entrance to lower prison. Lower prison: A, dungeon; B, flue for ventilation; C, cesspool; D, toilet. Eugène Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc, Dictionnaire raisonné de l'architecture Française du onzeème au seizième siècle (1869), vol. 7, 480.
passage through a massive wall, with double doors leading to an inner room with rings in the wall. The occupants had carved their names on these walls, as was the custom in prisons at this period. These quarters have often been remodeled, and no traces of the original construction are visible.

**Inquisition Prisons**

Conformity and heresy have been of concern to the Catholic church from its earliest days. To combat growing heresy in Europe, the church created the Inquisition, an investigative and punitive apparatus, between the late twelfth and mid-thirteenth centuries. Procedures were rigorous: secret testimony was admitted; the accused was not informed of the charges; there were severe conditions of detention and even the use of torture, approved for the first time for agents of the church. A considerable range of punishments was available, depending on the seriousness of the charges and the attitude of the accused. Prayer, fasting, and the wearing of a yellow cross on the clothing was prescribed for lesser offenses, and more severe penalties such as pilgrimages and imprisonment were exacted for major offenses. As the Inquisition grew stronger, imprisonment came to be the most common form of punishment. Sometimes, however, sentences—including those for life—could be commuted in exchange for a payment of money. If the prisoner remained defiant, he or she would be turned over to the civil authorities to be burned and all properties would be confiscated.

A mild form of imprisonment was known as *murus largus*, wherein the prisoner was given some freedom of movement in the corridors of the prison quarters. If the prisoner was a monk, he would be confined usually to his own chapter house, if space permitted. *Murus strictus* was more severe, in theory. The prisoner was chained to the wall of his cell, denied access to other people, and fed on bread and water alternating with bread and beer. *Murus strictissimus* called for a prisoner to be bound in heavier chains on hands and feet in a dungeon. Although long sentences were avoided and life sentences were rare, they did occur. Strict seclusion, often in an underground room, was generally conceived as a “living tomb.” In the bull *Excommunica*mus, Gregory IX in 1229 decreed that all those who converted to the faith through fear of death at the hands of civil authorities should then be imprisoned in a church prison for life.48

The campaign against heretics produced prisoners in such large numbers that they soon overwhelmed the modest quarters available in episcopal palaces and monasteries. Public prisons were sometimes used, as at Naples, and castles were also pressed into service, as in England. But new Inquisition prisons had to be built, and local communities complained of the heavy expense. By the mid-thirteenth century there were prisons of this type in France at Carcassonne, Béziers, and Toulouse.49 Papal orders stated that the prisons should be “constructed of small, dark cells for solitary confinement, only taking care that the ‘enormous rigor’ of the incarceration should not extinguish life.”50

Although prisoners with money might bribe jailers for extra food and other favors, conditions were harsh and the death rate was high. In 1350 the Archbishop of Toulouse appealed to King John II to mitigate conditions by requiring a church official to make regular visits and to allow a prisoner the company of monks twice a month.

The actual numbers of people sentenced to severe imprisonment by the Inquisition are not known. One scholar estimates that between 1705 and 1808, 291,450 were imprisoned with “peines rigoureuses.”51 Even accounting for possible exaggeration or inaccuracy, it seems clear that church inquisitions resulted in a large number of prisoners over the years.

Reliable descriptions of Inquisition prisons are very rare because of the great secrecy surrounding them. Even as late as the time of John Howard’s travels, visitors were seldom if ever admitted to such institutions. One surviving description concerns an Inquisition prison built during the 1600s at Goa, in Portuguese India. It was a complex of buildings, each two stories high, containing about two hundred separate cells. A corridor ran the length of each building with seven or eight cells on each side. On one side, cells were about ten feet square, some with a small barred, unglazed window in the vaulted ceiling. The cells on the other side were somewhat smaller and dark, with lower ceilings. Walls five feet thick separated these rooms, each of which was entered through a set of double doors with a space between, allowing one door to be locked before the other was unlocked. The inner door was heavily reinforced with iron and latticework and had an opening through which food and clothing could be passed into the cell. The outer door was lighter but of solid construction.52
Inquisition prisons were erected in Portugal itself beginning in the sixteenth century, at Evora, Lisbon, and Coimbra. The latter prison, where the guards wore masks, was still in use in the early years of the nineteenth century.

The church had both punitive and corrective goals for its prisons. Although historians of punishment believe the Christian church in western Europe originated the idea of imprisonment as penitential discipline, the doctrine of punitive imprisonment was also present, having been laid down by Pope Boniface VIII in his decretal *Quamvis* in 1298.

