

The foundation of Fountains Abbey from the 13th-century history, the *Narratio de Fundatione*. The preface of the *Narratio* shows it to have been written by a monk of Kirkstall (a daughter house of Fountains) named Hugh, at the request of Abbot John of York, abbot of Fountains from 1203-1211 in order to preserve for future generations of monks the origins of the abbey. Hugh purports to rely on the reminiscences of an aged monk named Serlo, who had been brought up at St Mary's Abbey in York and therefore witnessed the dramatic events of October 1132, who had entered the religious life at Fountains in 1136 or 1137, and been one of the group who founded Kirkstall in 1147. By the time the *Narratio* was begun, therefore, Serlo would have been going on 100 years old. Hugh received the monastic habit around the year 1183 from Ralph Haget, abbot of Kirkstall, who then went on to be abbot of Fountains. He knew Ralph well, and after 1190 Hugh himself became the eye-witness to what he describes. But the *Narratio* was more than just a reminiscence, and Hugh relied on a number of literary models. Look at the *Exordium Parvum* and *Exordium Cistercii* and see if you can detect any similarities. Does this undermine the credibility of the *Narratio*, that is, is it just a literary account, or does it have historical value?

[translation of selected passages attached]

The Narratio de Fundatione of Fountains Abbey

1. Preface

To the reverend father and lord John, abbot of Fountains, brother Hugh, monk of Kirkstall, greetings now and for ever. It has pleased your excellency, venerable father, that I should tell in a brief account by whose authority and in what way our mother house, that is the holy church of Fountains (over which you now, by God's will, preside) was founded, how that blessed vine of the Lord grew in a place of horror and solitary waste, and thus enlarged, extended its branches to the sea and its seeds to the furthest nations. You have advised me that for greater information I should search the memory of our aged brother Serlo for his recollections, in order that he might make certain what is in doubt, both those events at which he was present and what he heard from others of our order. I have asked the old man about those things which were in doubt. He told me, 'it is 69 years since my conversion, and I was then, as I recall about 30 years old when I entered Fountains to become a member of the convent. I could not be ignorant of what had happened. I myself was present at the egression of the monks from the monastery at York; I knew those who left by face and name from my childhood; I was born in that region; I was brought up among them, and I was related in the flesh to not a few of them. And although I am (as it seems to me) advanced in years, nevertheless I give thanks for my old age because my memory is still with me. Therefore I will tell of the origin of the monastery of Fountains as you order, which I saw with my own eyes or was told of by my elders with undoubted faith.' Therefore I have written down in order what I have heard from the mouth of the old man, taking care to preserve the sequence of events.

2. The foundation of Rievaulx

This chapter is translated separately.

3. Concerning the monastery of York and our first fathers

There were at that time in the monastery of York which is called St Mary's religious men walking in the ways of the fathers, following without quarrel the institutes which were accepted by the majority. They lived in the ways and customs of the fathers, honestly, under a rule and an abbot, but far from the precepts of the Rule, far from the vow of their profession, from the perfection of the discipline of the Cistercians. Several of them, hearing of the

purity of our order were led by a pious instinct to emulate it (their consciences accused them greatly, saying that they were fulfilling their professions less than they should; they saw their own imperfections from the perfection of others). They began to be ashamed of their torpor, to blush and to damn their imperfection and to scorn their free and easy ways.

