

Assignment - Commentary One – From Desert Myths to Sheep Tales: The Cistercians in the Middle Ages (HPHI5911)

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A commentary of 1250 words on the following extract:

The man of God, Alberic, however, after he had practised fruitfully regular discipline in the school of Christ for nine and a half years, went home to the Lord, full of glory in his faith and virtues, and therefore deserved to be rewarded by God with eternal life. His successor was a certain brother by the name of Stephen, an English man by nationality, who had also come to that place from Molesme, a lover of the Rule and of the place. During his time, the brethren and this abbot prohibited the duke of that land or any other lord from keeping his court at any time in that monastery, as they used in times past to do on the occasion of great feasts. Furthermore, lest anything remain in the house of God – where it was their wish to serve God devoutly day and night – that savoured of pride and superfluity or that would ever corrupt poverty, the safeguard of poverty, that they had chosen of their own free will, they resolved to keep no crosses of gold or silver ...

(Exordium Parvum)

This extract is taken from chapter seventeen of a twelfth century document, the Exordium Parvum, which means 'The Little Beginning'.¹ ² The body entire appears as a legal document, assembled to provide the narrative and institute sections in a required three-part collection, the other being the constitution, by which a religious order could make a case for 'papal approbation and confirmation'.³ This document formed the Cistercians' 'basis for juridical identity'.⁴ Given its purpose, to highlight the order's unique and devout way of life, one worthy of a grant from Rome to exercise their ministry, against a backdrop of many other houses and monasteries, it has not been formulated without agenda.⁵ Therefore, it should not be viewed as completely unbiased in its portrayal of the secession and subsequent transformation of a cohort of Benedictine monks from Molesme into the White Monks of a 'New Monastery' and warrants careful consideration due to potential omission or magnification.⁶

For many years the Exordium Parvum was taken at face value as an accurate reporting of the humble beginnings of what became a highly successful order. There has been more recent

¹ *Exordium Parvum*, chapter XVII.

² Janet Burton and Julie Kerr, *The Cistercians In The Middle Ages*, (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2011), p. 205.

³ Michael Casey, 'Unit Three: Primitive Cistercian Documents', *Exordium: A Program Of Reflection And Study On The Values Of The Cistercian Reform*, (1998), pp. 1-3 <<https://conversi.org/michael-caseys-exordium/>> [accessed 7th November 2022].

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

⁵ Burton and Kerr, *The Cistercians*, p. 5.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

scholarly debate about the veracity of the contents and the possibility of it being a hybrid, alongside continued discussion about its date and authorship.⁷ The earliest proposed date for part of the *Exordium Parvum* is AD 1113, but the mention of ‘twelve new foundations’ puts chapter eighteen nearly a decade later, and granddaughter houses later still.^{8 9} Other hypotheses put the *Exordium Parvum* as late as AD 1151 and AD 1170.¹⁰ Additionally, its relationship to a similar, shorter document, the *Exordium Cistercii*, which is less damning of Molesme, and to the constitution document, the *Carta Caritatis*, has not been agreeably established.¹¹

The role of the narrative, contained in seven chapters along with several corroborating letters, was to lay out the founding of the order in a chronological way, naming the key persons involved and their part in the instigation and maintenance of the monastic way of life specific to the Cistercian Order. Two of those people are named in this extract: Alberic and Stephen. The chapter, opened by this extract, is titled ‘About the Death of the First Abbot and the Election of the Second and Their Institutes and Their Happiness’.¹² This change in abbacy occurred in AD 1109.¹³

Alberic had been the prior at Molesme Abbey before moving, along with his abbot and nineteen others, to the ‘dense woods and the thorny thickets’ of Cîteaux, their desired desert of spiritual forebearers.¹⁴ Before he is even named in this chapter, he is declared a ‘man of God’, setting the tone for the passage firmly in the realm of the righteous, and then his devotional qualities expounded repeatedly. He is the ‘first abbot’ of the chapter title and is clearly written as an inspiring example deserved of ‘eternal life’.¹⁵ In truth, Robert of Molesme, was the first abbot of Cîteaux. As abbot at Molesme, he had been granted leave of that place, along with his long suffering prior, Alberic, and others, and blessed as abbot of the new foundation by ‘Hugh, Archbishop of Lyon and legate of the Apostolic See’.¹⁶ It was only when Robert was recalled, amid the scandal arising from the abandonment of Molesme, that Alberic was made abbot, accepting the post after ‘much resistance’.¹⁷ Robert’s abbacy at Cîteaux is omitted in this part of the *Exordium Parvum*.

Alberic is presented as fruitful and disciplined. The subtle allusion to physical harvest is suggestive of Alberic’s manual labour alongside his spiritual diligence, highlighting the Cistercians’ endeavour to maintain one of the original tenets of monastic life which had gone

⁷ Ibid., pp. 10-13.