The influence of various types of ecclesiastical prisons upon latter-day penology is difficult to assess. Frequently the philosophy behind imprisonment must have been misunderstood or ignored by prison keepers. However, there clearly was a Christian influence upon the later workhouse movement, which I discuss in the next chapter. Certainly it can be said that the church dogma of the reformation of prisoners left a strong imprint upon later thought and social theory.

In contrast, the architecture of the monastic and church prisons remained relatively undeveloped, perhaps because the tomblike prison rooms, like their civil counterparts, already expressed so well the philosophy of treatment that stressed solitude, suffering, and purification of the soul through mortification of the body. The ascetic Christian dogma, concerned almost exclusively with the well-being of the soul as a preparation for the afterlife, would hardly have brought forth an architecture that provided for the physical comforts of the prisoners, which was to become a concern.

The architecture of church prisons differed little from that of civil prisons of the time except in its use of the individual cell. A distinctive form of secular prison architecture could not have developed out of these rudimentary ecclesiastical beginnings as long as the number of prisoners remained small. The articulation of a specific style had to await the time when the number of prisoners greatly expanded as civil courts replaced the death penalty and mutilation with imprisonment. The system of cellular imprisonment that developed first in America and then in Europe, from the 1820s until World War II, must be regarded as the indirect outgrowth of the uses of imprisonment by the Christian church.
Stirrings of Reform: Prisons in the Early Modern Period

Early prison structures were expected to hold their inmates securely and to control any disorderly conduct, a goal that was accomplished with varying degrees of success. The idea that imprisonment was punitive and therefore might deter others from crime may have been assumed but was rarely articulated. Imprisonment and its structures were expected to do no more. Even as late as the eighteenth century the average institution was dominated by the old principle of simple imprisonment in a secure, unpleasant place. In England, at that late date, many jails were run as profit-making concessions given over to private individuals. Inmates were charged for basic services such as beds, bed linens, food, and the fitting and removal of chains and leg irons.

During this same period, debtors, children, and women were usually held with more dangerous adult criminals. Some prison rooms had no sewers, water, or bedsteads, and these conditions, along with terrible overcrowding, led to the constant depopulation of these establishments through "jail fever," probably typhus. Like the hospital patients of the day, prisoners were lucky to come out of their detention alive and healthy. Of course, the great masses of people at the time seldom had adequate physical comforts in their own homes. Cold, dampness, filth, and inadequate diet were common among all but the fortunate few. Nonetheless, the unrelieved, round-the-clock exposure of inmates to prison conditions exerted a terrible toll on health and spirit.

Prison facilities continued to be determined by the availability of preexisting structures. Fortresses, which by the sixteenth century had lost their military value, were pressed into service everywhere as major prisons. In poorer countries in eastern Europe this practice continued down into the twentieth century. In western Europe, Spain used presidios, or military forts, as prisons not only at home but in North Africa and other overseas colonies, such as Palma de Mallorca and Cuba. Morro Castle in Havana harbor has had an almost unbroken history of use as a prison since its establishment. Convents and monasteries were often converted into prisons in France, the Scandinavian countries, Spain, Russia, and smaller eastern European nations. In France, for example, as late as the 1870s most of the departmental prisons were still in former convents and other ecclesiastical buildings, and long-term convicts were kept in such establishments or in châteaux. Commercial structures and even private dwellings were sometimes converted into prisons.

Even when prisons were designed as prisons, conditions seldom improved. One extreme example is the underground dungeon built beneath the county jail at Warwick, England, about 1680. The dungeon remains, one of the few of its type still in existence. It is an octagonal vaulted structure twenty-one feet in diameter, its floor nineteen feet below the surface of the ground. One enters through two successive doors and a flight of thirty-one steps. A grating in the ceiling originally opened into the jail above. In the center of the dungeon is a small open cesspool for drainage, as the room is built over a spring. Originally around the center pit stood eight timber posts to which was attached a heavy chain. Prisoners’ leg shackles were fastened to this chain so
that when the prison was crowded, inmates were arranged around the center pit like the spokes of a wheel. In an 1817 pamphlet, a visitor from the local prison society recorded finding forty-five prisoners lying side by side. The dungeon was used during the later Stuart period to confine Quakers and Anabaptists and was still in use as the felons' night room in 1818.

Occasionally an individual—usually a clergyman, and occasionally an ex-prisoner—spoke out against such conditions. The Christian Knowledge Society, formed in 1699 in England, appointed a committee on prisons that visited Newgate and Marshalsea prisons, giving the prisoners money and distributing religious books. This same committee also proposed keeping each prisoner in a separate cell. Similar prisoners' aid societies existed in Florence and other cities but the conditions of the jails remained bad, even for the times.

