

THE ECCLESIASTICAL
HISTORY OF
ORDERIC VITALIS

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EDITED AND TRANSLATED

BY

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folklore. It is also one of the most unforgettable passages in the *Ecclesiastical History*.

6. *The treatise on the new monastic orders*

Orderic lived through the years when the older monasticism came under attack from newer houses, where the Benedictine Rule was interpreted more literally, without regard to historical change or climatic differences. These attacks came both from the 'orders' of Cîteaux, Savigny, and Tiron as they gained strength, and from groups of monks in individual monasteries, like those of Coulombs, who were the subject of a wise and understanding letter from Ivo of Chartres.¹ The great debate on the interpretation of the Rule reached its climax in the third and fourth decades of the twelfth century, with a spate of letters and treatises in addition to those of the two chief protagonists, Peter the Venerable of Cluny and St. Bernard of Clairvaux.² It is unlikely that Orderic ever saw the famous *Letter 28* of Peter the Venerable, which seems to have been a treatise intended for publication rather than a private letter,³ but he certainly heard Peter the Venerable expound his views in the chapter of March, 1132, attended by representatives of all Cluniac houses and houses with Cluniac customs.⁴ This was the chapter where Peter proposed a number of reforms for the whole order, but agreed to mitigate some of the more severe restrictions under pressure from the traditionalists. Orderic, in his comments on this meeting of two hundred priors and seven hundred and twelve monks which he attended in person, shows himself one of the traditionalists. Nevertheless he was an admirer of St. Bernard, and must have received a first-hand account of his character from his abbot, Warin, who had visited him and consulted him on the affairs of Saint-Évroul in 1131.⁵

¹ Migne, *PL* clxii. 198-22 (Ep. 192).

² The chronology of the documents in this controversy has been carefully established by André Wilmar, 'Une riposte de l'ancien monachisme au manifeste de saint Bernard' in *Revue bénédictine*, xlv (1934), 296-344, J. Leclercq, 'Nouvelle réponse de l'ancien monachisme aux critiques des Cisterciens', in *Revue bénédictine*, lxxvii (1957), 77-94, and Giles Constable, *The Letters of Peter the Venerable* (Cambridge, Mass., 1967), ii, Appendix E (pp. 270-4).

³ Printed, G. Constable, *The Letters of Peter the Venerable*, i. 52-101; commentary, ii. 115-20.

⁴ Le Prévost, v. 29-31.

⁵ See above, iii. 338-40.

He knew therefore the best in both the old and the new ideals, and he attempted to express it in his account of Robert of Molesme's efforts to secure a literal observance of the Rule, which led to the founding of Cîteaux.¹ But his exposition shows that he had little direct knowledge of the events of 1098-9. He knew that there was a bull commanding Robert to return to Molesme, and he either knew or guessed that some kind of canonical restriction was put on future movements of monks between Molesme and the new monastery. But comparison of Urban II's real bull, or even the letter of the legate Hugh,² with the pseudo-bull of Urban II invented by Orderic shows that he interpreted the events in terms of 1135 rather than 1099. If the reference to the horrible dangers of schism might have been equally appropriate at either date, the use of the term 'Cistercian', which had not been coined in 1099, was an anachronism. Orderic's narrative cannot be taken as evidence of the obscure and controversial early history of Cîteaux; it is much more likely to reflect the arguments that he had heard in his own cloister and in other monasteries. On the other hand, Tiron and Savigny were nearer to Saint-Évroul, and their history was less clouded by controversy. Orderic's brief accounts of the lives of Bernard of Tiron and Vitalis of Savigny are earlier than the official *Vitae* of these great abbots, and have the value of independent and contemporary testimony.

He made no reference to other treatises and pamphlets, and may not have seen any. The one document he cited explicitly was a satirical poem by Pain Bolotin,³ a canon of Chartres, written only a few years earlier, which attacked the hypocrites to be found among the genuine reformers in the new movement. He himself wrote as a historian, explaining and interpreting the growth of monasticism from its origins in the deserts of Egypt, not as a satirist or pamphleteer. Some historians have charged him, unjustly, with attacking St. Bernard or the Cistercians. In fact his strictures,

¹ For a guide to some of the extensive literature on the subject see David Knowles, 'Cistercians and Cluniacs', in *The Historian and Character* (Cambridge, 1963), pp. 50-75; id., *Great Historical Enterprises* (Edinburgh, 1963), pp. 198-222; J. Winandy, 'Les origines de Cîteaux et les travaux de M. Lefèvre', in *Revue bénédictine*, lxxvii (1957), 49-76; F. Masai, 'Les études cisterciennes de J. A. Lefèvre', in *Scriptorium*, xi (1) (1957), 119-23.

