

Monastic Orders

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CHAPTER ONE

The 'desert-place called Cîteaux'

After these things, supported by so distinguished and so important an authority, the aforesaid abbot and his own returned to Molesme, and from that fraternity of monks selected from their own company devotees of the Rule, so that between those who had spoken to the legate in Lyon and the others called from the monastery, there were twenty-one monks; and thus escorted by so goodly a company they headed eagerly for the desert-place called Cîteaux.¹

The monastery which became known as Cîteaux lay within the duchy of Burgundy, in the heart of the fragmented Middle Kingdom, or Lotharingia. Ruled by the semi-autonomous dukes, the region had seen the emergence of movements, such as the Peace of God and the Truce of God, designed to curb private warfare. It had also seen the foundation of monasteries, notably Cluny, and the alienation of property to them, which allowed them to prosper. Located on the fringes of the kingdom of the Capetian kings of France to the west, and the German lands to the east, Burgundy was on one of the main routes south into Italy. Remote it was not. Yet it was here that Cîteaux was founded and flourished, claiming to be a community that strenuously upheld the Rule of St Benedict, and, moreover, to be a desert place, a wilderness, 'removed from populated areas'.²

The foundation of Cîteaux: the historical debate

For students of Cistercian history there is one plain, but all too familiar, fact of life: to turn one's back on the subject, even for a moment, is to lose the plot.³

David Robinson's comment on the enduring appeal of the Cistercians to scholars of all disciplines – and the difficulties it can cause – was in 2006, and is still, an appropriate one. In recent years, however, it has been

¹ *Exordium Parvum*, NLT, p. 421.

² *Ibid.*, p. 433.

³ David Robinson, *The Cistercians in Wales: Architecture and Archaeology 1130–1540*, Reports of the Research Committee of the Society of Antiquaries of London 73 (London 2006) n. v.

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the very nature of the Cistercian movement in its first half century and beyond, and the emergence of the Cistercian 'Order', that have caused most controversy. To a large extent the problems are embedded in the documentary sources themselves, and an appreciation of those sources must be our starting point.

The narrative sources

At one time it seemed as if the story of the origins and growth of Cistercian monasticism represented one of the 'certainties' of medieval scholarship. Although it was recognised from an early date that the two narratives that tell the story of the foundation from the Cistercian perspective, the *Exordium Parvum* and the shorter *Exordium Cistercii*, posed problems relating to their authorship, date, and relationship to each other, nevertheless it seemed to historians that the basic outline of 'what happened' was clear enough.⁴ This is the story they tell.

In 1098 a group of monks from the prosperous monastery of Molesme, in the diocese of Langres, led by their abbot, Robert, appeared before the archbishop of Lyon, then papal legate. They voiced their deep discontent with monastic practices at Molesme, particularly the poor observance of the Rule of St Benedict. Accordingly the monks sought, and received, permission to leave Molesme, and they founded a new monastery in a remote spot in the diocese of Chalon, near Dijon. Indeed in its first years it was known as the *Novum Monasterium*, the 'New Monastery', and only later as Cîteaux. In this desolate and secluded spot – 'the desert-place called Cîteaux' – undistracted by the world outside, the monks would worship God in simplicity and poverty. The place suited their purposes well in that it was remote, 'rarely approached by men back in those days because of the thickness of grove and thornbush' and 'inhabited only by wild beasts'. After clearing away the dense thickets, they began the construction of a wooden monastery with the support of the local lord, Odo I, duke of Burgundy. The bishop of Chalon-sur-Saône, who approved the foundation, released the monks from their vow of stability at Molesme and, in the correct and canonical way, blessed Robert as abbot of the New Monastery.