In the early modern period a few secular prisons began to appear that were designed by professional architects and intended through the hard work and isolation of their inmates to bring about character reformation, a goal of the church prisons described in the last chapter.

What were the origins of purpose-built prison designs? Published plans and writings of architects must have been sources of inspiration. Other “total institutions” such as lazarettos, hospitals, and other charitable facilities that housed groups of inmates were clearly also models, in exterior appearance and interior arrangements.

What did the architects propose and what were their principles? In his De re aedificatoria, published in 1485 but written about thirty-five years earlier, the great Italian architect Leon Battista Alberti (1404–72) set forth some tenets:

I find that the ancients had three types of prison: one where rough and untutored men might be rounded up to receive nighttime training from learned and experienced teachers of the noble arts in matters relating to their moral conduct and way of life; the second in which to confine insolvent debtors and those who require the tedium of prison life to set right their wayward lives; the third where to assign those who have committed abominable crimes, those who are unworthy of the light of day or of contact with society, and who are soon to suffer capital punishment or be given over to darkness and shame. However, anyone who determined that this last category be an underground chamber, like some fearful tomb, would be proposing a penalty for the criminal more severe than what the law itself or human reason should demand. Even if such men (who are beyond redemption) deserve the ultimate of all penalties for their crimes, it would be expected of republic and prince alike that they should not be wanting in compassion. Suffice it to make the walls, openings, and vaults of the work strong enough to make it difficult for any prisoner to escape; and, to achieve the necessary thickness, depth, and height, it is vital to use large blocks of hard stone, held together with iron and brass. You may also use a lining of boards, lofty barred openings, and so on, although not even these will prove large or strong enough to prevent anyone intent on freedom and safety from escaping, should you give him the opportunity here to demonstrate the extent of his natural strength and ingenuity. And to my mind they are quite right when they say that the only impregnable prison is the eye of a vigilant guard.

But in all other respects let us follow the customs and practices of the ancients. It would be relevant to mention that prisons must contain latrines and fireplaces, without the nuisance of smell or smoke. Then the prison as a whole should be as follows: select a space of ground in a secure and not deserted part of the city, and surround it with a strong, high wall, pierced by no opening, and supply it with towers and galleries; between this wall and the walls of the cells there should be a gap of three cubits for the guards to make nighttime patrols to intercept any conspiracy to escape. The central space must be divided up as follows: There should be a hall, none too depressing, to serve as a vestibule for assembling those sent to be taught a discipline; beyond this the first entrances should be to the quarters of the armed guards, protected behind bars and a palisade; next there should be an open court, flanked by porticoes on either side, containing a large number of openings into several of the cells. Here the bankrupts and insolvent debtors should be kept, not all together, but in separate cells. In front there should be a more restricted prison, where those convicted of minor crimes should be held. Anyone convicted of a capital offense should be kept in the innermost section.²

Although Alberti was an influential architect and theorist and his writings were translated into several languages, his observations on prison architecture had little practical effect upon contemporary building.

Antonio Averlino (c. 1400–1469), a Florentine sculptor and architect known as Filarete, wrote his Treatise on Architecture in the 1460s. In it he described a large prison and a small prison. The large prison was not illustrated in detail but it was to be located in the town center near other governmental buildings. It was to have various sections graded in the severity of their regimens so that by good behavior the prisoner could progress to better quarters.
and conditions. Prisoners were to wear uniforms indicating their crimes. Filarete also described a prison for lesser offenders to be located under the vaults of the palace of an ideal city. The layout would be similar to that of the large prison: a square, 100 braccia (about 230 feet) per side, would contain four prisons in the corners of the palace, enclosed by double walls with water flowing between them. Filarete does not make clear exactly how the cells or rooms were to be lighted and ventilated but he mentions that windows were to be high up on the vaults in order to prevent communication.

Andrea Palladio (1508–80), the Renaissance architect and theorist, had little to say about prisons specifically. In his *Four Books on Architecture* he discussed prisons only in a part of a very short chapter dealing with public “squares and edifices,” suggesting that both mints and prisons should be placed in secure spots, surrounded by high walls and guarded by soldiers. He indicated that they must be “comfortable” and properly equipped, as prisoners are simply in custody and not being punished there. Walls are to be of stone, faced with terra cotta to keep out the dampness and strengthen the structure. Quarters for the guards must be placed in a part of the prison where they can hear what goes on among the prisoners. Palladio followed the Roman architect Vitruvius in this respect, and included in his work plans of both Greek and Roman public buildings that provide for prison rooms near the mint.

During this same time (1574) the Spanish writer Cerdán de Tallada wrote principles for jail construction. He presented such ideas as the separation of men and women as well as prisoners of different social ranks, and advocated more secure detention facilities for those accused of more serious crimes. He felt that prisons should exclude all elements of ornamentation: “The jail has to be formed out of rough stones in order to appear fearsome, but in such a manner that the prisoners are not deprived of the light of the sky.”

