

Commentary 1 – HPHI 6911 – From desert myths to sheep tales. The Cistercians in the Middle Ages.

Zen Redgrave - 1903175

Commentary on an extract from the *Exordium Parvum*

Supplied text

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 to 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, the safeguard of poverty, that they had chosen of their own free will, they resolved to keep no crosses of gold or silver....

This particular extract is from chapter XVII of the *Exordium Parvum* (EP) and concerns the appointment of Alberic as Abbot of the abbey at Cîteaux. Although there have been questions raised about the authenticity and dating of some of the sections of the EP, notably by Berman in her book *The Cistercian Evolution: The invention of a Religious Order in Twelfth Century Europe*¹, for the purposes of this commentary, it shall be assumed that the texts are genuine.

The opening statement of the extract shows that this particular narrative was written following the death of Alberic and the appointment of his successor. This opening statement is full of praise for Alberic, making specific note of how he was a ‘man of God’², had ‘practised fruitfully regular discipline’³ and that he ‘deserved to be rewarded by God with eternal life’⁴. It would be possible to assume from this that Alberic was indeed a truly devout and religious person who would receive their reward for such a life when entering the kingdom of heaven. Indeed, this perspective is also seen within the *Exordium Cistercii* where Alberic is described as a “religious and holy man”⁵ and who in the tenth year of being the abbot at Cîteaux “won the prize of eternal life ever after”⁶. However, it could also be argued that the narrative of this text is intended for current and future generations of readers and that

¹ C.H. Berman, *The Cistercian Evolution: The invention of a Religious Order in Twelfth Century Europe*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000) p. 46.

² *Exordium Parvum* Course Cistercian documents Vol. 1 course handbook, chapter XVII, p.31

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ *Exordium Cistercii* Course Cistercian documents Vol 1 course handbook, chapter II, p.32

⁶ Ibid.

the writer was in some way “playing to the crowd” so that whoever was reading the EP would form the desired good impression of Alberic that the writer intended. However, it should be noted that Alberic was one of the original people who followed Robert and left the abbey at Molesme and in so doing would have broken the Rules of St Benedict that he would have vowed to follow. Further, it could also be argued that by use of the phrase ‘therefore to deservedly be rewarded by God in eternal life’⁷, that the writer was presupposing knowledge of the judgement of God upon Alberic. However, this could also easily be interpreted as an understanding of scripture and the likely rewards that might come from living a devout and religious life.

The next section of note is that Alberic’s successor following his death is noted as Stephen, who the writer tells us had also come Molesme. Indeed, it is noted in chapter II of the EP that Stephen was one of the monks who left Molesme with Robert⁸. In view of this, it would be possible to also view Stephen as having broken the Rules of St Benedict by leaving Molesme with Robert in the same way that this has been argued in relation to Alberic. However, the writer notes that Stephen was a ‘lover of the Rule and of that place’⁹. With this statement, it has to be questioned why, if Stephen loved ‘that place’ i.e., Molesme, then why did he leave the abbey and go to Cîteaux with Robert. This particular statement suggests that an oversimplification of facts has been presented, potentially such that the status quo between different abbeys is maintained. We can see in another section of the EP, namely chapter VI – The letter of the Pope regarding the return of the Abbot, that efforts appear to have been made to avoid a scandal with a breakaway order, with that particular letter noting that Robert, the initial Abbot should be returned to Molesme, but that if that were not possible then ‘those who love the desert may live in peace and those who are in the monastery observe the practice of the Rule’¹⁰. We also learn from this section that Stephen was English by birth. From this it could be assumed that the writer is intimating the importance of the Abbey at Molesme for a person to travel from England to be a monk at an abbey in the middle of France. This would after all, not have been the easiest of journeys considering the time period.