An early threat to the new community came from Molesme, whose monks demanded of Pope Urban II the return of Robert on the grounds that his departure had caused scandal in the neighbourhood, and at a council held at Port d'Anselme, convened to discuss weighty matters, it was decided that they should have their wish. Robert resumed office at

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Molesme. In his stead Alberic, former prior of Molesme, was elected abbot (1099–1109). Chapter XV of the *Exordium Parvum*, entitled 'The institutes of the monks of Cîteaux who came from Molesme', lays down in some detail what are seen as many of the defining features of Cistercian monasticism: the close adherence to the Rule of St Benedict, the rejection of certain types of revenues, economic organisation through granges and *conversi* (lay brothers) and the siting of abbeys 'in places removed from populated areas'.⁵ The text continues with the death of Alberic (1109) and the election of the third abbot of Cîteaux, the Englishman Stephen Harding.⁶ Stephen, who had been one of the original party to leave Molesme, was responsible for two significant measures. The first was the exclusion of secular lords such as the duke of Burgundy from holding court in the monastery at important feasts; the second was the introduction of greater physical austerity into the church through the banning of gold and silver. Chapter XVI of the *Exordium Parvum* speaks of a period of uncertainty, even despair: although the monks attracted donations and landed endowments they failed to secure new recruits, a failure that the author put down to the harsh physical demands of the way of life at Cîteaux. But the final two chapters end on a triumphant and optimistic note, with an upturn in the monastery's fortunes, as thirty recruits – 'so many clerics, learned and noble, so many laymen, powerful in the world and likewise noble' – entered its gates. This led to the beginnings of the expansion through the foundation of daughter houses. The *Exordium Parvum* accordingly crafts a careful history, giving authenticity to the narrative by the inclusion of documents. Of eighteen chapters, nine are narrative and nine take the form of letters, privileges or statutes.

The *Exordium Cistercii* also tells the tale of the departure of Robert and his companions, but in a much shorter text – a bare two chapters – which have none of the fierce criticism of Molesme found in the *Exordium Parvum*. The problem with the monastery, which caused Robert and his colleagues to leave, was not, as in the *Exordium Parvum*, failure to observe the Rule of St Benedict. On the contrary, Molesme was 'of the most celebrated renown, and remarkable for monastic observance'. However, it was also rich, 'ample in possessions', but 'association of possessions with virtues is not usually longlasting', and this led Robert and others

⁴ The latest editions and translations of these two narratives are to be found in *NLT*, pp. 177–91, 232–59 (Latin text), and pp. 399–413, 417–40 (Latin text and translation). All quotations are from this edition and translation. The following brief summary is from the *Exordium Parvum*.

⁵ The traditional meaning of the word *conversus* in monastic contexts was an adult convert to the monastic life. Within the emerging monastic congregations it took on a new meaning, that of a member of a second group within an abbey, who took vows after a period of novitiate, but as a worker rather than a monk. On these see below, pp. 151–60.

⁶ *Exordium Parvum*, chapter XVII, *NLT*, p. 438. The rubric of this chapter calls Alberic and Stephen first and second abbot respectively, thus ignoring Robert of Molesme, even though he was blessed as abbot of Cîteaux. The text states that Alberic ruled nine and a half years, and his death, which made room for Stephen, occurred on 20 March 1109.

to ponder 'poverty, fruitful mother of a virile stock'.⁷ True, observation of the Rule according to their profession was a concern, but the main reason for departure was to seek poverty, and it was thus that, armed by the authority of church officials and with the backing of the duke of Burgundy, they sought 'a desert place', 'a place of horror and of vast solitude'.⁸ Internal evidence in both *exordia* – the apparent reference to the number of abbots at the time of writing⁹ – might suggest a date for the composition of the texts in the early 1120s, some quarter century after the secession, but this has not been universally accepted. It was early in the last century that scholars began to address these issues, and the controversy continues. The debate, which has centred on the dating of the early Cistercian documents, is, more broadly, about how soon the monks of the New Monastery set a radical agenda for reform, how soon a monastic order – the Cistercian Order – emerged with an identity based on a set of uniform ideas and principles, and indeed whether 'uniformity', so often considered the hallmark of Cistercian monasticism, was ever really seen as an achievable aim.

A recent reassessment of the authorship, date and intention of the early Cistercian documents has been that of Chrysogonus Waddell in his edition of the early Cistercian documents.¹⁰ Waddell's hypothesis is that the *Exordium Cistercii* is the earlier of the two texts and that its composition can be linked to the revision of the Cistercian liturgical customary, known as the *Ecclesiastica Officia*, that is, the detailed instructions for the performance of the canonical hours. In an important manuscript, Trento MS 1711, the *Exordium Cistercii* appears in sequence with the *Summa Carte Caritatis*, *Capitula* (rulings by the General Chapter), along with the second recension or revision of the *Ecclesiastica Officia*, thus bringing

together a range of historical, constitutional and liturgical texts.¹¹ Waddell has argued that the *Exordium Cistercii* was the work of Raynard du Bar, a monk of Clairvaux who was elected abbot of Cîteaux, probably in 1134, and who died in 1150. It took the form it did because it was designed as a brief historical narrative leading into the legal and liturgical texts, which were revised early in Raynard's abbacy. As a historical text, therefore, the *Exordium Cistercii* represents a view of the origins of Cîteaux from nearly forty years after the event.