Joseph Furtenbach (1591–1667), a German architect, published his *Architectura Universalis* in 1635, comprised of descriptions and plans of a series of projected buildings and fortifications, with some commentary. In his cursory remarks on prisons, he suggested that they should vary in severity for various types of prisoners. His plans for a small prison (fig. 16) and a large prison show clearly demarcated inside rooms or cells, some surrounded by a corridor and containing sleeping racks and chains for the prisoners. Most cells were designed to hold one prisoner, which Furtenbach believed would have the greatest curative value. The small prison plan had two levels. The upper floor, for the less serious offenders, provided individual interior rooms that were heated, probably with stoves.
Toward the end of the eighteenth century a more clearly articulated philosophy developed concerning the style of the prison structure. J. F. Blondel, for example, in his Cours d'architecture, published in 1771, speaks of the ideal prison architecture as “short and massive, where the prisoners, humiliated, weighted down, are constantly before the eyes of the other criminals who are confined there, offering a vision of the punishments that await them and the repentance that must follow the dissoluteness of their past life” (translation mine). In other words, the architecture of a prison must convey dread and terror, hopefully leading to reform.

An expression of this philosophy is seen in similar Italian works. Francesco Milizia (1725–98), in Principi di architettura civile, published in 1785, set forth the now familiar principle that the form of a prison must go along with its purpose. Here that expression is found in its most horrible form, “in order to announce the consternation of him whose disorderly conduct no longer makes him worthy of enjoying the advantages of society.” Milizia distinguished between civil and criminal prisons, stating that the style of some of these will be sad and dismal as the result of the purpose they are to serve. Melancholy will be seen in the civil prisons. In the prisons for more serious offenders the forms are heavier in appearance and include “high and thick walls with savage appendages that throw forth the most horrible shadows,” “uninviting and cavern-like entrances,” sculptural decorations, and “frightful inscriptions.” Everything, in short, must convey “darkness, threatening, ruins, terror,” which, Milizia felt, would control crime among the citizens. The choice of materials—large stones bound together with metal spikes and covered with terra cotta—and a massive scale would give such structures the necessary psychological appearance of solidity and stability.

But Milizia cautioned that a horrible exterior does not preclude a comfortable and well-ordered interior. He used the same words as Palladio in noting that prisons are for detention and not punishment, apparently ignoring newer trends in penology that were developing in his time, particularly in the use of jails as punishment. “Men must not be buried uselessly in sepulchers. Therefore the best plan for prisons is that they be a type of larger cloister in the middle of which there are pleasantly odoriferous plants, surrounded by porticos, behind which are the prisons, which, by the way, are quite spacious according to their various types, in an even distribution.” The architect provided for guard rooms located near the prisoners’ quarters and workrooms in the corridors—which, he stated, he patterned after those of the American colonies—and he stressed the importance of proper sanitary conditions.

Other Influences on Prison Design

Although the builder-designers of prisons may have been aware of some of these ideas and theoretical writings, there is not much evidence of this in their actual works. Prison architects found precedents, however, in monasteries, hospitals, lazarettos, schools, garrisons, and other contemporary public buildings.

From the fifteenth century on, the institutional care of the sick and poor was given increasing attention, as was later the treatment of criminals. Because hospitals, poorhouses, and prisons all faced the problem of housing large numbers of persons under a more or less rigid regimen, architectural forms that were developed for these building types often showed considerable similarity. For example, plague hospitals had to be built for the specific purpose of isolating persons and goods suspected of being infected and usually provided individual rooms for each inmate. The institutions were commonly built in the form of a quadrangle with small rooms opening onto a covered arcade surrounding a large inner court. One example should suffice. The lazaretto of San Pancrazio was designed in 1539 and erected later in a suburb of Verona, Italy, by the military architect Michele Sanmicheli (1484–1559). The interior court of this lazaretto was divided into four sections, each with a water supply. The center of the spacious court contained a chapel.

John Howard in his Account of the Principal Lazaretos in Europe describes many of these institutions, most of them containing small rooms with iron bars and shutters on the windows. He noted the existence of well-constructed plague hospitals at Marseille, Genoa, Messina, La Spezia, and other port cities of southern Europe and the Mediterranean region. That of Genoa, for example, was in an “E” form with a series of small individual outside rooms opening onto corridors.