It embarrassed them that they lived this side of perfection, to have dwelt so long in the land of Moab and to have accepted a heritage beyond the river Jordan. The tumult of the world and the clamour of the city shamed them. They longed with great longing for the desert, for the labour of their own hands, for the ways of the prophets. The first and chief of these were Richard the sacrist, Ranulf, Gamel, Gregory, Hamo, Thomas and Walter. These were the men whom God had chosen as the seed, by whose works and exhortation the remainder were turned to the same course and drawn to agreement. As yet word of this was hidden from the prior, for they feared that this man might be against them, might frustrate the work which they had just begun. But they need not have feared, for this man himself, touched by a similar grace had been transformed in the same way as they had, and shared the same aspirations. For he was ashamed to be using the title of monk in vain, and to have have been less than zealous in the pursuit of his profession. What more do I have to say? He heard the vows which the brothers were making, and giving thanks to God joyfully joined them as a comrade. He was a religious man who feared God, prudent in external matters, a friend of powerful men, for he was known to all on account of the reverence of his religion and especially well-known to the pontiff who then ruled the metropolitan church of York. His name was Richard. Now being their associate he called together and gathered to him those who were of like mind. They were thirteen in number, of one heart and one mind. The simplicity of the Cistercian order attracted them all, to experience poverty and want, and to associate themselves to the holy flocks. They talked together of leaving, of the means of their going, not fearing poverty or the harshness of the winter, thinking only of how this thing could be done without disturbing the peace of the brethren and without scandal. But this was difficult to achieve, for already the word became the deed, already there was talk among the brethren, that the prior [Richard] and his accomplices were in the spirit of levity urging departure from the people, even talking of novelties which were not allowed, both to the contempt of the order, the shame of the house, the confusion of the whole congregation. It seemed that they in their error wished to leave what was secure for what was insecure, wealth for poverty, and

that they did not care at all about the peace of the community, the scandal among the weaker brethren, and the profession which they had long ago made. This dangerous movement threatened to undermine the statutes of the fathers, and the sweetness of their unity.

The matter was brought before the abbot who was then in charge of the house, a man of great age - indeed an old man - called Geoffrey. This man was horrified at the novelty of the matter, calling it a disaster that such inconvenient things should happen to him in his old age - scandal in the house, the order [i.e., the monastic order] destitute, and subversion among the brethren. He warned them to stop what they had begun, that it was presumptuous to try to change for the better what should not be changed, to call to mind the profession which they had made long ago.

4. Concerning Archbishop Thurstan of York

At that time the church of York was ruled over by archbishop Thurstan of blessed memory, a man of great affairs and a lover of religion. Seizing an opportunity Prior Richard went to him and revealed to him their holy plan, asked his advice, and reverently implored his help. He showed him the confusion which existed among the brethren, the prohibition which the abbot had placed upon them, the discipline of the order. He demonstrated to him the importance of their profession, how their way of life had diminished in intensity, the stimulus of their consciences, their desire to achieve something, and how nothing could be done without him using his episcopal authority. The holy bishop recognized this to be the work of God, not of man, and commending his spiritual desire, he offered his advice and promised his help. Together they decided on a day on which the holy bishop should go to the monastery to visit the brothers. When the abbot of the monastery received this order he was afraid that the archbishop would favour the party he was opposed to, and would presume to do something unheard of, to the injury of his house. And so he sent messengers throughout England to monasteries, assembling learned men together, and no small multitude of monks came to meet the archbishop of York. This was all done so that they should resist the rebels and the archbishop and curb the insolence of the brethren. The day came, and the holy bishop appeared in a spirit of gentleness and peace, having with him, as was fitting, serious men, wise clerks, canons, and very many other members of the religious orders. The abbot came to meet him at the exit to the chapter house, and a crowd of

monks with him, denying him entry and saying that he was not allowed to enter with such a crowd, nor should any secular person to be admitted to the secrets of the chapter. He should send away his companions; he alone should enter the chapter if he wished to do so, so that the insolence of his clerks should not disturb the peace of the monastic order. The bishop was not willing to send them away, saying that it was not fitting for him to enter into debate alone; without his advisers there, especially as some of them had come from a long way away. There was a tumult among both clergy and the monks; dissent tore through the cloister, some pushed them away, others tried to enter. Then the archbishop called for silence. He said "You today have withdrawn the obedience which you owe us. We, by the authority of God, withdraw what you have from us, and lay your church under interdict, and suspend the monks dwelling there from celebrating the office."

5. Of the egression of the monks

Thirteen monks left the monastery of York with Archbishop Thurstan, taking with them none of the goods of the monastery, only the habits in which they were dressed. These were their names: Richard the sacrist, Ranulf, Thomas, Gamel, Hamo, Robert de Suella, Geoffrey, Walter, Gregory, Gervase, Ralph, and Alexander. And there joined them a monk of Whitby named Robert, a holy man who feared God, afterwards abbot and founder of the monastery of Newminster, of whom more will be said later. These were the holy men whom God had chosen as the seed, the root of our generation, the plantation to the glory of the Lord. Having left the wealth of their abbey, the affluence of their temporal goods, now it seemed to them for the first time that they had truly renounced the world, because they had with them no goods of the world. But God provided for them. The venerable archbishop, acting as their pastor, received them into his house, providing all things that pertained to their bodily needs.

