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Reformed Monasticism and the Narrative of Cistercian Beginnings

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Abstract

This essay explores the ongoing debates about the character of early Cistercian monasticism, the dating of early Cistercian documents, and assumptions about the Cistercians' place in eleventh- and twelfth-century monastic "reform." It analyzes the Cistercians' narratives of their foundation in relation to particular moments in the twelfth-century history of the order, drawing on and elaborating recent theories about the dating of these documents. Although the Cistercians often seem the quintessential example of "reformed monasticism," this essay argues that the earliest Cistercians did not present themselves as reformers but only gradually developed a rhetoric of reform over the course of the twelfth century. Finally, it suggests that reform is less a specific set of changes than it is a rhetorical use of the past that authenticates current practices and affirms that these interpretations of the past must be right and true.

Keywords: Reform; Cistercian Order; Medieval Monasticism; Twelfth-Century Christianity

Reform, renewal, and rebirth are terms that dominate the religious, institutional, and intellectual histories of eleventh- and early twelfth-century Europe. Around 1030, the monastic chronicler Ralph Glaber described the rebuilding of churches at the millennium as giving "the world the appearance of having shaken itself, of having rejected old age, and of having everywhere put on a white garment of churches."¹ The language of baptismal rebirth in Glaber's account reverberates with the images of regeneration, restoration, and renovation with which eleventh- and twelfth-century authors linked

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¹Ralph Glaber, *Historiarum libri quinque* 3.4.13, in *Rodulfus Glaber Opera*, ed. John France, Neithard Bulst, and Paul Reynolds, (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989), 115–117: "Erat enim instar ac si mundus ipse, excutiendo semet, reiecta uestustate, passim candidam ecclesiarum uestem indueret." My translation.

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their changing society to an idealized past.² “Reform” appears as well in the titles of so many modern studies of the central Middle Ages that it has become a shorthand for religious change. Only recently have scholars started to critique the implications bound up in the idea of reform and to investigate alternative narratives of change and continuity that reforming paradigms have obscured.³ This essay contributes to these critiques by exploring the articulations of reforming ideals in the Cistercians’ accounts of their foundation. The Cistercians’ changing depictions of their history indicate that they conceptualized their project as a reform only in retrospect, and they suggest the rhetorical force of reforming language in authenticating and justifying change.

The Cistercian order often appears as the quintessential example of twelfth-century reformed monasticism. The first Cistercians left the Burgundian monastery of Molesme in 1098 to establish a new community in a forest south of Dijon. By 1115, this new monastery, eventually called Cîteaux, had established four related abbeys. By 1119, the Charter of Charity, which the monks composed to link the new Cistercian foundations and regulate their way of life (*ordo*), received papal approval. By the end of the twelfth century, over 500 male monasteries and an unknown number of women’s communities followed Cistercian customs.⁴ The Cistercians’ growth stemmed in part from new foundations—some of which attracted monks from already existing communities—and in part from the imposition of Cistercian customs on older abbeys. By understanding the Cistercian developments as monastic reform, scholars place their history within a broader reform movement that separated the ecclesiastic from the secular, invoked ideals from the past, and encouraged new moral behaviors.

The assumption that the early Cistercians were monastic reformers has not prevented acrimonious debates over the character of this reform. Some scholars posit that the first Cistercians sought a strict or literal interpretation of the Benedictine Rule, others emphasize the influence of the apostolic life, and still others stress an early Cistercian adherence to the poverty, asceticism, and withdrawal associated with the desert fathers.⁵ These disagreements are further complicated by competing theories about the dating of the order’s early documents—documents whose earliest exemplars

²Giles Constable, “Renewal and Reform in Religious Life: Concepts and Realities,” in *Renaissance and Renewal in the Twelfth-Century*, ed. Giles Constable and Robert L. Benson (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991), 37–67. Kathleen G. Cushing, *Reform and the Papacy in the Eleventh Century: Spirituality and Social Change* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), 1, notes that eleventh-century authors wrote of renewal, renovation, and restoration more than reform. See also Julia Barrow, “Ideas and Applications of Reform,” in *The Cambridge History of Christianity*, vol. 3: *Early Medieval Christianities: c.600–c.1100*, ed. by Thomas F. X. Noble and Julia M. H. Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 345–362.

³See especially Maureen C. Miller, “The Crisis in the Investiture Crisis Narrative,” *History Compass* 7, no. 6 (November 2009): 1570–1580; Steven Vanderputten, *Monastic Reform as Process: Realities and Representations in Medieval Flanders, 900–1100* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2013); Julia Barrow, “Developing Definitions of Reform in the Church in the Ninth and Tenth Centuries,” in *Italy and Early Medieval Europe: Papers for Chris Wickham*, ed. Ross Balzaretti, Julia Barrow, and Patricia Skinner (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 501–511; and Conrad Leyser, “Church Reform – Full of Sound and Fury, Signifying Nothing?” *Early Medieval Europe* 24, no. 4 (November 2016): 478–499.

⁴The traditional enumeration of male monasteries appears in Leopold Janauschek, *Originum Cisterciensium*, vol. 1 (Vienna: A. Hoelder, 1877).

⁵Jean Leclercq, “The Monastic Crisis of the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries,” in *Cluniac Monasticism in the Central Middle Ages*, ed. Noreen Hunt. (London: Macmillan, 1971): 215–237, suggests a concern about material wealth, while Jean-Baptiste Auberger, *L’unanimité cistercienne primitive: Mythe ou réalité?* (Achel: Cîteaux, 1986), 317, stresses the importance of a strict observance of the Benedictine Rule. See also Bede

are no longer extant and whose manuscripts have not yet been conclusively dated. This confusion about early Cistercian ideals stems from efforts to shoehorn the Cistercians into a model of reform that was not initially theirs. Rather than describing themselves as reformers, the first generations of Cistercians experimented with models for their monastic communities. Only gradually, over the course of the twelfth century, did Cistercian authors create a narrative of monastic corruption and renewal that they retrospectively applied to their origins as a rhetoric of justification.

I. Corruption, Charisma, and Reform

Narratives of reform serve scholars of the European Middle Ages in a variety of intertwined ways. For some medievalists, discussions of reform assume an ecclesial ideal and emphasize human efforts to realize a church that best fosters individual reformation and salvation. For these scholars, reform links personal reformation with a confessional perspective on institutional change. It also makes late antique and medieval religious practices applicable to the history of the modern church.⁶ Other medievalists, less invested in the realization of religious ideals, use the idea of reform to tie the European Middle Ages to modern society; studies of medieval reformations and renaissances place the origins of modernity in the High Middle Ages.⁷ Yet many scholars recognize that the medieval people whom they study invoked reform as a renewal of past models, usually within a providential conception of history.⁸ The term “reform,” then, looks simultaneously to past models and to the origins of contemporary practices, and it encompasses both medieval theories of change and scholarly explanations for institutional, ecclesiastical, and societal developments.

Over the past several decades, scholars studying the medieval church have questioned whether reform remains a useful term for describing ecclesiastical and monastic change in medieval Europe. Projects rethinking reform have identified three important critiques of the term.⁹ One locates the theological assumptions that remain embedded

K. Lackner, *The Eleventh-Century Background of Cîteaux* (Washington, D.C.: Cistercian, 1972), 150, who considers the influence of the *vita apostolica*.

⁶The classic book on reform is Gerhart B. Ladner, *The Idea of Reform: Its Impact on Christian Thought and Action in the Age of the Fathers* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf and Stock, 1959). See also Christopher M. Bellitto and Louis I. Hamilton, eds., *Reforming the Church Before Modernity: Patterns, Problems and Approaches* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005); and Christopher M. Bellitto and David Zachariah Flanagan, *Reassessing Reform: A Historical Investigation into Church Renewal* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of American Press, 2012). As Maureen Miller points out in “The Crisis in the Investiture Crisis Narrative” there are both Catholic and Protestant permutations of this outlook.