² See below, pp. 322-4; *Analecta Sacri Ordinis Cisterciensis*, vi (1950), 9-10.

³ J. Leclercq, 'Le poème de Payen Bolotin contre les faux ermites', in *Revue bénédictine*, lxxviii (1958), 52-86.

like those of Pain Bolotin, were not directed against any particular individual or order. He gave high praise to the joys of Cistercian life at its best, in abbeys whose very names proclaimed the spiritual delights to be found in them, while criticizing individual pharisees or hypocrites, who brought the whole of monasticism into ill repute by their unholiness. Tares were mixed with the good corn, and this is no worse than he said in his account of life in his own monastery. His treatise is a balanced summing up of the views of a traditional Benedictine historian on the purpose of the institution in which his whole life was spent: it is a defence, and not a polemic.¹

(iv) *Note on the editing*

When Duchesne was preparing his edition the Caen MS. was still in France, and he transcribed and edited it. Le Prévost and Delisle did not have the same advantage. They used the edition of Duchesne and a transcript made by La Porte du Theil, which was in the Bibliothèque Nationale (Collection Moreau, no. 1275). Duchesne either misread words or deliberately provided editorial emendations which changed the sense in a number of places. La Porte du Theil's transcript is sometimes closer to the original than Duchesne's edition, but it contains a number of misreadings. Delisle did not see a facsimile of the MS. until long after the appearance of the edition with which he was concerned.

I have kept my edition as close as possible to the Caen MS. (MS. Vatican Reginensis lat. 703^a), and this involves in places substantial differences from earlier editions. This MS. is a fairly careful copy and was corrected; but the scribe had lapses, and his conventions were slightly different from Orderic's. He was careless in his use of the cedilla, and sometimes inserted abbreviations or suspensions out of place. While on the whole he preserved the periods of Orderic in his punctuation, he sometimes broke up the work into shorter sentences and seems occasionally to have used his medial stops indiscriminately. Where the punctuation corresponds neither to the sense nor to the rhythm I have slightly

¹ J. Lefèvre, 'Le vrai récit primitif des origines de Cîteaux est-il l'*Exordium Parvum*?', in *Le Moyen Âge*, lxi (1955), 329-61, argued that the treatises of Orderic and William of Malmesbury were Benedictine propaganda, which provoked a Cistercian response in the *Exordium Parvum*; but he modified this in *Analecta Bollandiana*, lxxiv (1956), 72-3, where he treated Orderic as accepting the Cistercian position.

emended it. There are some obvious mistakes in words, particularly noticeable where Orderic was quoting from another work, or in the fragments for which an alternative early copy exists, and these have been corrected. I have also made some minor adjustments, for instance by changing final *e* to *æ* where Orderic's own usage was consistently different from that of the scribe. Where substantial emendations have been made the readings of the Caen MS. are given in the textual notes.

note: Orderic's treatise on the new orders may have circulated independently from the ecclesiastical history.

The blessed end of the fathers who depart in Christ brings mourning to their dutiful and loving sons on earth who, although they confidently hope that these men have risen to the heavenly kingdom, nevertheless lament their absence out of affection, dreading the terrible desolation that remains after they are gone. But God in his divine mercy often visits his Church, consoling it with the unseen touch of his kindness lest it should faint by the way, and strengthens it to bear sorrow by sending it brave champions day after day. So he speaks through the prophet, 'Instead of thy fathers shall be thy children.' When the apostles were taken up into Heaven the apostolic doctors came in their place; they became glorious through their words and deeds as they stood within the gates of Jerusalem, and offered God the fruits of their labours which are still acceptable. See, though evil abounds in the world, the devotion of the faithful in cloisters grows more abundant and bears fruit a hundredfold in the Lord's field. Monasteries are founded everywhere in mountain valleys and plains, observing new rites and wearing different habits; the swarm of cowed monks spreads all over the world. They specially favour white in their habit, and thereby seem remarkable and conspicuous to others. Black represents humility in many places in Holy

Scripture; therefore up to now monks in their devotion have chosen to wear that colour. Now however, as if to make a show of righteousness, the men of our time reject black, which the earlier fathers always adopted as a mark of humility both for the cloaks of the clergy and for the cowls of monks, and also by cutting their garments in a novel way seek to differentiate themselves from others. In my opinion voluntary poverty, contempt for the world, and true religion inspire many of them, but many hypocrites and plausible counterfeiters are mixed with them, as tares with wheat. Pain, called Bolotinus, a canon of Chartres, recently wrote a beautiful song in adonic metre, in which he exposed the covert superstitions of their hypocrisy subtly and at length. But I will now attempt to make plain in this present chronicle how and by whose efforts the change from the ancient custom recently began to spread, for I believe this will be welcome to later readers.