The *Exordium Parvum* in the form in which we have it, on the other hand, Waddell considers to be an even later creation, but one based on earlier tradition. He is not the first to have considered it a hybrid document but his hypothesis differs slightly from earlier ones, in that he sees the core of the *Exordium Parvum* – a hypothetical primitive *exordium* – as the prologue and chapters I–II and IV–XIV, possibly written by Abbot Stephen Harding as a 'postulants' guide' around 1113 when the first daughter houses were being set up.¹² The remainder – that is, chapter III, which contains the most damning criticism of Molesme, chapter XV, the statutes which set the Cistercian agenda, and chapters XVI–XVIII, the account of the lack of success of the New Monastery in attracting recruits, and the turnaround under Stephen Harding himself – were also, for Waddell, the work of Raynard du Bar, composed not long before 1147. If he is correct we may see the production of the *Exordium Parvum* as coming at a time of great change; that is, that as a result of the incorporation of a number of smaller monastic groups – Obazine, Coyrouz and Savigny – the Cistercians produced yet another recension of the liturgical customs, that now known as RIII. The controversies about monastic practices, initiated by Bernard of Clairvaux's letter to his nephew (traditionally dated to c. 1119) and his *Apologia* (c. 1125), were still alive, and the White Monks found themselves fully immersed in ecclesiastical politics with the first Cistercian pope elevated to the See of St Peter in 1145. Such circumstances may well have produced a fuller and more self-conscious account of the foundation of Cîteaux and its early years.

Whatever the fine tuning of the dating of these texts, the significance is that they are later representations, or reworkings of the Cistercian story. The Cistercians revised their foundation narrative – or their 'origin myth',

⁷ *NLT*, pp. 399–400.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 399–401. For further comment on the phrase 'in loco horrois et vaste solitudinis' see below, pp. 15–16, 57–8.

⁹ *NLT*, p. 402 (*Exordium Cistercii*) and p. 439 (*Exordium Parvum*).

¹⁰ Space does not permit a detailed discussion of these arguments. They are summarised in Waddell, *NLT*, pp. 137–55 (*Exordium Cistercii*) and 199–205 (*Exordium Parvum*); for his own arguments see pp. 156–61, 205–31. See also the review article of Waddell's edition by Christopher Holdsworth, *Cîteaux: Commentarii Cisterciensis* 51 (2000), 157–66. Holdsworth is not convinced by Waddell's arguments as to authorship and suggests (p. 165) that the *Exordium Parvum* could be in its entirety the work of Stephen Harding, probably completed in two stages by 1119. J. -B. Auberges, in a review in the same issue (pp. 193–7), is also unconvinced by Waddell's arguments about authorship. See also J. -B. Auberges, *L'Unité primitive: mythe ou réalité?* (Cîteaux: Commentarii Cisterciensis, Studia et Documenta, 3 (Achel, 1986)). To these discussions of the narratives should be added Constance Berman's controversial dating of the documents in *The Cistercian Evolution: the Invention of a Religious Order in Twelfth-Century Europe* (Philadelphia, 2000) and the reviews by Brian Patrick McGuire, 'Charity and Unity: the Invention of the Cistercian Order: a Review Article', and Chrysogonus Waddell, 'The Myth of Cistercian Origins: C. H. Berman and the Manuscript