⁷See Constable and Benson, eds., *Renaissance and Renewal in the Twelfth Century*; and Giles Constable, *The Reformation of the Twelfth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), although on page 4 of *Reformation of the Twelfth Century*, Constable insists that he is not contributing “to the seductive game of precursorism.” R. I. Moore proposes a twelfth-century revolution in his *The First European Revolution: c.970–1215* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), and Thomas F. X. Noble and John Van Engen suggest transformation in their *European Transformations: The Long Twelfth Century* (South Bend, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2012).

⁸Giles Constable, “Renewal and Reform in Religious Life,” 37–67.

⁹Maureen Miller and William North organized a series of conference panels on “Re-thinking Reform” at the annual conference of the American Historical Association and the International Congress on Medieval Studies in 2013–2014, Julia Barrow received a grant from the Leverthulme Trust on “Rethinking Reform 900–1150,” and Stephen Vanderputten organized a strand of panels on monastic reform at the International Medieval Congress at Leeds in 2015.

in the concept of reform. For example, Maureen Miller and Julia Barrow recognize the importance of Augustin Fliche and Gerd Tellenbach in establishing the central themes for studying the eleventh-century church, but they also note the confessional differences between Fliche's understanding of reform as the growth of papal institutions, and Tellenbach's position that reform was instead a struggle over how to rightly order the world.¹⁰ Similarly, the twentieth-century "*nouvelle théologie*" of Catholic authors such as Henri de Lubac, Yves Congar, and Marie-Dominic Chenu emphasized historical approaches to theology that might revive an ossified ideal, but their "*ressourcement*" influenced not just movements of Catholic reform but all scholars of monasticism who depend on the *Sources Chrétiennes* for critical editions of medieval theological texts.¹¹ It is not easy to disembed the confessional implications of reform, even for scholars who seek to write post-confessional histories of medieval Christianity.

A second critique focuses on the words used to express reform. For instance, an investigation of medieval terminology and word usage is central to Gerhart Ladner's *The Idea of Reform*. Ladner makes the important point that, until at least the eleventh century, the term *reformare* depicted personal change rather than the reform of the church. Based in a Pauline conception of reform, *reformare* looked to a prelapsarian past and to an ideal future of human perfectibility. This resonated with medieval monastic communities that emphasized the spiritual formation of their members. By the twelfth century, the idea of reform became intertwined with a cluster of words that described natural cycles and growth, language that implied the possibility that future as well as past models could shape the present.¹² Yet we are only still beginning to understand the language with which people between the tenth and twelfth centuries narrated religious change.¹³ A focus on medieval language can obscure as well as illuminate: as John Van Engen warns, the individual expressions of personal striving and dissatisfaction that medieval monks articulated can easily become modern causal explanations for institutional change, while medieval satire and polemic create stark contrasts that modern scholars then use to describe cycles of monastic foundation, corruption, and reform.¹⁴

A third critique questions whether a unified narrative of reform can still structure the history of the medieval church and the role of monasticism in this history. Recent work on eleventh-century reform—whether monastic, episcopal, or papal—has moved away from idealistic and top-down approaches that posit charismatic ruptures of existing organizations and the separation of ecclesiastical institutions from lay influence. For example, Maureen Miller's analysis of the "crisis" in the "investiture crisis" narrative calls for studies of the eleventh-century papacy that stress conceptions of lordship, holiness, and the exercise of power. Similarly, John Howe, Kathleen Cushing, Julia Barrow, and John Eldevik place eleventh-century ecclesiastical reform in the context

¹⁰Barrow, "Ideas and Applications of Reform," 345–346, 349–350; and Miller, "Crisis in the Investiture Crisis Narrative."

¹¹See Gabriel Flynn and Paul D. Murray, eds., *Ressourcement: A Movement for Renewal in Twentieth-Century Catholic Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). De Lubac was one of the first editors of *Sources Chrétiennes*.

¹²Constable, "Renewal and Reform in Religious Life," 39.

¹³Barrow, "Developing Definitions of Reform," 501–511.

¹⁴John Van Engen, "The 'Crisis of Cenobitism' Reconsidered: Benedictine Monasticism in the Years 1050–1150," *Speculum* 61, no. 2 (April 1986): 269–304; and Constable, *Reformation of the Twelfth Century*, 126. See also William L. North, Jay C. Rubenstein, and John D. Cotts, "The Experience of Reform: Three Perspectives," *Haskins Society Journal* 10 (2002): 113–161.

of family history and power, while Leidulf Melve suggests that studies of communication networks may provide a new interpretative framework that links insights from local studies.¹⁵ Still others stress continuities with the Carolingian period rather than ruptures.¹⁶ Studies of monastic developments now analyze local connections between monasteries and their lay and episcopal allies rather than describing the emancipation of monasteries from secular influence and the gradual imposition of homogenous customs.¹⁷ This moves the field of monastic history away from the cycles of foundation, corruption, and reform that depended, if only implicitly, on Max Weber's analysis of charismatic authority and the disenchantment associated with routinization. Steve Vanderputten, for instance, finds in the political theories of Paul Pierson an analysis of institutional change that depends on existing social capital. Vanderputten critiques the idea that reform is a set of "exogenous shocks" and "flashpoint events" produced by charismatic figures aware of the failures of their predecessors. His study of eleventh-century Flemish monasteries emphasizes the local and individual character of specific monastic reforms, and his work points toward the importance of considering institutional continuities as well as transformations.¹⁸

Most of the studies rethinking reform have focused on the tenth and eleventh centuries. They contrast the paucity of tenth- and eleventh-century expressions of reform to an increased prevalence of reforming language in the twelfth century.¹⁹ But, while the twelfth-century rhetoric might have intensified, it did so as the innovations of the previous centuries subsided.²⁰ Frequently, this language is retrospective, describing events that took place some decades earlier. It justifies change not only by linking it to past models but by claiming that a new interpretation of a past model is authentic, correct, or divinely inspired. Such, for instance, is the case of the twelfth-century Cistercians, who first established their new monasteries and only later called their undertaking a reform.

II. Cistercian Histories and Early Documents

The history of the Cistercian order is only starting to break out of a narrative of charismatic foundation and decline. The Cistercians have long been placed in a reforming paradigm that emphasizes their isolation, literal interpretation of the Benedictine Rule, and uniform practices and that contrasts their "ideals" to a "reality" that shifted over

¹⁵Miller, "Crisis in the Investiture Crisis Narrative"; John Howe, *Before the Gregorian Reform: The Latin Church at the Turn of the First Millennium* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2016); Cushing, *Reform and the Papacy*; Julia Barrow, *The Clergy in the Medieval World: Secular Clerics, Their Families and Careers in North-Western Europe, c. 800–c. 1200* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); John Eldevik, *Episcopal Power and Ecclesiastical Reform in the German Empire: Tithes, Lordship, and Community, 950–1150* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); and Leidulf Melve, "Ecclesiastical Reform in Historiographical Context," *History Compass* 13, no. 5 (May 2015): 213–221.

¹⁶Sarah Hamilton, *Church and People in the Medieval West, 900–1200* (Harlow: Pearson Education, 2013).

¹⁷Joachim Wollasch, "Monasticism: The First Wave of Reform," in *The New Cambridge Medieval History*, vol. 3, c. 900–c. 1024, ed. Timothy Reuter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 163–185; and Steven Vanderputten, "Monastic Reform from the Tenth to the Early Twelfth Century," in *The Cambridge History of Medieval Monasticism in the Latin West*, ed. Alison I. Beach and Isabelle Cochelin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 599–617.

¹⁸Vanderputten, *Monastic Reform as Process*. See also John Nightingale, *Monasteries and Patrons in the Gorze Reform: Lotharingia c. 850–1100* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2001).

¹⁹Barrow, "Ideas and Applications of Reform," 347.