Hospital plans, particularly in Italy, manifested a characteristic cross pattern that symbolized, at least
for some architects such as Filarete, the Christian cross. One of the earliest hospitals was Santa Maria Nuova in Florence, erected in about 1330, a plan of which appeared in Filarete’s treatise on hospitals and lazarettos. The treatise was not published until 1780. However, Filarete’s Ospedale Maggiore in Milan was much imitated almost as soon as it was erected. Planned in 1456, the hospital when completed had two separate complexes, one for men and one for women, each with four wings in a cross form. Between the two cruciform structures was a large courtyard containing a church. Later, altars were erected in the centers of the cross forms.15

The Beginnings of a Distinctive Prison Architecture

In spite of the guidance offered in the theoretical writings of architects and prison reformers, a distinctive prison architecture and a specific philosophy of treatment were slow to be realized. However, the transition from makeshift quarters for prisoners to a specifically designed prison is admirably documented in Venice, in the evolution of the Doge’s Palace and, across a small adjacent canal, the New Prisons.16 Beginning in the ninth century, the site of the present Doge’s Palace was the seat of government, and its structures always provided small prison quarters. As the numbers of prisoners increased, more cells would be built. By the sixteenth century the whole ground floor in the part of the palace overlooking the Basin was used for prisoners. Rooms of varying dimensions were subdivided into many smaller cells.17 These prison rooms were used for other governmental purposes after the building of the adjacent prison in the sixteenth century.

The most famous cells in the palace were probably the Piombi, or Leads, just under the lead-covered roof. These chambers, arranged in a double range, were under six feet high and were unbearably hot in the summer and very cold in the winter. Each was lighted by one or two barred windows. It was these cells that Casanova, one of a series of illustrious persons to be imprisoned there, describes in his Mémoires.

In the 1500s, to overcome severe overcrowding, yet another prison was built on the canal side of the palace, and by 1532 it contained nineteen cells. The lower two floors were known as the Pozzi, or Wells, and although the cells in the palace were lined with two or three layers of larchwood planks crossed and tightly nailed together, dampness and seepage from the canal soon rotted them and they had to be replaced every few years. The cells also were heavily infested with insects in the summer months. Each cell contained a plank bed, a toilet pail, a water jug, and a straw mattress.18

Living conditions in these cells were probably superior to those in other prisons of the time, but they seem severe by modern standards. Rats and insects were plentiful. There was no heat and the death rate was very high, probably due to overcrowding and unsanitary conditions. Documents suggest that some magistrates were interested in these problems—undoubtedly because of their own physical proximity—and architects were admonished to study the arrangements of the cells “such as to keep into account all the measures of safety and secrecy, but above all the living requirements such as light, air and space and not to sacrifice these latter qualities to the former ones.”19

Because of crowding in the cells of the Doge’s Palace and the need to use that space for other administrative purposes, land was cleared on the opposite side of the canal to accommodate part of the New Prisons, first opened in 1566. The cells in the New Prisons more or less duplicated those in the Wells, with all of their disadvantages. The rooms were completely dark except for whatever torchlight might come through the very low doors from the passageways. Each cell had an air hole twenty centimeters wide. Each floor contained thirteen to fourteen cells and a common toilet room. Additional cells built later contained windows. By 1610 the prison had been completed in the form we see today. Surrounding an inner, open courtyard are three floors of cells, special cells for newly arrived prisoners, torture rooms, a dormitory for guards, and courtrooms. Some of these cells have a grated window facing the corridor and most have outside windows as well, with thick double gratings of iron. The bridge connecting the Doge’s Palace with the New Prisons was also erected at this time, though it acquired its romantic name, the Bridge of Sighs, only after it ceased to be used in 1921.20

One of the earliest purpose-built prisons was Le Stinche in Florence, opened to prisoners in 1304. There is good evidence that imprisonment was used here in lieu of the more usual forms of corporal punishment or death for serious crimes. In the early structure, five large rooms of various sizes were dis-
posed irregularly around a courtroom. Administrative and service facilities were in the front portion of the structure. By the early nineteenth century a cell building had been added.21

In England and the Low Countries, social conditions in the sixteenth century resulted in a large increase in the numbers of vagrants, prostitutes, and petty criminals of all sorts. The new humanitarian spirit of the times demanded less sanguinary treatment for those minor offenders than had been in force. The workhouse or house of correction was the result, built on the idea of the rehabilitative value of regular work and the formation of habits of industry. In 1556 the London Bridewell was opened, its wards and workrooms housed in the converted Bridewell Palace, granted to the city by Edward III four years earlier. Four-story buildings formed one large enclosed inner court and another that was surrounded on three sides.

