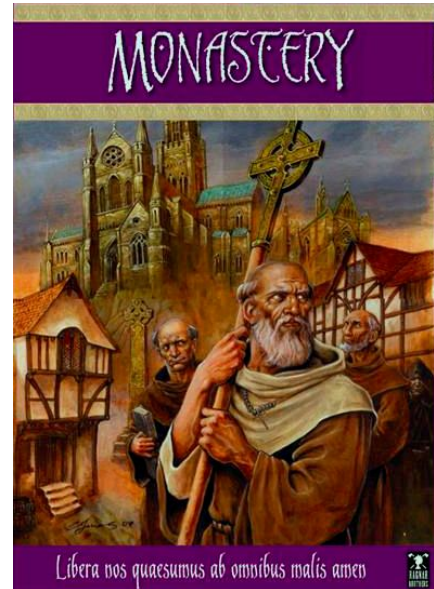


Oh, Brother! *Monastery* reviewed

The Ragnar Brothers have a track record of excellent historical games, but they're usually on a grander scale than this. *Monastery* has the players developing a medieval monastery. The monastery starts with the abbey church and the players each have one monk (pawn) in the church. They also start with several tiles that represent buildings and other additions to the monastery. In most rounds, players can place one tile and move their monk(s).

Tiles are always placed with their 'unconstructed' side up. This shows one or more numbered squares: to complete the tile, there must be a monk on every square at the end of the round. The tile is then flipped over to its completed side. This forms part of the 'scoring points' part of each round, once all players have laid their tiles and/or moved their monks. The number on each square is the points earned by that monk for his part in completing the tile. Monks can also earn points by working on a completed tile or by praying – more about this later.



The points earned by the monks are not victory points. Instead they are spent by the players to gain more monks or to get letters that go towards completing the monastery's motto. Any excess points are converted into 'blessings' – tokens that can be spent as points in subsequent rounds or count as victory points at the end of the game. However, the major source of victory points are those letters.

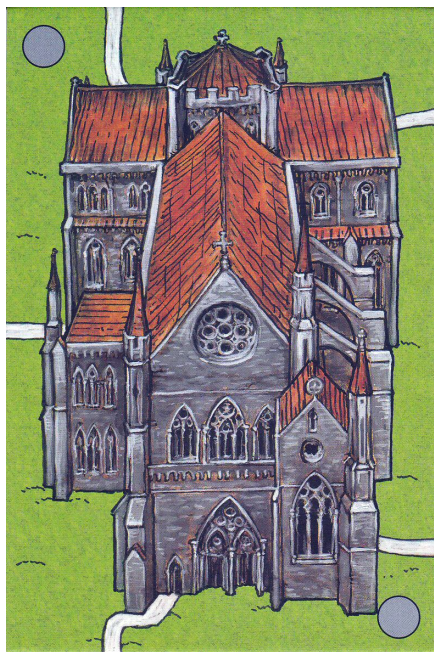
The monastery's motto is the last lines of the Lord's Prayer – in Latin, of course. Each player has a section of this to complete. When they spend points to get letters, they can add them to their own part of the motto, face-up. These will be worth 3 points each at the end of the game. Or players can put letters face down on their opponents' sections of the motto: these are worth zero. This gives players some real tactical decisions. If I'm the one player who needs the 'Q', which is a cheap letter, I might feel I need to spend my points buying letters for which I'm competing with others. However, the risk is that someone else, with a point to spare, might buy it, depriving me of some victory points. Hence players have some definite pros and cons to weigh up.

I mentioned praying above and this is another decision for players to think about. Each completed tile shows a number, which is both the maximum number of monks who can be on the tile and the points a monk can earn by praying on the tile. This is usually more than the 1 point he will get by working (on the appropriate type of round). However, you can only set one monk praying (by tipping the pawn forward

into a kneeling position) each round – and only if he's alone on a tile. Once praying, he can do nothing until the next 'Service' round, when praying monks are returned to the church. And he only scores the points once: on the round he starts praying. Clearly, there's less penalty the fewer rounds there are to the next service. It can be useful, too, to have some monks starting the next series of rounds in the church (they get to vote on who's Abbot for a start). It also depends on how many points you're going to earn that round and whether this is enough to buy what you want.