¹¹ MS Trento 1711 is described by Waddell, *NLT*, pp. 92–3. Its provenance is the abbey of Villers-Bernard (dioc. Metz), and it dates from c. 1138/40. Berman considers the texts of *EC*, *SCC* and *Instituta* (i.e. *Capitula*) to be additions to the manuscript of 'later than 1161' and dates the *Exordium Cistercii* and *Summa Carte Caritatis* to between 1161 and 1165; see *Cistercian Evolution*, pp. 56–67, but see also the discussion of the manuscript by Waddell himself in 'The Myth of Cistercian Origins', pp. 304–6. The second revision or recension of the liturgical texts is generally known as RII. Auberges, *L'Unité primitive*, pp. 42–52, considered *Exordium Parvum* as a hybrid, but with the earlier version represented by the prologue and diplomatic texts, linked by the narrative of chapters I, and

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perhaps – in different historical circumstances. Reading the prologue of the *Exordium Parvum* with this in mind makes it clear that the Cistercians were in some ways seeking to justify their foundation; that is, this was written at a time of controversy. It takes a defensive tone:

We Cistercians, the first founders of this church, by this present document, are notifying our successors how canonically, and with what authority, and also by whom and by what stages their monastery and tenor of life took their beginning, so that, with the sincere truth of this matter made public, they may the more tenaciously love both the place and the observance of the Holy Rule there initiated ...¹³

This prologue sets the scene for a narrative that will argue that Cîteaux was a canonical and legitimate foundation. Waddell is correct to point out that it is not until late in the twelfth century, with the *Exordium Magnum* of Conrad of Eberbach, that there is evidence of overt charges – from the German Benedictines – that as an order the Cistercians were illegal.¹⁴ Nevertheless, there were earlier circumstances in which the White Monks might have felt defensive and crafted their history accordingly. So, what can we learn from these accounts, read in their broader context, about the early Cistercians?

The foundation of Cîteaux in context

A key feature of the narratives, particularly the *Exordium Parvum*, is the failure of the monks of Molesme to adhere strictly to the Rule of St Benedict. In chapter III, a section that Waddell would credit to Raynard du Bar c. 1147, the monks accuse themselves of perjury in failing to observe the Rule as they should, and the need to observe the Rule is a consistent feature of the text. Close adherence to Benedict's *horarium* (the monastic timetable for the day) was also an aspiration of other new monastic movements of the period. It meant reducing the liturgical accretions that had crept in over the centuries since Benedict wrote, as patrons and special friends came to expect lengthy masses for the dead; these reductions allowed for the restoration into the *horarium* of the periods of manual labour expected by Benedict. We do not have to rely solely on these Cistercian accounts, however, to understand the importance, for the early Cistercians, of adherence to the Rule. An English Benedictine monk, William of Malmesbury, writing before 1124 and possibly deriving his knowledge of the White Monks from the French Cistercian monastery of

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I'Aumône, described how Stephen Harding, while a monk at Molesme and a leading protagonist in the debate that led to the secession, had proposed that the abbey should 'abandon superfluities and explore the very marrow of the Rule and nothing else', and noted that the Cistercians held to the Rule 'so closely ... that they think it wrong to diverge by one letter, one iota'.¹⁵ Another Benedictine monk, Orderic Vitalis, writing at a Norman monastery, St Evroul, and somewhat later (c. 1135) made the contemporary Benedictine abandonment of manual labour a keystone of the imagined debate at Molesme on the eve of the departure for Cîteaux.¹⁶ Chapter XV of the *Exordium Parvum* contains perhaps the most explicit statement of the need to conform strictly to the tenets of the Rule in terms of food and drink, bedding and clothing, and all other details of the monastic life, and even if Waddell is correct in his dating and this was an editorial addition to the text of c. 1147, the evidence of William and Orderic is clear: by the 1120s and 1130s the Cistercians were seen as the upholders of the Rule in its primitive form. That the witnesses are Benedictine monks makes their evidence the more compelling. This is how they understood Cistercian practices.

The insistence on the strict observance of the Rule linked the early Cistercians with the most powerful written monument in the monastic tradition. But they were aware – as indeed was Benedict himself – that what lay behind the cenobitic or communal way of life for which the Rule was written was the call of the desert, the cradle of the hermit monks of the third and fourth centuries who were seen as the real founders of the monastic way of life.¹⁷ The eremitic monastic tradition was transmitted to the West through John Casian, through the anonymous author of the *Regula Magistri*, and through Benedict himself. Part of the enduring Cistercian myth was the taming of the desert, whether in terms of monastic sites on the edges of society, or the opening up of new lands to cultivation. The *Exordium Cistercii* uses a phrase to describe the site of the New Monastery, which was to become a *topos* in Cistercian writing. Cîteaux, writes the author, was founded 'in loco horroris et vaste solitudinis', 'in a place of horror and vast solitude' (Deuteronomy

¹³ *NLT*, p. 417.