²⁰For a periodization of reform, see Constable, *Reformation of the Twelfth Century*, 4–5.

time.²¹ Even Constance Berman's revisionist argument in *The Cistercian Evolution* implies that the Cistercians moved from having charismatic founders to the compromises of institutionalization; she posits that the early Cistercians, as a loose affiliation of communities devoted to the example and writings of Bernard of Clairvaux, allowed both female and male houses to consider themselves "Cistercian," whereas the later institutionalization of the order excluded women's communities.²² Two recent books, however, criticize the narrative of founding ideal and subsequent decline. In *The Cistercian Order in Medieval Europe: 1090–1500*, Emilia Jamrozak argues for recognition of the Cistercians' pragmatic adaptation of their institutional structures to social and economic conditions, whereas Janet Burton and Julia Kerr suggest in their book, *The Cistercians in the Middle Ages*, that the Cistercian order retained a distinctiveness despite accommodations to regional variations.²³ In fact, Janet Burton astutely notes that Cîteaux should be considered the last of Robert of Molesme's many monastic experiments rather than a break with Molesme.²⁴ These scholars emphasize practice over ideal, and they see continuity and institutional development rather than rupture and decline. Neither book, however, fully critiques the language of Cistercian reform.

A careful reading of the Cistercians' narratives of their foundation demonstrates that the Cistercians' language of reform developed some decades after the monks established their first monasteries. These narratives once seemed to provide a clear history of the order but since the 1940s have become the subject of much dispute.²⁵ Especially debated are two early accounts of the Cistercians' beginnings, the *Exordium parvum* and the *Exordium cistercii*. The history of these texts and the manuscripts in which they appear is intertwined with the development of the *Carta caritatis*, the document that formed the affiliated monasteries into an organization, as well as with various collections of statutes issued by Cistercian abbots. Many of these disputes are not yet fully resolved; each time we think we have a resolution, another hypothesis appears.²⁶

The early exordia are complex texts. The *Exordium parvum* provides a dossier of disparate pieces. Half of its eighteen chapters consist of copies of letters and privileges from ecclesiastical figures, none of which have independent confirmation outside of a Cistercian manuscript tradition. The narrative chapters linking these diplomatic texts describe the monks' departure from Molesme, the foundation of the new monastery

²¹For a critique of this scholarship, see Martha G. Newman, *The Boundaries of Charity: Cistercian Culture and Ecclesiastical Reform, 1098–1180* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 3–5.

²²Constance Hoffman Berman, *The Cistercian Evolution: The Invention of a Religious Order in Twelfth-Century Europe* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000). Berman develops valuable insights about the gradual development and institutionalization of the Cistercian order, but her controversial dating of Cistercian documents has distracted from these important arguments. See also Constance H. Berman, "The Cistercian Manuscript, Trent 1711, Version One and its Exemplar," *Scraped, Stroked, and Bound: Materially Engaged Readings of Medieval Manuscripts*, ed. Jonathan Wilcox (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013), 159–176.

²³Emilia Jamrozak, *The Cistercian Order in Medieval Europe: 1090–1500* (New York: Routledge, 2013); and Janet Burton and Julie Kerr, *The Cistercians in the Middle Ages* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2011). See also Mette Birkedal Bruun, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the Cistercian Order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

²⁴Burton and Kerr, *Cistercians in the Middle Ages*, 17.

²⁵Jean-Berthold Mahn, *L'ordre cistercien et son gouvernement des origines au milieu du XIIIe siècle (1098–1265)*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Boccard, 1951), 41, noted the clear history.

²⁶Alexis Grélois, "Genèse et évolution de la Charte de Charité au XIIe siècle," in *La Charte de charité 1119–2019: Un document pour préserver l'unité entre les communautés*, ed. Éric Delaissé (Paris: Cerf, 2020), 45, calls for an experienced paleographer to analyze the manuscripts at the heart of this dispute.

at Cîteaux, the elections of Alberic and Stephen Harding as abbots, the first statutes regulating Cîteaux and its affiliates, and the order's early growth. The dating of the *Exordium parvum* has varied widely; many have followed the chronology established by Philippe Guignard, who saw the document as a historical introduction to the Charter of Charity that was presented to Pope Calixtus II in 1119. Jean Lefèvre, by contrast, argued that it was written as late as 1151 as an effort to hide Cîteaux's irregular foundation.²⁷ Even more radically, Constance Berman dated the document to 1170, arguing that it and a version of the Charter of Charity called the *Carta caritatis prior* were a response to criticisms leveled at the Cistercians by Pope Alexander III. She posited that the monks forged the 1119 papal bull from Calixtus II around the same time.²⁸

In comparison to the *Exordium parvum*, the *Exordium cistercii* possesses a stylistic unity. Its language links it to a different version of the Charter of Charity called the *Summa cartae caritatis* and with a collection of early Cistercian statutes (the *capitula*) that appear alongside it in many extant manuscripts.²⁹ Nonetheless, suggestions for its date of composition have also ranged widely. In 1955, Jean Lefèvre proposed that the *Exordium cistercii* and the *Summa cartae caritatis* formed the dossier of texts that Pope Calixtus II approved in 1119. Alternatively, Constance Berman has hypothesized that it was composed as late as 1165, as part of what she thinks to be the initial Cistercian constitution that Pope Alexander III approved in his bull *Sacrosancta*.³⁰ For much of the late twentieth century, however, there has been a rough consensus that the *Exordium cistercii* was composed around 1123 or 1124, possibly at Clairvaux. This dating is based on the number of abbots mentioned in the text as well as on a description of Stephen Harding that is so laudatory that most scholars agree it could not have been written at Cîteaux under Stephen's supervision.³¹

The scholars arguing about these documents divide into two conceptual camps. On one side are those who see in the documents' inconsistencies an effort by the Cistercians to hide their irregularities by rewriting and reshaping their history. On the other side are scholars who assume the extant copies of early Cistercian documents are essentially what they claim to be: documents from the first decades of the twelfth century. Generally, this second group of scholars has assumed that Calixtus II approved a version of the Charter of Charity in 1119, that the *Exordium parvum* was composed at Cîteaux around 1119, and that monks at Clairvaux—possibly even the Abbot Bernard—produced the *Exordium cistercii* a few years later.

The analyses by Jean-Baptiste Auberger and Chrysogonus Waddell fall between these two positions. Neither scholar suggests that the Cistercians consciously disguised an irregular foundation, but both argue that these exordia are composite documents

²⁷Philippe Guignard, ed., *Les monuments primitifs de la règle cistercienne* (Dijon: Imprimerie Darantier, 1878), xxx–xxxiv; and J. A. Lefèvre, "Le vrai récit primitif des origines de Cîteaux est-il l'*Exordium Parvum*?" *Le Moyen Age* 61 (1955): 79–120, 329–361.

²⁸Berman, *Cistercian Evolution*, 240.

²⁹Chrysogonus Waddell, ed., *Narrative and Legislative Texts from Early Cîteaux* (Achel: Cîteaux, 1999), 144. All translations of the *Exordium parvum*, *Exordium cistercii*, and *Carta caritatis* are mine, but they are based on Waddell's edition unless otherwise noted.

³⁰Lefèvre, "Le vrai récit primitif," 88; and Berman, *Cistercian Evolution*, 89–90.