Other English towns soon followed suit: Oxford in 1562, Salisbury in 1564, Norwich in 1565, and, later, Gloucester, Ipswich, and Chester. In 1576 Parliament passed an act calling for each county to erect its own “bridewell,” as the type was now known, and many did so.22

In 1589 the officials of a court in Amsterdam, objecting to the death sentence for theft to be imposed on a sixteen-year-old boy, urged the burgomaster to find a better way to deal with juvenile offenders. It was suggested they be compelled to give up their “evil ways” and change their lives. A house of correction was set up in an old convent in 1596 and opened with twelve inmates, mostly beggars and petty thieves, as well as a few unruly children committed by their well-to-do parents on a private basis. Sentences were indeterminate, and rehabilitation was to be accomplished through work, a novel idea at that time. The male prison was known as the rasp

huis, where the prisoners rasped various woods to produce dyers for textiles. The women’s prison was the spinhuus, where textile work, spinning, and sewing provided constructive labor. The Amsterdam institution consisted of a rectangular range of buildings around an inner court with covered walkways.23 The famous Leiden house of correction was set up two years later and a number of others were established in Dutch cities early in the seventeenth century. Outside Holland, the Hanseatic towns of Germany led the way: institutions patterned after the Amsterdam houses of correction were estab-

lished in Lubeck and Bremen in 1613, Hamburg in 1620, and in other German cities during the rest of that century.

The architecture in these buildings revealed no break from the past. Workhouses in the Low Countries were frequently a hollow square in plan, much like the hospitals, convents, and other establishments of the time. In fact, many were often located in buildings once used for those purposes. The congregate system of sleeping and working was followed, although youthful recalcitrants committed by their wealthy parents might be lodged in private rooms.

These early houses of correction appear to have been the first true “reformatories,” aside from small-scale church prisons. They fostered the novel aim of reformation of the criminal by means of religious instruction and regular work of a nature calculated to be useful to the prisoner. The Dutch houses of correction, probably more than the English, exerted a powerful direct influence in Belgium, Germany, and Scandinavian countries, and possibly also in Spain and Italy.24 The regulations of these Dutch workhouses apparently provided the basis for the principles of the Penitentiary Act of 1779 in England. They also had an indirect but far-reaching influence: the early Quakers must have been aware of the “bettering-houses” of Holland, but it was probably through the writing of John Howard and others that reformers in Pennsylvania learned the details of such institutions.25

Although by the closing years of the sixteenth century the vague outlines of a new rationale of treatment were beginning to emerge, neither a coherent penal program nor a distinctive prison architecture had been formed. Most prisons remained relatively crude structures with only one or two chambers. Large prisons might be designed by an architect. In such cases the exterior of the prison reflected current ideas of how a grand public building should look. The appearance would be similar to that of the city homes of the wealthy or of governmental buildings. Behind the facade, the prison’s spaces were quite ordinary, usually consisting of a series of group cells, often arranged in no systematic pattern, or simply disposed around interior courtyards. There was almost never a provision for washing and sanitation or any kind of surveillance over what went on among prisoners and guards. Sometimes, courtrooms were included in the structure.
In Rome, Pope Innocent X commissioned Antonio del Grande to build the Carcere Nuovo in the via Giulia in 1655. For the temporary detention of prisoners destined for the slave galleys at Civitavecchia, the jail had eighteen strong rooms for the men and, according to a contemporary observer, various quarters for boys, priests, Jews, and those with contagious skin diseases. The building, which still exists, is in the form of a hollow square, four stories high, constructed of brick with stone facing.  

Perhaps the best known of the newly constructed prisons in England was London’s Newgate. The chronically overcrowded and unhealthy premises that had been built on the site between 1423 and 1432 were replaced by a new prison, also known as Newgate, designed by the city architect, George Dance the Younger (1740–1825), and erected in 1769. The original plan was reduced and modified in response to financial considerations so that as completed in 1780 the prison was an impressive structure on the outside but cramped and unhealthy on the inside. Most of the inmates were kept in a series of large rooms arranged around three courtyards, forming a central square and two smaller flanking squares (fig. 17). Debtors, women felons, and male felons were to be separated. Originally, only five individual cells were constructed; these were intended for punishment. In 1782 the prison was burned by anti-Catholic rioters. Once rebuilt, however, it continued to be used until 1902.  

Although specifically built as a prison, Newgate was not forward-looking in its penology. As late as 1824 the windows remained unglazed except in the infirmary. Lax administration allowed prisoners to shake down one another and there was almost no supervision. Inmates spent fourteen to fifteen hours during the winter months in total darkness in the congregate sleeping rooms.

The prison built in Kassel, Germany, in 1720 was an early example of a more rational interior plan. Group cells for four people were arranged on one side of a large room, perhaps used for work activities (fig. 18). The uppermost of three floors accommodated female prisoners.