¹⁴ *Exordium Magnum Cisterciense sive Narratio de Initio Cisterciensis Ordinis*, ed. Bruno Griesser, Corpus

¹⁵ William of Malmesbury, *Gesta Regum Anglorum: the History of the English Kings*, ed. and trans. R.

A. B. Mynors, R. M. Thomson and M. Winterbottom, 2 vols. OMT (Oxford, 1998–9), I, 576–85

(p. 581) and note at II, 291. For further discussion of the Cistercians and the Rule see Janet Burton,

'Past Models and Contemporary Concerns: the Foundation and Growth of the Cistercian Order', in

Revival and Resurgence in Christian History, ed. Kate Cooper and Jeremy Gregory, Studies in Church

History, 44 (Woodbridge, 2008), pp. 27–45.

¹⁶ *The Ecclesiastical History of Orderic Vitalis*, ed. and trans. M. Chibnall, 6 vols. OMT (Oxford, 1969–

80), IV, 312–27.

32.10).¹⁸ In the *Exordium Parvum* the author makes use of the word *heremum*, 'desert', to encapsulate the theme of isolation and marginality. The early Cistercians accordingly transmitted to their successors the idea that they were the inheritors of the desert tradition. In an eloquent passage in his *Vita Prima* of St Bernard, William of St Thierry extolled the site of Clairvaux, the third daughter house of Cîteaux, in a way that linked both the eastern and the Benedictine traditions:

I was amazed to see as it were a new heaven and a new earth, and the well worn path trodden by the monks of old, our fathers in Egypt, bearing the footprints of men of our own time.... There was a sense in which the solitude of that valley, strangled and overshadowed by its thickly wooded hills, in which God's servants lived their hidden lives, stood for the cave in which our father St Benedict was once discovered by shepherds – the sense in which those who were patterning their lives on his could be said to be living in a kind of solitude. They were indeed a crowd of solitaires. Under the rule of love ordered by reason, the valley became a desert for each of the many men who dwelt there.¹⁹

The *exordia*, therefore, portrayed Cîteaux as an institution that followed the Rule strictly, called to mind the tradition of the desert, which was symbolically portrayed by the very site of the house, and embraced that poverty which – characteristic of the emergent monastic movements of the period – at one and the same time evoked the notion of apostolic poverty (making the new monks' the successors of the apostles as well as the early monks) and criticised the great wealth and ostentation of contemporary houses of Black Monks. But was this construction of the monastic life the intention of the founder fathers of the *Novum Monasterium* or a later justification? Just how different was Cîteaux?

The *Exordium Parvum* has a number of heroes, the earliest of which is the founder abbot, Robert of Molesme. The author – no doubt with an eye to the criticism that in abandoning their abbey the monks had breached their vow of stability – makes a point of recording the canonical election and benediction of Robert as abbot of the New Monastery.²⁰ But Robert was ordered to return to Molesme, and the phrasing of the report of the council of Port d'Anselme, which refers to Robert's 'usual

inconspicuity', suggests that his career was unorthodox.²¹ Indeed, putting the foundation of Cîteaux in its broader context makes it clear that it was the last of a number of experiments through which Robert had attempted to devise a combination of the eremitic and the cenobitic traditions.