³¹Jean de la Croix Bouton and Jean-Baptiste Van Damme, *Les plus anciens textes de Cîteaux* (Achel: Cîteaux, 1974); and Auberger, *L'unanimité cistercienne primitive*, 37. According to the *Exordium cistercii*: "The venerable father Stephen, with an ever-watchful perceptivity, had provided a document of admirable discernment" (*venerabilis pater Stephanus sagacitate pervigili mirae providerat discretionis scriptum*): Waddell, *Narrative and Legislative Texts*, 402.

that took their current form over time. Both scholars posit that Stephen Harding or someone close to him composed the initial kernel of the *Exordium parvum* before Calixtus II approved the Charter of Charity in 1119. Both think that it consisted of diplomatic documents linked with narrative chapters, although they do not agree about the exact composition of this kernel nor its date of composition.³² Both argue that later chapters were added to the *Exordium parvum* in the 1130s and 1140s, although Waddell again supplies a more precise date, positing its completion before 1147. The two scholars differ, however, in their analysis of the *Exordium cistercii*. They agree that its praise of Stephen Harding eliminates Stephen as its author, but Auberger thinks it was written at Clairvaux in the mid-1120s, while Waddell argues that Raimond of Bar composed it after he became abbot of Cîteaux in 1134.³³ I follow Waddell's analysis of the *Exordium parvum*, but his date for the *Exordium cistercii* is too late; the regular canons at Prémontré, Arrouaise, and Oigny drew on passages from the *Summa cartae caritatis* and *capitula*—texts associated with the *Exordium cistercii*—perhaps as early as 1130.³⁴ Waddell's great insight, however, was to associate both exordia with the revisions of the Cistercians' customary. He argues that the *Exordium cistercii* and the *Summa cartae caritatis* together became a historical introduction for the new version of the Cistercians' customary, completed before 1138/1140, but that when the Cistercians rewrote their customary again in 1147 after a set of liturgical reforms, they developed a different historical introduction by revising the *Exordium parvum*.³⁵ It was then, Waddell thinks, that the monks added new chapters to the initial kernel of the *Exordium parvum* to give a detailed account of the monastery's foundation, its later expansion, and the early decisions made by the abbots who met in their yearly Chapter General.³⁶

³²Waddell, *Narrative and Legislative Texts*, 205–208; and Auberger, *L'unanimité cistercienne primitive*, 43–52. Waddell argues that this initial document consisted of the introduction and thirteen of the first fourteen chapters; nine of these thirteen chapters contain letters and charters from ecclesiastical officials. Auberger, in comparison, places the break between the initial kernel and later additions partway through chapter 10. Waddell dates the initial text to 1113, around the time Cîteaux started to found affiliated communities, dating that is based in part on a parenthetical remark referring to the “sin” committed by Pope Pascal when he capitulated to the demands of Henry V in 1111; this would have still been a concern in 1112–1113, but not by 1119. Auberger dates it before 1119. Both men assume at least some of the embedded documents are authentic.

³³Auberger, *L'unanimité cistercienne primitive*, 56–57; and Waddell, *Narrative and Legislative Texts*, 56–61.

³⁴Grélois, “Genèse et évolution,” 60–62, draws on the work of Benoît-Michel Tock and Dirk Van de Perre. On pages 57–59, Grélois also suggests that the *Summa cartae caritatis*'s alternation between summarizing, paraphrasing, and simply copying an early version of the *Carta caritatis* suggests that it too might have been written in at least two stages. See also Guido Cariboni, “L'Charte de charité en tant que document pour l'établissement d'une abbaye: Remarques à partir du réseau canonial de Saint-Martin de Laon” in Delaissé, *La Charte de Charité 1119–2019*, 27–42.

³⁵Using the texts to introduce the customaries does not mean they were written for them. It is possible that Raimond wrote the *Exordia cistercii* while still a monk at Clairvaux. Christopher Holdsworth doubts the existence of an early customary from before 1137: Christopher Holdsworth, “Narrative and Legislative Texts from Early Cîteaux by Chrysogonus Waddell: A Review Article,” *Cîteaux: commentarii cistercienses* 51, no. 1–2 (2000): 159. For a recent overview of the Cistercians customaries, see Emilia Jamrozak, “The Cistercian Customaries,” in *A Companion to Medieval Rules and Customaries*, ed. Krijn Pansters (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 77–102.

³⁶The added chapters were chapter 3 and chapters 15–18: Waddell, *Narrative and Legislative Texts*, 227–231. This 1147 customary, however, was further revised after 1152 when Pope Eugenius III confirmed a new version of the Charter of Charity. The customaries from the second half of the century show more variation in the choice of narrative accounts that preface them.

The third account of the Cistercians' beginnings, the *Exordium magnum*, is a different kind of text. Its author, Conrad, initially wrote from Clairvaux and later from the German abbey of Eberbach in the years between 1180–1215.³⁷ A large and complex composition that combines a foundation narrative with exemplary accounts of the holy men of the order, the *Exordium magnum* tells us a great deal about the ways Cistercian monks reused their earlier texts and how they remembered their foundation nearly a century after Cîteaux was established.³⁸ Written at a time when other Cistercian abbeys also recorded their memories of their foundations, its retrospective account has influenced the ways in which we read the earlier documents and the ways we understand the nature of early Cistercian “reform.”³⁹

The composite nature of the *Exordium parvum*, when read together with the two other exordia and other Cistercian documents, allows an exploration of the changing ways Cistercian monks portrayed their monastic foundation and reused their histories. These documents suggest distinct moments when the monks at Cîteaux and Clairvaux employed texts to describe their origins: soon after 1113, in the late 1120s, around 1147, and after 1180. These moments can be linked to important milestones in Cistercian history and to the complex relations between Cîteaux and Clairvaux. Yet, only gradually did these first generations of Cistercian authors suggest their project returned to ancient models and contrasted with the practices of some of their contemporaries.

III. The Initial *Exordium parvum*

The monks who left Molesme for the forest of Beaune in 1098 established a single community. By 1113, the monastery had grown, and it started to found affiliates. Monks from the new monastery settled at La Ferté in 1113, at Pontigny by 1114, and at Clairvaux and Morimond in 1115. Most scholars studying the Cistercians think that it was soon after this initial expansion that Cîteaux's abbot Stephen Harding began to consider the relations between the new abbeys and laid out their organization in the Charter of Charity. The early core of the *Exordium parvum* that Waddell identified is silent about this charter and thus probably antedates it. In fact, whereas the Charter of Charity formed what would become the Cistercian order, this initial kernel of the *Exordium parvum* instead asks later monks to remember the foundation of a single monastery.

In describing the foundation of this new monastery, the early *Exordium parvum* combines narrative and diplomatic documents. Much of the *Exordium parvum* consists of letters and charters issued by bishops, papal legates, and the pope that are linked by short narratives. Waddell considers all nine embedded documents to be legitimate,

³⁷Paul Savage, “Introduction,” in *The Great Beginning of Cîteaux: A Narrative of the Beginning of the Cistercian Order; The Exordium Magnum of Conrad of Eberbach*, trans. Benedicta Ward and Paul Savage, ed. E. Rozanne Elder, (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical, 2012), 1.

³⁸Brian Patrick McGuire “Structure and Consciousness in the *Exordium magnum cisterciense*: The Clairvaux Cistercians after Bernard,” *Cahiers de l'Institut du Moyen-Âge Grec et Latin* 30 (1979): 33–90; and Martha G. Newman, “The Benedictine Rule and the Narrow Path: The Place of the Charter of Charity in the *Exordium Magnum* and Other Late Twelfth-Century Cistercian Texts,” in *Delaissé, La Charte de Charité 1119–2019*, 235–248.

³⁹Janet Burton, *The Foundation History of Byland and Jervaulx* (York: Borthwick, 2006), xxx–xxxii, mentions the *Historia fundationis* of Byland and Jervaulx, the Kirkstall Chronicle, the *Narratio de fundatione* of Fountains Abbey, the *Om Book*, and the *Narratiuncula de fundatione monasterii Vitaescholae in Cimbria*. See also Elizabeth Freeman, *Narratives of a New Order: Cistercian Historical Writing in England, 1150–1220* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2002).

while Auberger is more cautious. Even if only the papal privileges and the documents negotiating the return of Robert to Molesme are legitimate, the formation of a community of monks at Cîteaux quickly became an international affair. Its establishment involved the papal legate and archbishop, Hugh of Lyon; Pope Urban II and Pope Pascal; the bishops of Langres, Autun, Chalon-sur-Saône, Mâcon, and Belley; and the abbots of Tournus, St. Benigne-Dijon, and Ainay.⁴⁰ As a result, this was not the foundation of an unstructured hermitage in the wilderness but a carefully planned undertaking whose instigators were accustomed to working with ecclesiastical officials and accepted their authority. Given that Robert, Alberic, and Stephen Harding had all held administrative positions at Molesme before leaving for their new monastery, this is not surprising. Nonetheless, it has elicited the suspicion of scholars who do not expect a reformed monastery to articulate a concern for authority so quickly and who hear in its language a later justification for an unauthorized foundation.