Although the prisons mentioned thus far usually did not have individual cells or any coherent regimen for rehabilitation, two early exceptions should be noted. In 1627 the Malefizhaus, intended for the punishment and rehabilitation of witches, sorcerers, and “sinners,” was built in Bamberg, Germany, under the auspices of the local bishop. It had two and a half stories, the second floor containing individual cells opening onto a wide central corridor. At the end of the hall was an altar (fig. 19). A guard room looked over the entrance and stairway. Each cell had an outside window and the entire structure was heated by means of stoves fired from the outside by a system, which was common in that part of Europe.  

The second institution, though not purpose-built, is another noteworthy example of the earliest uses of cellular confinement of civil offenders with betterment of conduct as its aim. In 1677 a priest, Filippo Franci, opened the hospice of San Filippo Neri for deserted, homeless, and delinquent boys in a remodeled palace in Florence. A number of small cells were constructed, and thirty-three priestly and lay “protectors” acted as supervisors, vocational instructors, recreation directors, and in the capacity of what we would now term parole officers. Franci applied a regimen of day and night isolation and meditation and visits by two “protectors,” who used compassion rather than force. Inmates were completely separated from one another and their faces concealed when they were taken out of their cells, assuring their anonymity. All of this was part of a philosophy of rehabilitation that was highly advanced for that era. This institution was maintained for over a hundred years. Franci also established a similar one at Leghorn. Thorsten Sellin regarded the twenty-four-hour segregation used here as the “first practical attempt to use this mode of treatment for the avowed purpose of correction and reformation.”

Most prisons in the eighteenth century, even those with fine exteriors and comparatively generous provisions for ventilation, space, and other creature comforts, had little influence outside their own communities, and therefore are of interest primarily as examples of the state of the art. There are a few notable prisons that, because of an advanced penal program, unusual architecture, and some favorable publicity, had considerable effect upon both architecture and treatment methods elsewhere. These are the House of Correction of San Michele in Rome, the Milan house of correction, and the Ghent Maison de Force. All three were enthusiastically described, with accompanying plans, in the several editions of John Howard’s State of the Prisons between 1777 and 1792.

Scholars have traced the origins of cellular confinement to earlier examples, but its use in correctional imprisonment first became conspicuous through Howard’s descriptions of San Michele. In 1704, Pope Clement XI opened the house of correc-
tion for criminal boys in a hospice in Rome that had been established in 1582, and which also had quarters for the poor, the aged, and orphans. Over the entrance to the new structure the Pope had inscribed the following words: “Pope Clement XI. For the correction and instruction of profligate youth: that they, who when idle, were injurious, when instructed might be useful to the State. 1704.” Emphasis was upon moral instruction, manual training, and the prevention of contamination resulting from the free intermingling of inmates that went on in most other institutions.32

Although the reformatory regimen instituted in San Michele has been linked to earlier establishments of Filippo Franci, it was probably influenced more by the papal authorities’ knowledge of Dutch workhouses. The architect, Carlo Fontana, designed a rectangular structure with thirty outside cells arranged on three tiers with balconies or galleries on each level (fig. 20). Each cell contained a latrine, exterior and interior windows, a mattress, a solid door, and a small aperture opening onto the balconies that could be closed from without by a small door. Glass was used for the outside windows, an unusual practice for the time. From the inner window of the cells, the inmates had a view of the altar. These sleeping rooms faced a large center hall that was used as a workroom, dining room, and for Mass (fig. 21). The boys worked in silence, bound by leg chains. The main floor of the cellular section as well as the ground floor and the basement were used for manufacturing articles for the Vatican state.33 Discipline was severe and whippings were routinely administered in the main hall, in full view of the other boys. Fontana wrote that he designed a building in which the movements and conversation of its occupants could be easily monitored by the keepers in any part of the hall to verify that the boys behaved “with due modesty.”34 The goal, however, could not have been completely achieved. A staff room at one end of the main hall was equipped with barred apertures opening into the hall for surveillance. Nevertheless, given the scale of the main hall and the three levels of cells, it is difficult to see how careful supervision could have occurred except by guards.
who were in close proximity to inmates. Severe by modern standards, treatment at San Michele was advanced for its day. Contrast the motto found in the main hall, “Parum est coercere improbos poena nisi probos efficias disciplina” (it is of little advantage to restrain the wicked by punishment unless you also make them good by instruction [discipline]), with that appearing over the entrance to the jail erected in the same city in 1655 by Innocent X: “Securiori ac meliori reorum custodies” (for the safer and better keeping of criminals).