Robert had entered the monastic life at Montier-la-Celle and risen to hold the office of prior, during which time he had helped to organise a group of hermits in the forest of Colan.²² In 1068 he was elected abbot of Saint-Michel-de-Tonnerre, which he attempted to reform, despite the requests of the hermits of Colan that he become their leader. He was also sought, as prior, by Saint-Avoulen-Provins, but was ordered by Pope Gregory VII to accede to the request of the hermits, and in 1075 he relocated them to Molesme, probably with the intention of transforming the community into a Benedictine abbey. Molesme attracted patronage – an important benefactor being Duke Odo I of Burgundy – and grew wealthy. Robert was fully conversant with other contemporary reform movements. He provided assistance, for example, to Bruno of Cologne in his search for a new form of religious life which was to result in the foundation of La Grande Chartreuse. Increasingly restless at Molesme, Robert attempted to introduce reform there but left once again to live with a group of hermits at Aux. In an action that was to prefigure events of late 1098 the monks petitioned Pope Urban II to order Robert to return to them, which he did, probably in 1094. Robert once more attempted to reform Molesme, this time assisted by the man who in 1094 or 1095 was named claustral prior, Alberic. Robert now embarked on a journey which took him through Flanders, visiting abbeys such as Saint-Vaast-la-Haut and Tournai, which were also undergoing reform. In 1097, just a year before the secession, Molesme's cell of Aulps was raised to the status of abbey, three witnesses of which were the 'three founders of Cîteaux': Robert, Alberic and Stephen. In one sense, therefore, Cîteaux marked not a beginning but an ending: it was to be the last of Robert's many experiments in making monastic foundations.

Robert's career speaks of his commitment to reform of monastic houses, and also his interest in the eremitic tradition in the monastic life. He was a man driven by the same need to question, to challenge and to reassess the meaning of the monastic life as other reformers who flourished in this time of intellectual ferment. However, for all the Cistercians' professed desire – so evident in the *Exordium Cistercii* – to withdraw from

¹⁸ This is part of the 'Song of Moses' in which God is praised as a bulwark and defence of his people. The phrase appears in other Cistercian narratives, such as the *Vita Prima*, where it is applied to Clairvaux (PL, 185, col. 241) and in the early thirteenth-century foundation history of the Yorkshire monastery of Fountains, the *Narratio de Fundatione: Memorialis de Fountains*, I, 2. On Cistercian sites see below, pp. 56–66.

¹⁹ *Vita Prima Sancti Bernardi*, PL, 185, cols 247–8. The translation here is that in *The Cistercian World: Monastic Writings of the Twelfth Century*, ed. P. Matarasso (Harmondsworth, 1993), pp. 30–1.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 242, 425. William of Malmesbury implies that Robert was not unwilling to return to Molesme (*Gesta Regum*, I, 583; see also Orestic Vitalis, *Ecclésiastical History*, IV, 323–4). Robert was not counted as first abbot of Cîteaux until his canonisation in 1220.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 242, 425. William of Malmesbury implies that Robert was not unwilling to return to Molesme (*Gesta Regum*, I, 583; see also Orestic Vitalis, *Ecclésiastical History*, IV, 323–4). Robert was not counted as first abbot of Cîteaux until his canonisation in 1220.

²² This account of Robert's earlier career is drawn from Jean-Baptiste Van Damme, *The Three Founders of Cîteaux*, trans. Nicholas Groves and Christian Carr, Cistercian Studies Series, 176 (Kalamazoo,

the world, the establishment of Cîteaux was rooted in that co-operation between the secular and ecclesiastical authorities that generally marked successful monastic foundations. The *Exordium Parvum* opens with the appearance of the monks before the archbishop of Lyon, a papal legate, and throughout the text the monks are shown to have secured ecclesiastical sanction for their foundation. Now, read one way this could be seen as a later Cistercian attempt to give the whole order canonical authority and legitimacy. Read in another way, however, it indicates that the early Cistercians were fully aware of the implications of what they were doing, and that they were locating their actions firmly within the agenda of the reforming papacy. Pope Urban II (1088–99) – the pope who launched the First Crusade – knew of Robert and his past career, and was supportive of the new foundation. He it was who ordered investigation into the petition of the monks of Molesme for the restoration of Robert, and that Robert should be returned there. However, he also supported the continuation of the community of those ‘who love the desert’.²³ Although a Cluniac before his elevation to the See of St Peter and therefore a member of the congregation that would later become seen as the antithesis – and opponent – of the White Monks, Urban was a reformer and may have seen in the new groups that were springing up a force for good and an agent of change. The early years of Cîteaux coincided with a second wave of the struggles between the Empire and the Papacy, but Pope Paschal II, despite his difficulties, was able to lend his authority to the *Novum Monasterium* by granting the papal privilege.²⁴