Even more, the passages that introduce and link the letters and charters blur the distinctions between diplomatic and narrative texts and give the document the characteristics of a foundation charter.⁴¹ Chrysogonus Waddell assumes that the purpose of the initial *Exordium parvum* was to provide a spiritual guide for the early Cistercians at a time when they were expanding beyond the monastery at Cîteaux, but it is difficult to imagine novices learning much that was spiritually instructive from reading the letters and privileges of the bishops, legates, and popes.⁴² Instead, the single complex sentence of the *Exordium parvum*'s prologue that describes what the monks did, why they did it, and why they wished to preserve the letters and privileges, uses the cadences of a charter. It starts by addressing the monks' successors: "We of Cîteaux, the first founders of this church, notify our successors through this present document." It then records what the monks wanted their successors to remember: "How canonically, with what authority, and also by what persons and at what time their monastery and the course of their life took its beginning." Finally, it provides the reasons that these future monks should remember these things: "So that with the whole truth of the matter made manifest, they may more steadfastly love both the place and the observance of the Holy Rule established there to the extent possible by ourselves through the grace of God, so that they may pray for us who have tirelessly borne the burden and agitation of the day, so that they may sweat until their last breath in the strait and narrow way that the Rule points out, and so that they can halt in ever-lasting rest, having laid aside the burden of their flesh."⁴³ The *Exordium parvum*'s introduction to Urban II's 1100 "Roman Privilege" makes much the same point; the author of the *Exordium parvum* states that he included the document so that future monks could see "with what great counsel and

⁴⁰Waddell, *Narrative and Legislative Texts*, 221–227, 214–242; and Auberger, *L'unanimité cistercienne primitive*, 50.

⁴¹Constance Brittain Bouchard notes the ways in which twelfth-century monks also combined narrative and legal documents in their chronicles: Constance Brittain Bouchard, *Rewriting Saints and Ancestors: Memory and Forgetting in France, 500–1200* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), 39.

⁴²Waddell, *Narrative and Legislative Texts*, 207.

⁴³*Exordium parvum*, prologue, in Waddell, *Narrative and Legislative Texts*, 417: "Nos Cistercienses, primi huius ecclesiae fundatores, successoribus nostris stylo praesenti notificamus quam canonicè, quanta auctoritate, a quibus etiam personis, quibusque temporibus, coenobium et tenor vitae illorum exordium sumpserit; ut huius rei pro palata sincera veritate, tenacius et locum et observantiam sanctae Regulae in eo a nobis per Dei gratiam utcumque inchoatam ament, pro nobisque, qui pondus diei et aestus indefesse sustinimus orent, in arcta et angusta via quam Regula demonstrat, usque ad exhalationem spiritus desudent, quatenus deposita carnis sarcina, in requie sempiterna feliciter pausent."

authority their church was founded.”⁴⁴ The introduction to the *Exordium parvum* may have stressed the Cistercians’ purpose for their monastic life, but like a charter, it also authorized these intentions by recording and preserving the monks’ diplomatic connections.

Few early Cistercian monasteries had foundation charters. Constance Brittain Bouchard attributes this to the low status of the knights who initially supported these foundations, in comparison to the more powerful donors who issued charters to establish Cluny and Molesme.⁴⁵ Many Cistercian abbeys wrote retrospective accounts of their establishment that became part of their diplomatic archive. The monks of Pontigny added a narrative describing their foundation as a preface to an 1147 charter recording a gift from the Count of Nevers; Gautier, bishop of Chalon-sur-Saône, introduced one of La Ferté’s pancartes confirming a series of donations made before 1158 with an account of La Ferté’s foundation; and Morimond’s foundation charter was composed some eleven years after the monastery was established.⁴⁶ The initial kernel of the *Exordium parvum* perhaps initiated this Cistercian practice of introducing diplomatic material with narrative. Furthermore, the dating of this early exordium correlates with the composition of early cartularies in Burgundy; Cîteaux’s neighbor, St. Benignè of Dijon, for instance, assembled its first cartulary around 1113, modeling its efforts after Cluny’s composition a generation before.⁴⁷ Was the early *Exordium parvum* also an attempt to preserve and record an institutional history? Most cartularies start with papal and episcopal privileges and with foundation charters. The early *Exordium parvum* offered something similar, recording the community’s purpose and its links to ecclesiastical authorities. Its creation demonstrates a use of the monastery’s history that proclaimed Cîteaux’s social position, its relationship with the powerful authorities around it, and its purpose in fostering monastic love, prayer, labor, and rest.

Although the *Exordium parvum* records the monks’ purpose in establishing their monastery, the text linking the letters and charters does not critique the community the monks left behind. It recognizes the monks’ efforts to follow the observances of the Benedictine Rule, but the only distinction its author makes between Molesme and the new community at Cîteaux is one between monastery and desert—that is, between two different forms of religious life.⁴⁸ Similarly, the one time the author uses the comparative, he employs it to describe the benefits of the legate’s authority; Abbot Robert sought the support of Hugh of Die so that the monks could carry out “their promise to order their life under the custody of the Holy Rule of our Father Benedict, and therefore to accomplish this more freely [*liberius*].”⁴⁹

⁴⁴*Exordium parvum* 10, in Waddell, *Narrative and Legislative Texts*, 428: “Quam magno consilio et auctoritate ecclesia eorum sit fundata.” Auberger thinks this second introduction marks the start of the later additions: Auberger, *L’unanimité cistercienne primitive*, 44–45.

⁴⁵Constance Brittain Bouchard, *Holy Entrepreneurs: Cistercians, Knights, and Economic Exchange in Twelfth-Century Burgundy* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991), 22. See also Hubert Flammarion, *Recueil des chartes de l’abbaye de Morimond au XIIIe siècle* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2014).

⁴⁶Martine Garrigues, *Le premier cartulaire de l’abbaye cistercienne de Pontigny (XIIe–XIIIe siècles)* (Paris: Bibliothèque Nationale, 1981), 152–154; Georges Duby, *Recueil des pancartes de l’abbaye de La Ferté-sur-Grosne (1113–1178)* (Gap: Éditions Ophrys, 1953), 42–43; and Flammarion, *Recueil des chartes*, 98–100. La Ferté’s pancarte exists in a copy from before 1158, but as it speaks of “domno Stephano Cisterciensis abbate,” it probably was written before Stephen’s death in 1133.

⁴⁷Bouchard, *Rewriting Saints and Ancestors*, 13–15.

⁴⁸*Exordium parvum* 5, in Waddell, *Narrative and Legislative Texts*, 422. Pope Urban’s letter of 1099 also emphasizes this distinction: *Exordium parvum* 6, in Waddell, *Narrative and Legislative Texts*, 423.

⁴⁹*Exordium parvum* 1, in Waddell, *Narrative and Legislative Texts*, 418: “Vitam suam sub custodia sanctae Regulae patris Benedicti se ordinaturos pollicentes, et idcirco ad hoc liberius exsequendum.”

Nowhere does the author write of a literal or pure observance of the Benedictine Rule. In fact, his initial comment about the Rule in the prologue has a hesitation about it, for he notes that he wished his successors to “more steadfastly love both the place and the observance of the Holy Rule established there to the extent possible [*utcumque*] by ourselves through the grace of God.”⁵⁰

The early *Exordium parvum*'s emphasis on the authority of the papal legate and the “custody” of the Benedictine Rule corresponds with Stephen Harding's reliance on the authority and charisma of others, and it supports Waddell's supposition that Stephen Harding is its author. In fact, Stephen's emphasis in the Charter of Charity on a uniform interpretation of the Benedictine Rule in all Cistercian abbeys demonstrates his concern about linking affiliated abbeys and shows his desire to regulate his monasteries using the charismatic authority he thought Benedict imparted to the Rule.⁵¹ Rather than copying the organizational structure of Molesme and Cluny that required an abbot's continual travels from community to community, Stephen drew on Gregory the Great's picture of a Benedict who cared for his new foundations with a miraculous discretion that allowed him to see the intent of those distant from him. Stephen did not try to imitate Benedict's miraculous knowledge; rather, he insisted on a uniform adherence to the Rule that he thought embodied Benedict's discretion and charisma. The language in the *Exordium parvum* similarly relies on the authority of the ecclesiastical officials who negotiated and approved Cîteaux's foundation rather than on Stephen's own vision. In the *Exordium parvum*, as in the later Charter of Charity, Stephen started with structure and authority—with the Benedictine Rule, with the authority of the bishops and the pope—but then found within this organizational structure the potential for a rich religious life.