Praying monks also reduce your movement options. At the start of each round, you have 2 movement points for each standing monk. A monk uses a point for each tile he moves onto and must follow the paths between tiles. Because of this restriction, it is quite difficult for one player to complete larger buildings on their own. A bit of co-operation is necessary and players can sweeten the deal by adding blessings to incomplete tiles they have monks on. Players also have a 'Secret Way' tile each and any of their monks can move there for one point. Initially, players spread out from the church, of course. As this is a much larger tile, there is plenty of room for tiles adjacent to it. Completing their Secret Way tile gives players a base and they then tend to build from there. However, getting your monks to the right places is another tactical element to each round.

As I stated earlier, players can play one tile a round. Generally, this is "should play one tile a round" as leftover tiles are minus victory points at the end of the game. However, players also have the option of changing a tile: they draw a new one and then return one to the bag. This can be a useful option if you have awkward tiles, but leaves you with an extra tile (as you haven't placed one that round). There are all sorts of restrictions on placing tiles. A new tile must have at least one edge adjacent to an existing tile. However, grey and brown tiles cannot go next to each other – there are neutral tiles and some that are both colours to put in between. Paths cannot connect to non-path edges, of course, though some tiles have 'gateways' which are optional paths. On top of which, some types of tile can only be in groups up to a certain size (though players get extra points for adding to a set). This is the fiddliest bit of the rules and it took me a couple of games to make sure I knew all the restrictions.



However, I haven't finished with the tiles yet. A few of them are special features, which are completed when placed and gain that player some blessings. This bonus is pure chance, of course. Other tiles have special effects, which can be used by players with a standing monk on them. These include things like allowing the player to place an extra tile or providing extra points for monks working there. Having these in play offers some useful tactical options – at the cost of not using a monk elsewhere.

The progress of the game is controlled by the canonical hours of the day. The day starts with a Service round (Matins). In a Service round, praying monks return to the church, players elect an Abbot (the first player) and take additional tiles at random from the bag. Then come Study and Toil rounds, where players place tiles, move their monks, earn points and buy letters. The only difference between these is that monks gain points for working on grey tiles during a Study round and brown tiles during a Toil round. There are two further services during the day (Sext and Vespers), each followed with fewer Study and Toil rounds. In total, the day has three Service rounds, three Study and three Toil. However, the irregular distribution of these is another tactical element in the game. The last round of the day is actually night, when all monks are returned to the church.



The game ends either at the end of the second day or when all the letters have been bought and placed – which usually occurs at much the same time. In theory the game can also end if “it is impossible to place any further tiles”, but I haven’t seen this happen yet. Players get ‘testament’ points for face-up letters on their portion of the *Monastery’s* motto and for any blessings they have. They lose points for any remaining tiles and the player with the most points wins, of course.

As far as I can see, this is a largely tactical game. It’s about what you can do each round, with only some regard for the bigger picture. Strategically, I usually buy extra monks as soon as I can. This seems to mean that I miss out on the earlier, cheaper letters every game. However, those extra monks get me more points and make it easier to buy the more expensive letters. I also keep an eye open for the buildings with special functions, as these can be very useful – in the right circumstances. Almost all the buildings will be played in a game (though not all will be completed). The special function buildings are, of course, more useful the earlier they’re played (and completed).

Monastery is a clever, tactical game, but for some reason it doesn’t grab me. Perhaps it’s too dry: the calculation involved in getting my monks to the right places each turn doesn’t feel like I’m helping to build a monastery. It’s also quite a competitive game. I’m quite willing to believe that monks split into competing factions, but somehow it doesn’t fit the idea of the game. It remains a challenging game that I will be happy to play, but I probably won’t be the one putting it on the table.

Monastery was designed and published by the Ragnar Brothers. It is a strategy board game for 2-4 players and takes about 90 minutes to play. It gets 7/10 on my highly subjective scale.

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Monastery artwork courtesy of Ragnar Brothers