Another noteworthy eighteenth-century Italian institution is the Milan house of correction, characterized by Howard as an improvement on San Michele. It was begun under the rule of Maria Theresa, probably in the late 1750s, and was still unfinished by 1778.39 The structure as finally completed was intended as a house of correction for the criminals of the Lombard states. The design suggests that the architect, Francesco Croce, had combined elements of San Michele with some of the conventional cross plans found in contemporary Italian churches and hospitals (fig. 22). A T-shaped cellular section was flanked by buildings containing


Figure 22. Milan house of correction, late eighteenth century. John Howard, *State of the Prisons*, 3d ed. (1784), opposite 121.
workrooms and other services. The flanking structures were arranged around two courts on either side of the main portion. This T-shaped main building contained 120 sleeping rooms, each eight feet two inches by nine feet two inches, arranged along the outer walls on three levels and connected by stone galleries with iron railings. Each cell had a bed, a stool, and a toilet. There were windows on both the outside wall and the inner wall opening to the balconies, much as at San Michele. The largest wing housed men, one of the short wings was reserved for boys, and the other was used as an infirmary and for women prisoners. The “Great Room” in the long wing, measuring 31 feet by 124 feet, was used as a workroom where prisoners carried on their labors chained to benches. At the crossing of the T-shaped structure was an altar. Although an advanced institution for its day and one that showed architectural superiority over most others and some minor improvements over San Michele, it seems to have had little effect on later prison structures.36

The unsettled economic and social conditions that gave rise to the English and Dutch workhouses continued to plague Austrian Flanders, which found itself burdened with vagabonds, beggars, and petty thieves in increasing numbers during the eighteenth century. Consequently, in 1771, the government, then under the rule of Maria Theresa, asked Count Jean Philippe Vilain to prepare a project for the reform of the penal system.37 The precedents of penal treatment with which Vilain was familiar are now partly a matter of conjecture. The English houses of correction were not well known on the Continent but the Amsterdam institutions were. In Ghent a workhouse had been set up in 1617 in the château of Gerard le Diable. The regimen consisted of communal work during the day and isolation at night. Workers could accumulate money, which was theirs when they left the prison. Vilain presented his famous Memoire in 1775, enunciating a policy of penal treatment opposed to corporal punishment. Such treatment included the deprivation of liberty augmented with forced labor—labor that was meaningful paid work rather than simply a means of supporting the institution.

Some of his inspiration for this philosophy may be suggested by the fact that he quotes St. Paul in his work. He divided prisoners into two categories: first, those deemed unimprovable, due to age or hardness of crime, as well as those classed as foreign vaga-

bonds, all of whom were to be put to work for the institution; and second, the hopeful cases, those who could be employed at trades that they could use upon release, taking into consideration the part of the country to which they would be returning.38 The principles that Vilain applied to the management of the Ghent House of Correction, which culminated his reform project, were certainly not new, but they probably had never been put into practice all at the same time before. These were night isolation; separation of the sexes; and separation of prisoners of the same sex according to categories based on age, degree of criminality, and length of sentence.

Architecturally, the Maison de Force built in Ackerghem, a suburb of Ghent, was as remarkable as its internal government. It can be regarded as the first large-scale adult penal institution in which a conscious attempt was made to bring architecture to the aid of the penological philosophy of treatment in a sophisticated and skillful manner. The sources of inspiration for the truly original design of this prison are not known.39 The master plan (fig. 23), worked out by the architect Malfaison in collaboration with a Jesuit priest named Kluchman, or Klukman, was a giant octagon, formed by eight trapezoidal units, each self-contained. This allowed for separation of the various classes of prisoners and facilitated construction of the prison in stages as funds became available.40 Each unit was to have sleeping cells and workshops back-to-back with such rooms in adjacent units. Separate sections held specific types of offenders, for example, vagrants, women, and male felons. The center octagonal court formed by the inner sides of the various units was to be flanked by service facilities and was to have gateways leading to the several courts to make communication easier for custodial personnel.

Construction began in 1772 and continued until 1775, although apparently prisoners were received in 1773 upon completion of four sections: for felons, for mendicants, for women, and for both unemployed laborers and abandoned children.

Initially this institution was a model prison, enthusiastically described by Howard and others, good even by modern standards. Howard’s later accounts were less complimentary. He described the crowded conditions that required more than one prisoner in a cell, the use of cages for inmates, and a system of manufacturing that had deteriorated to mere production rather than training. Conditions became
worse with political unrest and revolution and especially under French domination. After Belgium and Holland were united in 1815, the prison did not improve. However, further building took place from 1824 to 1827. In the following decade the original plan was completed, bringing the capacity up to 2,600 (fig. 24). The prison, in use until 1935, was partially destroyed by bombs during World War II. Although its unusual architecture had few direct imitators, the spirit of that architecture and of the management of the prison inspired reforms in the nineteenth century.