⁸ Ibid., p. 13.

⁹ *Exordium Parvum*, chapter XVIII.

¹⁰ Martha G. Newman, ‘Reformed Monasticism And The Narrative Of The Cistercian Beginnings’, *Church History*, 90 (2021), 537–556 (p. 543) <doi:10.1017/S0009640721002171>.

¹¹ Burton and Kerr, *The Cistercians*, pp. 10-13.

¹² *Exordium Parvum*, chapter XVII.

¹³ Glyn Coppack, *The White Monks: The Cistercians In Britain 1128-1540*, (Stroud, UK: Tempus Publishing Ltd, 1998), p. 17.

¹⁴ *Exordium Parvum*, chapter II.

¹⁵ Ibid., chapter XVII.

¹⁶ Ibid., chapter II.

¹⁷ Ibid., chapter X.

by the wayside during the Cluniac Reform.¹⁸ Alberic serves faithfully for the remainder of his life. He appears above reproach, whiter than white, not unlike the eremitic-style robes he had the order adopt.¹⁹

The extract then names Stephen as the 'second' abbot, successor to Alberic. His nationality is stated, possibly in order to prompt Rome's memory of the devout English monk who had made a pilgrimage to their Catholic heartland prior to his arrival at Molesme or because William of Malmesbury had enhanced Stephen's reputation by the time of writing, making him an advantageous and recognisable figure.²⁰ The introduction of Stephen is carefully worded to link those who left Molesme with being lovers of the all-important Rule of St Benedict. This emphasises one of the distinguishing markers of the Cistercian narrative, that of their stricter adherence to the Benedictine precepts, and deliberately detracts from any dubious contravention of the very same rulebook incurred by their secession.

The second half of the extract expands on two features of Stephen's influential time as abbot, which lasted until AD 1134.²¹ Whilst drawing attention to the admirable cessation of 'entertaining its lay patrons' under Stephen's leadership, there is a convenient lack of clarification about whether the hosting of local nobility had taken place up until that point, leaving a question mark over the supposed strict rule keeping regarding feasting at Cîteaux from the outset.²² Next, the order's intention is repeated, that of desiring to serve God at all hours, as per the Rule, before stating another of their preferable qualities in comparison to those apparently so taken up with the riches afforded by the Beauty of Holiness.²³ ²⁴ The willingness of all Cistercians to go above and beyond what has become the norm in other abbeys and houses, is laid out in no uncertain terms. They, unlike others, abide with humility and in poverty, rejecting greed and excess. The message is that their purity will bring glory to God, and to a papacy undergoing reform.

The Exordium Parvum attempts to draw a line under the foundation of the Cistercian Order by presenting a chronology that is desirable to both Rome and the monks going forward. This extract primarily establishes who the first two abbots were, and that they were both god-fearing adherents to the Rule, without a blemish to their name, and as such welcome additions to Catholic history. The sentences are well constructed, appearing to supply factual information in a straightforward timeline.

Secondly, it is persuasive, with shrewd use of adjectives amplifying key points, aiming to convince the reader that the founding of Cîteaux was a step in a godlier direction. The Cistercians are depicted not just as good but better than their contemporaries and some of

¹⁸ Burton and Kerr, *The Cistercians*, p. 3.

¹⁹ New Advent LLC, 'Catholic Encyclopedia: Cistercians', *New Advent* (2021) <<https://www.newadvent.org/cathen/03780c.htm>> [accessed 4th November 2022].

²⁰ Burton and Kerr, *The Cistercians*, p. 35.

²¹ The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 'St. Stephen Harding', *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (2022) <<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Saint-Stephen-Harding>> [accessed 7th November 2022].

²² Burton and Kerr, *The Cistercians*, p. 18.

²³ *Rule of St. Benedict*, Chapter 16.

²⁴ Burton and Kerr, *The Cistercians*, p. 3.

their predecessors.²⁵ The extract itself is told as an ascension of improvements, repeatedly focussing on the differences between their dutiful observance of the Rule of St Benedict and the less strict measures of others. This short passage conveys a legal tone in which statements are qualified, extended or enhanced calculatedly, as if to make sure any room for doubt has been covered. This aspect of the extract is in keeping with a request meriting a papal bull. Without being accurately dated, the precise motivation behind this extract or the wider Exordium Parvum is unknown, but they contribute effectively to the Cistercian effort to control or revise their own historical narrative and public perception.²⁶

²⁵ Casey, *Unit Three: Primitive Cistercian Documents*, p. 4.

²⁶ Burton and Kerr, *The Cistercians*, p. 13.

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