In Burgundy is a place called Molesme, of which Reginald, bishop of Langres, says,

Molesme, to those who love the place, is like a baptism.

There in the time of King Philip of France the venerable Abbot Robert founded a monastery, and by the grace of the Holy Spirit gathered followers of true piety and instructed them carefully in the pursuit of virtue in holy poverty, according to the custom of other monasteries. After some years he examined the Rule of St. Benedict very carefully; and after studying the writings of other holy fathers he called the brethren to him and spoke as follows: 'We have made our profession, my dear brethren, according to the rule of our holy father Benedict, but it seems to me that we have not observed it in every point. We have many customs which are not laid down there, and we carelessly overlook a number of its precepts. We do not work with our hands as we read that the holy fathers did. If you do not believe me, my friends, read the acts of St. Anthony, St. Macharius, and St. Pachomius, and in particular of St. Paul, the learned apostle of the Gentiles. We receive abundant food and clothing from the tithes and oblations of churches, and by casuistry or force take for ourselves the things that belong

to the priests. In this way we are gorged with the blood of men and are participants in sin. I propose therefore that we should observe the Rule of St. Benedict in everything, taking care not to turn aside either to the left or to the right. Let us earn our food and clothing by the labour of our hands, and abstain from wearing breeches and shirts and lambskins according to the Rule. Let us surrender tithes and oblations to the clergy who serve parishes, and in this way let us fervently strive to follow after Christ in the footsteps of the fathers.'

The community of monks did not agree to these proposals; indeed they preferred the examples of predecessors whose worthy lives were made glorious by proved miracles, and the well-tried paths long trodden by venerable men, to exaggerated innovations. 'The way of religious life', they said, 'which was once followed in France by the holy fathers whose sanctity was pleasing to God in life and after death, as miracles clearly prove, is the one which up to now we have observed according to their customs and traditions, and we wish to preserve it until we die. As to your rebuke, reverend father, about our departure from the letter of the monastic Rule and our failure to follow the rough path of the fathers of Egypt, who dwelt in the Thebaid and Scete and Nitria among the barbarous peoples of ancient times, reflect with care and precision on the true explanation.'

'No learned doctor attempts by law to compel the faithful to suffer in time of peace all that the holy martyrs had to endure during the persecutions of the pagans, for the martyrs themselves did not voluntarily suffer before the attacks of the impious those hardships that they endured afterwards of necessity in fighting for the Faith. Indeed the Lord openly proclaimed this, when he said to Peter, "When thou wast young, thou girdedst thyself and walkedst whither thou wouldst: but when thou shalt be old, thou shalt stretch forth thy hands and another shall gird thee and carry thee whither thou wouldst not." Meditate in your heart according to the precepts of the divine law how carefully you should direct in the way of God those who, having of their own free will turned from worldly corruption, desire to lead a better life

① The region which was the centre of early
eremitic and monastic life.

under your guidance. By what argument can you maintain that those who voluntarily seek to change their sinful life for a better one should be violently driven to the retreats of Paul or Anthony? They indeed fled from their fathers' homes to avoid death, fearing even their kinsmen. A wise physician treats a sick man with a mild medicine, for fear that if he goads the sick man with the pain of too drastic a remedy he may kill instead of curing him. No wise man imposes an intolerable burden on a weakening for fear that the porter, growing weary or weighed down by the burden, will perish on the journey.'

Abbot Robert replied to the monks who openly protested in this way, 'I remind you of the life of the Egyptian fathers, which can be imitated, as an example of virtue, but without attempting to force any part of it on you, only a desire to persuade you for your good. Instead I invite you to observe the Rule of St. Benedict in every detail, for in truth I see that you have departed in many ways from that Rule to which you professed obedience. Therefore I fear the condemnation of the supreme Judge, and dread that he will censure us for the guilt of this transgression in the Last Judgement.'

