



Good day Worthy Knights,

In this part 87, the Seneschal and the Prior

Wikipedia

## Seneschal



The word *seneschal* can have several different meanings. Most commonly, a seneschal was a senior position filled by a court appointment within a royal, ducal, or noble household. In the medieval period the seneschal might oversee hundreds of laborers, and servants with their associated responsibilities. They had a great deal of power in the community, at a time when much of the local economy was often based on the wealth and responsibilities of such a household.

A second meaning is more specific, and concerns the late medieval nation of France, wherein the seneschal was also a royal officer in charge of justice and control of the administration of certain southern provinces called *seneschalties*, or for one of the districts of the crown in Languedoc and Normandy holding a role equivalent to a northern French bailiff (*bailli*).

### Origin

The *scholae* in the late Roman Empire referred to the imperial guard, divided into senior (*seniores*) and junior (*juniores*) units. The captain of the guard was known as *comes scholarum*. When Germanic tribes took over the Empire, the *scholae* were merged or replaced with the Germanic king's warband whose members also had duties in their lord's household like a royal retinue.

The king's chief warbandman and retainer from the 5th century on, personally attended on the king, as specifically stated in the Codex Theodosianus of 413. The warband, once sedentary, became first the king's royal household, and then his great officers of state.

### In France

In late medieval and early modern France, the seneschal was originally a royal steward overseeing the entire country but developed into an agent of the crown charged with administration of a *seneschalty*.

Hallam states that the first seneschals to govern in this manner did so by an 1190 edict of Philip II. The seneschals also served as the chief justice of the royal courts in those areas.

**Henry Hallam** (1777 – 1859) was an English historian.

## **Prior (or prioress)**

The ecclesiastical title for a superior, usually lower in rank than an abbot or abbess. Its earlier generic usage referred to any monastic superior. The Latin word means "earlier" or "first".

In the Rule of Saint Benedict, the term appears several times, referring to any superior, whether an abbot, provost, dean, etc. In other old monastic rules, the term is used in the same generic sense. With the Cluniac Reforms, it supplanted the provost or dean (*praepositus*).

## **Compound and derived titles**

The Benedictine Order and the military orders have three kinds of priors:

- the claustral prior
- the conventual prior
- the obedientiary prior

The **Claustral prior** (Latin *prior claustralis*), called dean in a few monasteries, holds the first place after the abbot (or grand-master in military orders), whom he assists in the government of the monastery, functioning effectively as the abbot's second-in-charge. He has no ordinary jurisdiction by virtue of his office since he performs the duties of his office entirely according to the will and under the direction of the abbot.

His jurisdiction is, therefore, a delegated one and extends just as far as the abbot desires, or the constitutions of the congregation prescribe. He is appointed by the abbot, generally after a consultation in chapter with the professed monks of the monastery and may be removed by him at any time. In many monasteries, especially larger ones, the claustral prior is assisted by a **sub-prior**, who holds the third place in the monastery.

In former times there were in larger monasteries, besides the prior and the sub-prior, also a third, fourth and sometimes even a fifth prior. Each of these was called *circa* (or *circator*), because it was his duty to make the rounds of the monastery to see whether anything was amiss and whether the brethren were intent on the work allotted to them, respectively.

He had no authority to correct or punish the brethren but was to report to the claustral prior whatever he found amiss or contrary to the rules.

The **Conventual prior** (Latin *prior conventualis*) is the independent superior of a monastery that is not an abbey (and which is therefore called a "priory"). In some orders, like the Benedictines, a monastery remains a priory until it is considered stable enough and large enough to be elevated to the rank of an abbey.

The **Obedientiary Prior** heads a monastery created as a satellite of an abbey. When an abbey becomes overlarge, or when there is need of a monastery in a new area, the abbot may appoint a group of monks under a prior to begin a new foundation, which remains a dependency of the mother abbey until such time as it is large and stable enough to become an independent abbey of its own.



Painting of a prior with coat of arms 18<sup>th</sup>.