6 Concerning their persecution by the abbot

[This chapter tells how Abbot Geoffrey of St Mary's wrote to the king, and to various bishops and senior churchmen to tell them what had happened. Thurstan retaliated by writing to William of Corbeil, archbishop of Canterbury and papal legate in England.]

7. The letter of Archbishop Thurstan

[This has been the subject of debate. It exists in two versions, the long and the short, and appears in some manuscripts independently from the *Narratio*. Was it part of the original composition? It is a polemic, designed to justify the actions of those who left St Mary's. It contains an attack on Benedictine monasticism, especially Cluniac monasticism. As commentators have pointed out; this in itself is suspicious, as it was to a Cluniac house, Pontefract, that Thurstan retired and took the habit in 1140. So the status of the letter is difficult to determine: for arguments see the articles by Derek Baker on the booklist. I have not included a translation of the letter, and we pick up the text at chapter 8:]

8. Of two monks who looked backwards

The temptor [i.e., the devil] hated their endeavours and attempted to assail two of the brethren, Gervase and Ralph, with doubts. He instilled into their minds poisonous counsel, disloyal thoughts, fear of solitude, the austerity of the order, the familiarity of their former life. He laid before them the steep ascent, the fear of falling, the pressing danger they were in, the new trials which would always be ahead. He persuaded them to return to their past, to be reconciled to their brethren, to put up with their former mediocrity, to be safe in the middle ground. He said to them, 'Are you better than you fathers were, that you think you can live in the desert, push the man beyond the limits of human endurance, and not be moved by the agonies of the flesh?' What more do I have to say? They succumbed to temptation. They returned to their former ways, and returning once more they were a source of scandal to their friends, a cause of derision to their enemies. But Gervase, gaining his former strength came back to the camp, joined his brethren once more, and washed away the stain on his conversion.

9. Of the grant of a monastery and the election of an abbot

Meanwhile Christmas Day came, and the venerable archbishop went with his household to celebrate the holy feast at Ripon. While he was there, during the feast, he assigned, from the patrimony of St Peter, a place for the site of a monastery. It was uninhabited, covered with thorns, lying between the mountains and the rocks, more suitable to be the lair of wild beasts than the habitation of men. Its name was Skeldale, that is, the valley of the river [Skell] which flowed through it. The holy archbishop

added a village with the fields lying next to it, called Sutton. And this was the origin of the mother house which is now called Fountains. And when this place had solemnly been confirmed to them they discussed, as was right and proper, the election of an abbot who could, as father and pastor of their souls, lead them to God. The holy archbishop was present, and presided over the election to ensure that it was carried out according to the Rule, and with common consent they elected as abbot Richard the prior. The archbishop consented to the election, confirmed and blessed the elect, and he became first abbot of Fountains. But what was this man of God to do? He had monks, but he had no monastery. There was nowhere he could receive them, nowhere for them to lay their heads, nowhere for them to shelter from the harshness of the climate, the pouring rain - and it was winter. However, he fulfilled the office which had been laid upon him as best he could, arming himself with his faith against the harshness of poverty. He relied on the help of God and, having accepted the archbishop's blessing, he and his holy community took themselves off to the secret solitude. It was a real wonder to see men of such faith and fervour that neither the harshness of the winter, nor the horror of their solitude, nor the lack of goods, deflected them from their purpose or delayed them from what they intended to do. There was no money in their bags, no wheat in barns, nothing for their daily food, unless they were able to obtain anything from the generosity of the archbishop. There was no house for them to live in, no shelter for them to hide under, no comfort against the harshness of the winter, unless any were afforded by the high rocks.

10. How they slept and ate under the elm tree

[This describes how elm tree afforded shelter, and how the monks maintained the monastic horarium, despite their circumstances.]