The early *Exordium parvum* does contain phrases comparing Molesme to the new monastery, but this is the language of papal officials, not the early Cistercians. The letters of the papal legate, Hugh of Die, and the 1100 privilege of Pope Pascal compare the strict observance at the new monastery to the laxer observance at Molesme using the rhetorical expressions of reform. In one letter, Hugh remarks that the monks of the new monastery desired to “adhere more strictly and perfectly to the Rule of the most blessed Benedict, which until then [they] had observed lukewarmly and negligently in that monastery,” while in a second letter, he notes that, because of the Cistercians' wish for “a stricter, more secluded life following the Rule of the blessed Benedict,” the monks at Molesme feared they would be held “more commonplace and despicable” in comparison to the new monastery.⁵² Pope Pascal's privilege echoes Hugh's ideas, comparing the monks' new way of life to the “less austere straits of a laxer monastery,” which they had left behind.⁵³ The earliest language that described the Cistercians as

⁵⁰*Exordium parvum*, prologue, in Waddell, *Narrative and Legislative Texts*, 417. For the Latin, see note 43 above.

⁵¹See Martha G. Newman, “Text and Authority in the Formation of the Cistercian Order: Re-assessing the Early Cistercian Reform,” in Bellitto and Hamilton, *Reforming the Church Before Modernity*, 173–198. Here, I disagree with Auberger's analysis of Stephen's character.

⁵²*Exordium parvum* 2, in Waddell, *Narrative and Legislative Texts*, 419: “Ac Regulae beatissimi Benedicti, quam illuc usque tepide ac negligenter in eodem monasterio teneratis, arctius deinceps atque perfectius inhaerere velle professos fuisse.” See also *Exordium parvum* 12, in Waddell, *Narrative and Legislative Texts*, 430: “Propter arctiorem et secretiorem vitam secundum Regulam beati Benedicti quam proposuerant tendendam . . . aestimantes se viliores et despectiores haberi.”

⁵³*Exordium parvum* 14, in Waddell, *Narrative and Legislative Texts*, 433: “Monasterii laxioris minus austeres angustias reliquistis.” For similar language, see the letter from Walter of Chalon where he writes of the

reformers of earlier institutions came not from the monks' own narrative but from the letters and bulls written by legates and popes active in establishing a newly assertive papacy. These were the men who were accustomed to using a rhetoric of reform and comparison to justify change.

IV. Adding Divine Agency: The *Exordium cistercii*

Like the *Exordium parvum*, the *Exordium cistercii* also provides a narrative introduction to non-narrative texts. Whereas the initial kernel of the *Exordium parvum* prefaces the diplomatic documents that gave legitimacy to Cîteaux's foundation, the *Exordium cistercii* introduces the decisions of the Cistercian abbots that began to form the new Cistercian monasteries into an order. In the earliest extant manuscripts, the *Exordium cistercii*, the *Summa cartae caritatis*, and these capitula appear together as a single text; Chrysogonus Waddell argues for their stylistic unity as well.⁵⁴ The composition of the *Exordium cistercii* appears to have initiated the Cistercian custom of using narratives to introduce regulatory material, including the Charter of Charity, the abbots' decisions, and, eventually, the order's customary.⁵⁵ It also offers a very different perspective on Cistercian life than the *Exordium parvum*. Rather than emphasizing Cîteaux's connections to ecclesiastical authorities and institutional continuities, it instead places Cîteaux's foundation into a providential history that asserts the special qualities of Cistercian monasticism.

Unlike the early kernel of the *Exordium parvum*, the *Exordium cistercii* uses the comparative language articulated by the prelates involved in Cîteaux's foundation. Although it does not explicitly criticize Molesme as negligent or lax, it does employ Molesme as a foil against which to compare the Cistercian foundation. Molesme, the *Exordium cistercii* asserts, had become wealthy, and "possessions and virtues are not usually long-lasting partners."⁵⁶ Furthermore, the monks who left Molesme preferred "to be occupied with heavenly devotion than to be entangled in earthly affairs," and they left a community that "fell short of their desire and purpose to observe the Rule they had professed."⁵⁷

Even more noticeable than the *Exordium cistercii*'s comparative language is its discussion of divine agency. Whereas the *Exordium parvum* describes the monks' relations with episcopal and papal authorities, the *Exordium cistercii* invokes a set of biblical passages that imply that the new community at Cîteaux formed through the intervention of divine grace. According to the narrative it tells, in deciding to leave Molesme, Robert and his companions act "by common counsel and by common assent, they strive to accomplish what they conceived through one spirit." They arrive at a place of "horror and vast solitude" that had been prepared for them by God. Abbot Alberic is described as a

monks' desire for a "stricter life": "Qui arctioris vitae desiderio a Molismensi ecclesia sanctorum virorum consilio recesserunt": *Exordium parvum* 13, in Waddell, *Narrative and Legislative Texts*, 431.

⁵⁴Waddell, *Narrative and Legislative Texts*, 166.

⁵⁵Scholars have long thought that the *Exordium parvum* was composed to introduce the version of the Charter of Charity that the pope approved in 1119. But if Waddell's dating of the *Exordium parvum* is correct, then the *Exordium parvum* did not become an introduction to regulatory documents—as opposed to diplomatic documents—until the 1140s.

⁵⁶*Exordium cistercii* 1, in Waddell, *Narrative and Legislative Texts*, 399: "Caeterum quia possessionibus virtutibusque diuturna non solet esse societas."

⁵⁷*Exordium cistercii* 1, in Waddell, *Narrative and Legislative Texts*, 399–400: "Elegerunt potius studiis coelestibus occupari quam terrenis implicari negotiis," and "minus tamen pro sui desiderio atque proposito, ipsam quam professi fuerant Regulam observari." For a discussion of this passage, see C. Waddell, "The *Exordium cistercii*: Lucan, and Mother Poverty," *Cîteaux* 33 (1982): 379–388.

“man of God” guiding the progress of the monastery. Then, under Stephen Harding, God intervenes again, making a barren mother fecund by providing Cîteaux with a flood of novices, first increasing Cîteaux’s numbers to thirty and then eventually allowing Cîteaux, as joyful mother, to “gaze upon twenty sons of her own as well as sons of her sons, like tender olive plants around her table.”⁵⁸ In these few short paragraphs, the *Exordium cistercii* compares the Cistercian founders to the apostles in Acts, to the Israelites in the desert, to the contemplative Rachel who miraculously gave birth to Jacob, and to those in Psalm 128 who walk in obedience to God. It also portrays them as imitating the example of Benedict, whose “institutes they were embracing.”⁵⁹ Unlike the initial *Exordium parvum*, this history asserts the special grace and charisma of the men responsible for Cîteaux’s founding, and it includes the influx of novices—novices that included Bernard—as well as the growth of the order as examples of this divine beneficence.

By the 1120s, this comparative language had become common at Clairvaux. Both Jean Leclerc and Jean-Baptiste Auberger think the *Exordium cistercii*’s author was a monk at Clairvaux who received permission from Bernard to write.⁶⁰ Bernard’s letter addressed to his relative Robert, who had left Clairvaux for Cluny, not only criticizes the comforts of Cluny but asks Robert to consider in which community he could live “more strictly, more correctly, more perfectly.” Bernard’s *Apologia*—probably composed around 1125—while claiming to critique black and white monks alike, satirizes Cluniac customs.⁶¹ Whereas Stephen Harding placed himself under the authority of Benedict and his Rule, as well as under the authority of ecclesiastical officials, Bernard increasingly acted with a sense of his own righteousness. This is especially apparent after the abbot of Morimond departed for the eastern Mediterranean in 1124, when Bernard took it upon himself to repair the damage he thought this departure had inflicted.⁶² It is often difficult to distinguish Bernard’s own sense of authority from the charisma later attributed to him, but it is clear that as Stephen aged and Bernard became a public figure, Bernard began to articulate a sense of Cistercian superiority that Stephen had not expressed. No longer simply comparing monastery to desert, the *Exordium cistercii* instead presents the Cistercians’ monastic life as holier than that of other monks.