To this the monks answered, 'Our blessed father Benedict, as is well known to all of us, sent to Gaul St. Maur, the prior of his monastery, whom he had brought up from boyhood; and sent a book of the Rule, which the man of God had written with his own hand, a pound of bread, and a measure of wine through him to the Franks. St. Maur was welcomed by King Theodebert and remained in Gaul until his death; with the help of Florus, the king's counsellor, he founded a monastery in the place called Glanfeuil, and instructed a hundred and forty monks there in the observance of the Rule. Our prudent father, Maur, did not imitate the customs of the Egyptians, which are appropriate to the great heat of the sun there; he had more respect for the customs of the Gauls, who often shiver in the wintry frosts of the west. This accords with what our spiritual master himself taught for our good. St. Benedict says, "Let clothing be given to the brethren according to the nature of the place where they live and the climate; for more is necessary in cold, and less in warm, regions. It is the

① Traditionally the pupil of St Benedict who
brought monasticism to Gaul.

abbot's business to take thought for this matter."¹ In a similar way he makes due adjustment for food and drink and all the human needs of monastic life, so that everything may be done in moderation on account of the faint-hearted² and they may abstain from murmuring.³ He particularly enjoins the abbot to bear in mind the weakness of all,⁴ commanding him to assign such work or craft for sick or delicate brothers that they shall neither be idle nor exhausted by heavy work and driven away from the monastery.⁵ Paul and Anthony and many others, who were the first to fly to the desert and build monasteries for themselves in the remote parts of the desert, were driven there, as we have said, by fear of the pagans; they adopted a rigorous way of life and, by God's grace, turned necessity into choice. Afterwards because of their laudable example the number of those who renounced the world greatly increased; this gave rise to different foundations according to the differences in regions and human customs. But, as Pope Gregory says, the varying custom of Holy Church does not impede the unity of the Faith. Most men in warm climates dispense with breeches and like women, prefer loose, ankle-length tunics: the groups of monks that spread thence and are established there do not regard such dress as unseemly, but adopt it themselves. But all peoples in the western region wear breeches, and could not do without them both for warmth and for decency's sake. Therefore the same custom exists in our order, and we are unwilling to give it up, for it is both useful and modest. Similarly the learned doctors who have lived before us according to the holy Rule teach us sound reasons for all other divergences. In Italy and Palestine and other regions where olive trees grow freely those who use their fruit to cook various dishes do not need lard, which has been reasonably permitted for those who have no olive oil. It is true that we are severely criticized by many because we do not engage in daily manual labour; but we openly offer in its place our earnest toil in the worship of God, as we have been taught to do by true masters of former ages, who have proved their worth by their long-continued observance of the divine law. King Dagobert and Theodoric and the Emperor Charlemagne and other kings and emperors piously founded monasteries and made ample provision for the food and clothing of the servants of God. They introduced numerous dependants to carry out all the external duties and established monks to devote their time to sacred reading, devout

1. RSB. ch. 55.

4. RSB. ch. 37.

2. RSB. ch. 48

5. RSB. ch. 48

3. RSB. ch. 40.

prayers for all their benefactors, and the divine office. So, through the foundations of princes and long-established custom, it is the practice in France for peasants to perform work in the fields, as is seemly, and servants to perform the duties suitable for servants. Monks, however, who have voluntarily renounced the vanities of this world for the service of the King of kings, live peacefully in their enclosed cloisters like the daughters of kings, seek out by study the hidden meanings of Scripture, and, as they meditate continually on them, gladly preserve silence, keep their lips from foolish and idle words, sing the psalms of David and other mystical chants night and day to their Creator, and devote themselves each day to other pure and suitable activities, as is fitting according to the precepts of the fathers. These are the works which monks in the west have performed up to now, and everyone knows and testifies without a shadow of doubt that such should be their activities. God forbid that peasants, whose true lot is continual toil, should grow useless through idleness and should lounge lasciviously, wasting their time in coarse laughter and idle sport; or that noble knights and gifted philosophers and learned scholars who have renounced the world should be compelled to spend their time in servile and unbecoming labours and occupations like low-born servants in order to earn their bread. The tithes and oblations of the faithful are by general approval granted to the clergy and ministers of God; as Paul the apostle says to the Corinthians, "They which minister about holy things live of the things of the temple. They which wait at the altar are partakers with the altar." So, as the Lord ordained, they that preach the Gospel live by the Gospel. We indeed are clergy both by order and by office and offer a priestly service to the high priest who has gone into the Heavens, so that by his aid we may obtain a share of the heavenly kingdom. So we hold ecclesiastical benefices by right and believe that we should hold them always by common approval. This, reverend father, is certainly well known to you. The things that we have learnt to value from earlier monks who lived by the Rule, the things that we hold as heirs of the order and its possessions, we will not renounce as long as the Cluniacs and the monks of Tours and other monks preserve them; and we do not choose to be condemned far and wide by our brethren as rash innovators.