The *Exordium Parvum* makes two brief mentions of the lay founders of Cîteaux. In chapter III the author tells of the help given by the duke of Burgundy in raising the first wooden monastery and in supplying the monks with land and animals. In chapter XVII Abbot Stephen Harding forbade ‘the duke of that region or any other lord to hold court in the church at any time, as had formerly been their practice on solemnities’. This last phrase is a telling one, because it suggests that in its early years – to 1109 at the earliest and maybe for some time later – Cîteaux was used to entertaining its lay patrons in traditional Benedictine fashion. Indeed, what the *Exordium Parvum* does not tell us is that the lay founder (in the sense of the provider of the site) was Reynard, viscount de Beaune, and his wife Hodierna. With the assent of their sons and daughter they granted to Abbot Robert and the brothers, who with him are desirous of observing the Rule of St Benedict more strictly and faithfully than they

have hitherto done’ their estate at Cîteaux, together with buildings and all things necessary for the monastery.²⁵ The estate was an allod; that is, it did not carry with it any service or obligations. Reynard also renounced any claim to the chapel on the site, since the monks did not feel it right to accept such a grant from a layman.²⁶ That he and his lord, the duke of Burgundy, were both committed to help the new foundation is shown by Reynard’s further endowment of it, at the request of the duke of Burgundy. The evidence of Reynard’s charter is consistent with that of the *Exordium Parvum* in that it stresses the desire of the monks to live more fully in accordance with the Rule of St Benedict. However, at the same time it suggests that the *Exordium*’s ‘thickness of grove and thornbush ... inhabited only by wild beasts’ was a rhetorical device, intended to suggest a metaphorical desert; the reality of the site of the New Monastery was that it was far from remote but was integrated into the territorial holdings of Burgundy, not many kilometres from the ducal and ecclesiastical centre of Dijon, and settled enough to have a rural population. By 1106 work on the site was advanced enough for the church to be consecrated.²⁷

The New Monastery was born, then, with the full cooperation of the ecclesiastical and temporal authorities, harnessed to the restless spiritual adventures of Robert of Molesme who in 1098 – and in contrast to his earlier endeavours – was able to convince a sizeable portion of his convent to join him in his latest monastic adventure. The foundation of Cîteaux therefore stands in sharp relief to that of the other reformed orders of the period, which grew up around individuals. The departure from Molesme was a true schism; Cîteaux grew out of division and dissent.

Chapter XV of the *Exordium Parvum* is headed ‘The Institutes of the monks of Cîteaux who came from Molesme’, but, as we have seen, both the content and the heading may be later additions inserted around 1147. The monks who left under Robert would have had no such clearly articulated programme as we find in chapter XV; rather, they were motivated by more general concerns linked to monastic practices and ecclesiastical reform. The presence of Robert at the New Monastery was short and his direct input into the development of Cistercian thought after 1098 must have been minimal. His successor, Alberic, had been prior at Molesme, and the *Exordium Parvum* notes his devotion to the Rule of St Benedict,

²³ *Exordium Parvum*, chapter VI, *NLT*, p. 423.

²⁴ *Exordium Parvum*, chapter XIV, *NLT*, pp. 432–4. Chapter X (p. 428) refers to Alberic seeking the privilege ‘before Pope Paschal, imprisoned by the Emperor, had committed his sin’. His ‘sin’ was to complete the coronation of Emperor Henry V after a period of imprisonment. For comment on this

²⁵ Translated in *The New Monastery: Texts and Studies on the Early Cistercians*, ed. E. Rozanne Elder, Cistercian Fathers Series, 60 (Kalamazoo, 1998), pp. 11–12, from *Chartes et documents concernant l’abbaye de Cîteaux 1098–1182*, ed. J. Marilier, Bibliotheca Cisterciensis, 1 (Rome, 1961), no. 23 (pp. 49–51).