V. Customaries and Histories

Starting in the 1130s, Cistercian monks found new uses for their histories. In the first two decades of expansion, the abbots started to regulate the relations between their

⁵⁸*Exordium cistercii* 1–2, in Waddell, *Narrative and Legislative Texts*, 400–402: “Egressi communi consilio, communi perficere nituntur assensu quod uno spiritu conceperunt;” “Scilicet horroris et vastae solitudinis;” “Vir Dei Albericus;” “Donec tam de suis quam de filiis filiorum suorum viginti . . . tamquam novella olivarum in circuitu mensae suae laeta mater conspiceret.”

⁵⁹*Exordium cistercii* 2, in Waddell, *Narrative and Legislative Texts*, 402: “Sancti patris Benedicti, cuius amplectebatur instituta, imitaretur et exempla.”

⁶⁰Jean Leclercq “L’*Exordium cistercii* et la *Summa cartae caritatis* sont-ils de saint Bernard?” *Revue Bénédictine* 73, no. 1–2 (1963): 88–99; and Auberger, *L’unanimité cistercienne primitive*, 57. Interestingly, Bernard never writes of the *Carta caritatis*.

⁶¹Bernard of Clairvaux, Letter 1, in *Sancti Bernardi Opera*, vol. 7, *Epistolae I, Corpus epistolarum 1–180*, ed. J. Leclercq and H. M. Rochais (Rome: Editiones Cistercienses, 1974), 1–11; and Bernard of Clairvaux, *Apologia ad Guillelmum*, in *Sancti Bernardi Opera*, vol. 3, *Tractatus et opuscula*, ed. J. Leclercq and H. M. Rochais (Rome: Editiones Cistercienses, 1963), 81–108.

⁶²Bernard of Clairvaux, Letters 4–6, in Leclercq and Rochais, *Sancti Bernardi Opera*, 7:24–46. See also Brian Patrick McGuire, *Bernard of Clairvaux: An Inner Life* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2020).

abbeys, hold annual assemblies, and require a uniformity of practice across their order. They also began to establish customaries based on their liturgical innovations and their abbots' decisions, and they prefaced these customaries with a summary of their early history. As they did, they began to present themselves as monastic reformers.

The monks at Clairvaux may have initiated the Cistercians' use of a narrative to preface regulatory materials but, sometime after 1134, the entire Cistercian order adopted this practice. 1133 and 1134 were difficult years at Cîteaux. Stephen Harding resigned as abbot, probably in the spring of 1133, and died later that year. He was succeeded briefly by Guy, who had been abbot of Trois Fontaines, one of Clairvaux's foundations. Guy served as abbot perhaps less than a year and certainly no more than two before he was removed from office.⁶³ By March of 1134, Rainard of Bar, a former monk from Clairvaux, was abbot. Did he bring the *Exordium cistercii* and its associated texts with him from Clairvaux? We do not know, but it seems that, by the time he and his fellow abbots finished writing the Cistercians' customary, around 1136, they attached to it the *Exordium cistercii*, the *Summa cartae caritatis*, and early decisions made by the abbots and sent it to other houses in the order.⁶⁴ What might have started as Clairvaux's particular view of the order's foundation had become an official history.

The use of the *Exordium cistercii* as an introduction to the Cistercians' customary was short lived. Between 1142 and 1147, the monks again revised their liturgy, bringing it into closer conformity with the chant common in monasteries in France and northern Italy.⁶⁵ By 1152, they had also revised their customary and again prefaced it with an account of their history. But instead of reusing the *Exordium cistercii*, they rewrote the *Exordium parvum*, transforming what had been an account of Cîteaux's foundation into a narrative about the establishment of the order. To Stephen's compilation of diplomatic documents, a new author added chapters describing the monks' departure from Molesme and settlement at Cîteaux, the growth of the order, and the order's initial observances. This created a new history that responded to particular conditions in the Cistercian order at mid-century.

The letters and privileges embedded in Stephen's *Exordium parvum* may explain why mid-twelfth-century Cistercians reused this text rather than continuing to use the *Exordium cistercii*. They rewrote the *Exordium parvum* at the same time that a number of Burgundian abbeys received pancartes from their local bishops, each confirming in one long document privileges and donations of land.⁶⁶ In 1147, Geoffrey, bishop of Langres—himself a former Cistercian monk—issued a set of pancartes for Clairvaux; the same bishop also issued pancartes for La Crête and Auberive, although the dates for these documents are less certain. La Ferté received a set of pancartes around 1153. And just after the death of count William II of Nevers in 1147, monks from Pontigny composed a retrospective “foundation charter” detailing the various

⁶³In his *Historica ecclesiastica* 8.26, Ordericus Vitalis reports that he had held his office in a “blameworthy fashion” and “foolishly” left it after two years: Margorie Chibnall, ed. and trans., *The Ecclesiastical History of Orderic Vitalis*, vol. 4, *Books 7 and 8* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1973), 326. See also Waddell, *Narrative and Legislative Texts*, 159.

⁶⁴Trent, Biblioteca comunale MS 1711, which is central to Waddell's argument for the relation between the *Exordium cistercii* and the Cistercian customary from the 1130s, originated at Villers-Betnach in the filiation of Morimond, while other copies of the *Exordium cistercii*, also usually introducing customaries, are in manuscripts associated with the filiations of both Clairvaux and Morimond: Waddell, *Narrative and Legislative Texts*, 137–138.

⁶⁵Waddell, *Narrative and Legislative Texts*, 228–229.

⁶⁶For pancartes as a way to record memories, see Bouchard, *Rewriting Saints and Ancestors*, 20–21.

donations that contributed to their estates at St. Procaire.⁶⁷ The confluence of these events suggests that many Cistercian abbeys around mid-century used the authority of local bishops to confirm their property and practices. The new *Exordium parvum*, whose additions now made it a description of the foundation of the order rather than a single abbey, also asserted that the Cistercian project from its beginning had authorization from bishops, papal legates, and even the pope.

This reworked *Exordium parvum* has a juridical and explanatory tone that compares the Cistercians to Molesme and describes the particularities of the Cistercians' observance of the Benedictine Rule. The chapter that portrays the monks' departure from Molesme, for example, insists that they professed to obey the Benedictine Rule, and describes their grief while at Molesme since they "had knowingly incurred the accusation of perjury."⁶⁸ Other chapters justify the Cistercian's observances and early statutes by explaining their institution in relation to the Rule, to Benedict's example, to church canons, and to the permission of their bishop. It may be that this defensiveness stemmed from the ongoing debates between the Cistercians and other monks over proper practices and the recruitment of novices. Certainly, by the time Idung of Prüfening wrote his *Dialogus duorum monachorum* (between 1155 and 1160) he quoted directly from the reworked sections of the *Exordium parvum*.⁶⁹ But these were also the years in which the Cistercians sought to incorporate the congregations from Savigny and Obazine and convince their monks to adopt Cistercian customs.⁷⁰ This new *Exordium parvum* provided guidance for these new congregations. It places the Cistercians' observances in a historical context, gives reasons for the Cistercians' observances, and reminds the new monks that ecclesiastical authorities had supported the order's beginnings. In an environment in which the differences between monastic observances had become apparent, the Cistercians' account of their history began to employ a language of reform.