As the monks resolutely argued along these lines the abbot, who held firmly to his opinion, retired with twelve men of like mind and for a long time looked for a place suitable for himself and his companions, who were resolved to observe the Rule of St. Benedict according to the letter as the Jews observed the law of Moses. At length Odo, the son of Henry duke of Burgundy, took pity on them and gave them an estate in the place called Cîteaux in the diocese of Châlons. Abbot Robert and his chosen brethren lived there for some time in the wilderness and began to found a monastery of great austerity and piety; in a short time God sent many others to imitate their holiness. When the monks of Molesme had been for some time without an abbot, since the departure of the man of God, renowned for his virtues, made them seem contemptible to men everywhere, they went as petitioners to Pope Urban and, after describing the course of events which I have related, asked for his advice and help. Out of paternal affection he gave consideration to both sides. By his apostolic authority he commanded the abbot to return to his former monastery and govern it as the Rule requires to save it from decline, and to appoint as abbot in the new house he was founding a suitable man from among the monks there. Then he firmly decreed that every man should make an initial choice of the way of life he desired and should be indissolubly bound to abide by it all his life.

So this most judicious pope promulgated a wise decretal to this end, declaring, 'We must at all costs avoid allowing a shocking schism to appear in God's house and to spread and increase, bringing ruin to many; but equally we must avoid wrongly smothering something good, which has been inspired by God to save souls. So, in fatherly fashion, we make sound provision and, by apostolic authority, we command that the monks of Molesme who choose the established customs of monks shall observe them and shall not hereafter venture to leave their house and follow other customs. The Cistercians on the other hand, who publicly profess to follow the Rule of St. Benedict in all things, shall never

of Exordium parvum.

from this time return to the custom which they now abandon of their own free will. For stability in a community and perseverance in whatever is good should be extolled and resolutely maintained because it is acceptable to the Creator, who requires even the fat-tail of the offering in the sacrifice; also it is useful and salutary to men, who may be inspired to greater virtue by seeing an example of sanctity.'

So under compulsion Abbot Robert returned to Molesme and there worthily served God until the end of his life. He chose Alberic, a man of great piety, to take his place in the Cistercian enterprise, and made him abbot of Cîteaux over John and Hildebod of Arras and twenty-two other brothers. He remained there for ten years in great poverty, and with his companions faithfully served God, in the assurance of receiving a priceless reward from him. After his death Stephen, an Englishman remarkable for his piety and wisdom, succeeded him and held office for more than twenty-four years, giving a shining example by his holy works and teaching. In his time the monastery in the wilderness grew in every way greater. At Stephen's command, while he was still living, Guy, abbot of Trois-Fontaines was elected; shortly afterwards the venerable Stephen died. After Guy took up the office of abbot he held it in a disgraceful way for some time, and after two years relinquished it through his folly. Then Reginald, the young son of Milo count of Bar-sur-Seine, was elected. He was blessed as abbot by Walter bishop of Châlons.

It is now about thirty-seven years since Abbot Robert founded Cîteaux in the way I have described, and in that time such a great multitude of men has flocked there that sixty-five abbeys have been founded from it. All of which with their abbots are subject to the chief abbot of Cîteaux. All dispense with breeches and lambskins, abstain from eating fat and flesh-meat, and by the great good they do shine out in the world like lanterns burning in a dark place. They maintain silence at all times and wear no dyed garments. They toil with their own hands and produce their own food and clothing. From 13 September until Easter they fast every

① 1099.

② 1109.

③ 1133.

④ 1133/4 - 1150.

⑤ implies Orderic writing c. 1135.

⑥ By 1134/5.

day except Sunday. They bar their gates and keep their private quarters completely enclosed. They will not admit a monk from another religious house to their cells, nor allow one to come with them into the church for Mass or any other offices. Many noble warriors and profound philosophers have flocked to them on account of the novelty of their practices, and have willingly embraced the unaccustomed rigour of their life, gladly singing hymns of joy to Christ as they journey along the right road. They have built monasteries with their own hands in lonely, wooded places and have thoughtfully provided them with holy names, such as Maison-Dieu, Clairvaux, Bonmont, and L'Aumône and others of like kind, so that the sweet sound of the name alone invites all who hear to hasten and discover for themselves how great the blessedness must be which is described by so rare a name.

Many who were parched with thirst have drunk from their spring; many streams have flowed out of it through all parts of France. Imitators of the new foundations have spread through Aquitaine, Brittany, Gascony, and Spain. Among the good men are some hypocrites who, clothed in white or other distinctive habits, have deceived men and made a great show to the masses. Many seek to be numbered with the true servants of God by their outward observance, not their virtue; their numbers disgust those who see them and make true monks seem less worthy in the faulty judgement of men.