²⁶ Aubberger, *L’Unité initiale*, pp. 91–2, discusses the site of the New Monastery, pointing out that as it was an allod it was not difficult to acquire. He takes the reference to the church, or chapel, to be the first church built by the monks and not one in existence at the time of Reynard’s grant.

suggesting that he may have been a formative influence in this part of the Cistercian agenda. It is clear from charter evidence that Alberic was successful in building the material base of the new abbey.²⁸ A glimpse of the evolution of Cistercian thought can be seen in the *Exordium Parvum*'s account of the abbacy of Stephen Harding. Like Robert, Stephen had a background marked by lack of stability. Born in England he entered the monastic life at the Benedictine abbey of Sherborne, only to leave and spend several years wandering: to Scotland, to France and to Rome. It was on his return from Rome that he became a monk of Molesme. Out of pride for 'the worthy man who was the author and agent of that monastic observance', or, as the *Exordium Parvum* describes him, 'a certain brother, Stephen by name, English by birth', William of Malmesbury assigns to Abbot Stephen a leading role in the secession from Molesme and the formation of Cistercian thought. The impression given in the *Exordium Parvum* is one of a decisive leader. Stephen is not only recorded as taking a stand about the presence of lay patrons in the monastery, but he defined that austerity with which the Cistercians were to become associated, and which was noted by William of Malmesbury as early as 1124 as being characteristic of Cîteaux:

It is an index of his self-denial that in those houses you nowhere see, as you do in other monasteries, the glitter of gold or flashing gems or gleaming silver; for as the pagan poet says, 'To what purpose gold in holy places?' The rest of us think our sacred vessels fall far short unless a solid sheet of precious metal is outshone by glorious gems ... But the Cistercians put in second place what other mortals wrongly think most important; their efforts are all spent on the adornment of the character and they prefer pure minds to gold-embroidered vestments, knowing that the best return for a life well spent is the enjoyment of a clear conscience.²⁹

Here then we begin to perceive a sense of 'us and them': by the third decade of the twelfth century, before even a single Cistercian foundation had been made on English soil, the Cistercians were perceived, by an English observer, to be different, to be distinctive and worthy of comment. Given that Stephen presided over the beginnings of the expansion of the congregation and the formation of the earliest constitution, there are good grounds for seeing his abbacy as a seminal point in the beginnings of the creation of a Cistercian identity.

CHAPTER TWO

'In mountain valleys and plains': the Spread of the Cistercian Order

*Here begins the narrative of the beginning of the Cistercian Order, how our fathers left the monastery of Molesme in order to recover the purity of the Order according to the Rule of St Benedict and founded the fertile house of Cîteaux which is the mother of all our houses, since from her, as if from the purest fountain, the rivers of all the churches of our Order flow.*¹

In his opening sentence of the third and most ambitious of the Cistercian *exordia*, the *Exordium Magnum*, Conrad of Eberbach makes two points.² The first is that within the Cistercian tradition the impetus for the secession from Molesme was now firmly seen as the desire to bring monastic life back to the Rule of St Benedict. The second is that Cîteaux itself was the mother house of all Cistercian abbeys – in other words the head of an order. The close and tightly knit relationship among Cistercian houses has always been seen as one of the hallmarks of the Order. So, too, has the rapid spread of the reputation of the White Monks and, as a result of this, the equally rapid foundation of Cistercian houses throughout Europe. The received narrative of modern scholarship on the Middle Ages tells us that the novelty and the attraction of their way of life meant that the monks of the New Monastery were not left alone to enjoy the solitude: between 1113 and 1115 four daughter houses were founded; in 1119 the then abbot, Stephen Harding, drew up the *Carta Caritatis*, the 'constitution' of the Order; and over the next thirty years the Cistercians were so overwhelmed both by recruits seeking the 'high road of supreme progress toward Heaven' and by men and women wanting to found Cistercian houses that the congregation's numbers exploded, and in 1152 a halt had to be called.³ The Order – theoretically but not in practice – had reached its fullest extent. Held together by common usages in all areas of

²⁸ Van Damme, *Three Founders*, pp. 62–4; Marilley, *Chartes et Documents*, nos 22–3, 33–5 (pp. 49–51, 57).

²⁹ *William of Malmesbury: Cistercian Documents*, 1, 20.

¹ *Exordium Magnum*, p. 5 (our translation). The quotation in the title for this chapter is from Orderic Vitalis, *Ecclésiastical History*, IV, 311, where Orderic begins his description of the foundation of Cîteaux and the spread of the Cistercians. Here he comments on their ubiquity.

² Conrad began the *Exordium Magnum* at Clairvaux between 1177 and 1193 and completed it at Eberbach between 1206 and 1221.

³ A phrase used by William of Malmesbury in his essay on the Cistercians. See *Gesta Regum*, I, 577.