The writer continues to tell us that Stephen forbade the duke of that region to hold court in that monastery.¹¹ It is not clear as to whether the writer is referring to the abbey at Molesme where Stephen had previously been, of whether he was referring to the abbey at Cîteaux, with our only reference being the phrase ‘the duke of that region’¹². From this we must then question if feast day celebrations were held at Molesme, or if the duke of the region around Cîteaux held feasts at the abbey there. Whilst it is the case that visitors to an abbey would have been shown hospitality¹³, strict observance of the Rule of St Benedict would suggest that this would not have been a lavish feast¹⁴, rather an audience with the abbot. The phrase raises the further question of what the relationship of the monks at Cîteaux had with the aristocracy of the surrounding area. We learn from chapter III of the EP that the Duke of

⁷ *Exordium Parvum* Course Cistercian documents Vol. 1 course handbook, chapter XVII, p.31

⁸ *Exordium Parvum* Course Cistercian documents Vol. 1 course handbook, chapter II, p.24

⁹ *Exordium Parvum* Course Cistercian documents Vol. 1 course handbook, chapter XVII, p.31

¹⁰ *Exordium Parvum* Course Cistercian documents Vol. 1 course handbook, chapter VI, p.25

¹¹ *Exordium Parvum* Course Cistercian documents Vol. 1 course handbook, chapter XVII, p.31

¹² Ibid.

¹³ *Rule of St Benedict* Course Cistercian documents Vol 1 course handbook, chapter 53, p. 15

¹⁴ *Rule of St Benedict* Course Cistercian documents Vol 1 course handbook, chapter 39, p. 12

Burgundy gave the new monastery both land and livestock, and also used his own resources to finish the building of the monastery¹⁵. With these differing accounts, we could question whether the relationship between abbey and local lords was soured in some way when Stephen enforced the Rule of St Benedict and banned the use of the monastery on feast days, considering the amount of help that the writer tells us that the monastery received from the Duke of Burgundy.

In the last section of the text, the writer talks to us about how the monks protect their state of poverty within the monastery. The writer specifically tells us about objects that ‘savoured pride and superfluity’¹⁶ and implies to us that these are bad things by further referencing items that ‘would ever corrupt poverty’¹⁷. It would be possible to take from this a reference to the seven deadly sins, and specifically the sin of pride. It is possible to see in the Bible in Proverbs 6:16-17 that pride is mentioned, ‘These six things doth the Lord hate: yea, seven are an abomination to him: A proud look’¹⁸ and again in Proverbs 16:18 ‘Pride goeth before a destruction’¹⁹. By making these inferences and specifically telling us that ‘they resolved to keep no crosses of gold or silver’²⁰ the writer is reinforcing for the reader the view that these monks at Citeaux were indeed devoutly religious men who were following the teachings of God, and by so doing reinforcing the view that by founding the monastery at Citeaux, they were doing the correct thing, even though to do so they needed to break the Rules of St Benedict. This is further explicitly reinforced with the phrase ‘where it was their wish to serve God devoutly day and night’²¹. However, it would also be possible to read into this an inference that other churches and monasteries were perhaps not quite so righteous and indeed did keep crosses of gold and silver. The text does not specifically name a particular location for this, but it could be assumed that this may have been the abbey at Molesme.

Overall, what we can learn from this extract is that the writer is trying to convey the rightful lineage of the abbots of Citeaux and the correctness of their appointments into the position of abbot. However, as with any document that is presented for public consumption, it is essential that the overall context of the writing is considered so that it is possible to understand what is not being said rather than taking a face value approach to the text.

Word count: 1280

¹⁵ *Exordium Parvum* Course Cistercian documents Vol. 1 course handbook, chapter II, p.24

¹⁶ *Exordium Parvum* Course Cistercian documents Vol. 1 course handbook, chapter XVII, p.31

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ *The Holy Bible* Proverbs 6: 16-17, King James Version, Oxford University press.

¹⁹ *The Holy Bible* Proverbs 16:18., King James Version, Oxford University press.

²⁰ *Exordium Parvum* Course Cistercian documents Vol. 1 course handbook, chapter XVII, p.31

²¹ Ibid.

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