11. How they subjected themselves to the Cistercian Order and the house of Clairvaux

Now the Winter was passing they discussed their predicament, their way of life, the observance of the Rule and the form of discipline, for they did not wish to be led into error. The holy simplicity and the perfection of the life of salvation of the Cistercian Order was pleasing to all of them. Therefore with common consent they sent messengers to Abbot Bernard, indicating that they had chosen Clairvaux as their mother house and he himself as their father abbot, and that they were ready to follow his advice and heed his orders. However, in order that

they might receive from him a way of life and the discipline of holy religion, they wrote to him telling him of the reason why - and how - they had left the monastery of York, the stimulus to their consciences, their proposals for reform, the way the abbot had persecuted them, and the archbishop's generosity. The holy archbishop wrote for them, upholding and commending their cause. The blessed man [Bernard] received their messengers and when he heard what they had to say he rejoiced, and gave thanks to God. For he knew in his spirit that this was the work of God and not of man and that he could not ignore it.

12-14 Three letters of St Bernard

[These were addressed to (i) Abbot Richard, written in either 1133 or early 1134, commending his actions. At the end of it Bernard mentions a brother Geoffrey. This is Geoffrey d'Ainai, whom Bernard sent to Fountains to instruct the monks in the observances of the Cistercian Order. (ii) to Archbishop Thurstan, praising his good works, and (iii) to Abbot Geoffrey of St Marys, York, who had evidently written to Bernard to ask what to do with the two monks who had returned to the monastery].

15 Concerning the monk Geoffrey whom St Bernard sent to Abbot Richard and the convent so that he might teach them the ways of the order

When these things were done the messengers who had been sent to Clairvaux came home, having in their company a certain monk of Clairvaux named Geoffrey, a holy and religious man. We need not doubt the sanctity of this man, who was held in such regard by Bernard that he sent him from his side to teach our first fathers how to live according to the ways of the Cistercians. I saw him as a man of great age, of modesty, a man industrious in both spiritual and human affairs; he had begun and instituted monastic life in many places This Geoffrey, as I say, came to Fountains and was honorably received by his fellow monks and they were reassured, and at the command of the abbot they submitted themselves to the discipline of the Cistercian Order. They listened to the words of the old man and took them to heart. On his advice they built the offices [monastic buildings], and learnt to sing the chant and say their psalms as the old man taught them. They embraced his orders with reverence, and like wax accepts the impress of the seal, so they received the form of the Cistercian way of life. The man from Burgundy marvelled at the great need which he found among the Englishmen, their swiftness to obey him, their frugality in eating, the seriousness of their ways. He

found them strong in their faith, bottomless in their charity, patient in their poverty. Their number grew, and there were added to them 10 clergy and lay men who were received as novices according to the teaching of the Order. However, as yet they had received no further possessions, no fields to cultivate, no means of sustenance except for what they had obtained from the archbishop.

16 [This chapter tells of the growing need for food, which was so great that the monks were forced to eat the leaves of the trees.]

17 [A poor man is given bread, despite the poverty of the house, and - a sign of heavenly blessing - at that precise moment two men, sent by Eustace Fitz John, lord of Knaresborough, arrived with food from their master who had heard of the monks' need.]

18. Of the consolation that was brought to them by Hugh, dean of York

The brothers laboured for two years in great poverty and had no hope of alleviation other than that God should see that they put their trust in him. The abbot, almost in despair, went to his lord at Clairvaux and, explaining to him his distress and the inconvenience of their location asked if he and his comrades could be received in those parts [Burgundy] as they had no hope of maintaining themselves in their own place. St Bernard was moved to compassion and placed at their disposal a grange of his house, with the adjacent fields, where they might live until something better was provided for them. But the Lord provided better When the abbot [Richard] returned back again from overseas he happened to meet a noble man named Hugh, who was dean of York, a man of great importance and considerable wealth. And the Lord had planted a sound idea in his heart, that he should confer himself, and his goods, on the abbey of Fountains. And so it was done. He was a rich man, not only in money and goods but also in books of sacred writings, and by bringing these with him he was the first to breathe life into the library at Fountains. The brethren were comforted by the things which had happened, and recognizing them to be the work of God they spent the money which he had brought with him wisely.

[the *Narratio* continues to tell the history of the house into the thirteenth century. We leave it here, with the future of Fountains secured by the entry gifts of Dean Hugh and the growing attention which the abbey attracted as a result.]