VI. The *Exordium magnum* and Cycles of Reform

It was not until Conrad of Eberbach composed the *Exordium magnum* in the last decades of the twelfth century and the first years of the thirteenth that the

⁶⁷For Clairvaux's pancartes, see Jean Waquet, Jean-Marc Roger, and Laurent Veysiere, eds., *Recueil des chartres de l'abbaye de Clairvaux au XIIe siècle* (Paris: Comité des Travaux Historiques et Scientifiques, 2004). For La Ferté, see Duby, *Recueil des pancartes de l'abbaye de La Ferté*. For Pontigny, see Garrigues, *Le premier cartulaire de l'abbaye cistercienne de Pontigny*. For Auberive and La Crête, see Bouchard, *Holy Entrepreneurs*, 14–15.

⁶⁸*Exordium parvum* 3, Waddell, *Narrative and Legislative Texts*, 421: "Et ob hoc periurii crimen scienter incurrisse." This stress on the juridical aspects of the monastic profession echoes Bernard of Clairvaux's treatise *On Precept and Dispensation*, which he wrote in the early 1140s. Bernard's position on the question of perjury is complex: a monk who has sworn to live "according to the Rule" has not broken his vows as long as he lives according to "the good customs of his house"; it is a different matter for the Cistercians, and those like them, "who have promised an integral literal observance of the Rule rather than life according to the Rule": Bernard of Clairvaux, *Liber de praecepto et dispensatione* 47–49, in Leclercq and Rochais, *Sancti Bernard Opera*, 3:285–287.

⁶⁹R. B. C. Huygens, "Le moine Idung et ses deux ouvrages: 'Argumentum super quatuor questionibus' et 'Dialogus duorum monachorum,'" *Studi Medievali* 12 (1972): 291–470. Idung quotes from the *Exordium parvum* 3, 12, and 15. See Auberger, *L'unanimité cistercienne primitive*, 355–375.

⁷⁰The Cistercians incorporated the congregations of Savigny and Obazine in 1147. The vita of Stephen of Obazine provides evidence for the transition to the new customary, for it notes that the monks from Obazine had started to follow a Cistercian customary around 1142 but then had to revise their books when they became affiliated with the order in 1147: Waddell, *Narrative and Legislative Texts*, 228–229.

Cistercians produced a history of their order that emphasized reform. The *Exordium magnum* is a complex text, more often considered within the genre of Cistercian exemplum collections than as a Cistercian history. It consists of six books that provide a general history of monasticism, an account of the foundation of the Cistercian order, and exemplary stories of illustrious Cistercians, all presented within the context of providential history. Unfortunately, we know little about Conrad, other than that he was a monk at Clairvaux and the abbot of the German abbey of Eberbach, that he died in 1221, and that he had access to a variety of well-known Cistercian texts, including the *Exordium parvum*, Bernard of Clairvaux's treatises and letters, and the collection of Cistercian exempla assembled by Herbert of Clairvaux. Conrad's presentation of Cistercian history reflects both particular Cistercian concerns at the end of the century and the culmination of nearly a century of rivalry between black and white monks. Most strikingly, Conrad depicts a monastic history that illustrates how divine grace repeatedly reinforced a penitential ideal and helped Christians battle against human weakness and monastic negligence. He thus depicts a Cistercian reform that integrates the Cistercians' history into a progression that moves from ideal to decline to restoration.

Conrad tells a story familiar to modern scholars of monasticism. He presents successive eras in which Christians seek to follow Jesus's model of perfect penance, but he suggests that at the end of each era, human negligence corrupts this ideal. Our familiarity with these cycles of reform and corruption obscures the *Exordium magnum's* unusual characteristics. It is rare that monastic chronicles begin with Christ. Universal chronicles, such as that of Otto of Freising, start with creation; national histories often begin with mythic origins; histories of monasteries usually begin with their founders. Orderic Vitalis is one of the few exceptions; what he may have started as the history of his monastery became a history of the church modeled on Eusebius.⁷¹ But Conrad's history is neither the history of the church nor a history of a particular monastery; rather it is the history of a penitential ideal that began with Jesus.⁷² Rather than focusing on Jesus as God-become-Man—emphasizing the salvific sacrifice of the Incarnation or celebrating the hope of the Resurrection—Conrad instead presents Jesus as an exemplar who “preached to the world the saving way of perfect penance.”⁷³ Like his near contemporaries, Valdes and Francis of Assisi, Conrad emphasizes the Jesus from Matthew and Luke who advocates to those who would be perfect that they sell all that they have, give to the poor, and follow him. It is the history of this Christian search for perfection that Conrad wishes to relate.

Conrad divides his monastic history into four periods that show the struggle between Jesus's penitential ideal and the corruption and relaxation caused by negligence and human weakness. The penitential life of the apostles who established a common life in Jerusalem and Antioch represent Conrad's first era. Even the apostles, however, recognized that their narrow path was not for everyone, and they expanded the charitable preaching of the church so as to include “the weaker and more fainthearted” and “carry

⁷¹Orderic, however, is interested in showing the working of divine mercy and justice in the world rather than creating a history of monasticism. See Elisabeth Mégier, “Jesus Christ, a Protagonist of Anglo-Norman History? History and Theology in Orderic Vitalis's *Historia ecclesiastica*,” in *Orderic Vitalis: Life, Works and Interpretations*, ed. Charles C. Rozier, Daniel Roach, Giles E. M. Gaspar, and Elisabeth van Houts (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2016), 260–283.

⁷²He may have borrowed this idea from John Cassian, *The Conferences* 18.5, trans. Boniface Ramsey (New York: Newman, 1997), 637–638. Cassian uses his monastic history to define different forms of monasticism and to celebrate the virtues learned in cenobitic life.

⁷³*Exordium magnum* 1.1, in Ward and Savage, trans., Elder, ed., *Great Beginning of Cîteaux*, 47.

the less fit to the heights of perfection.”⁷⁴ The monastic fathers—Anthony, Pachomius, Basil, Benedict, and Maur—initiated the second era. They too created communities dedicated to the perfect life of penance, but invasions destroyed many of their monasteries and left others reduced to “negligence and desolation.”⁷⁵ The third era was that of Cluny. Odo of Cluny “restored the completely ruined monastic way of life of his times to the ancient vigor of holy observance,” but again, negligence eroded Cluny’s customs.⁷⁶ Finally, when “monastic life had fallen into such a torpor of negligence that it seemed in many places as if those seeking conversion of life were coming closer to peril than to progress, and that there was no hope of restoration anywhere,” a fourth era began: Robert, Alberic, Stephen, and their companions left Molesme to renew monastic observances in the forest of Cîteaux.⁷⁷

Conrad’s narrative of corruption and reform draws on earlier Cistercian texts, but he reshaped these older accounts to defend the Cistercian order from both internal and external threats. The internal threat was the danger of negligence. To combat this, Conrad recounted stories from the Cistercians’ past to provide his audience of monks with models to which they could conform. As he remarked in his verse introduction, he wrote his work for those who sought to “follow in the footprints of the ancient fathers,” and he provided this audience with saintly examples of Cistercians who “bore the marks of Christ” and lived so that “their works were in harmony with their words.”⁷⁸ Conrad drew on an already-established Cistercian interest in creating written collections of stories that described Cistercian holy men and miraculous visions, and he reworked Herbert of Clairvaux’s *Liber miraculorum* to make the moral lessons of these tales more explicit and to fit them into his own sense of providential history.⁷⁹ Conrad’s use of the order’s earlier history thus presented moral examples to aid the spiritual formation of his monastic audience and prevent a corrupting relaxation of rules and standards.

Conrad’s defense of the Cistercians against external threats, in comparison, is less moral and exemplary and more concerned with the presentation of documentary evidence and reasoned arguments. This external threat came from those who accused the Cistercians of an irregular and unauthorized foundation. Conrad complained that “monks of the black order, mostly those living in the provinces of Germany,” asserted that “our holy fathers left the monastery of Molesme scandalously and disobediently, against the will of their abbot.” This claim was a “shameless lie,” Conrad insisted, and he offered his text to supply “true and sincere evidence” based on reason and authority to counter these false stories.⁸⁰ Conrad also provided material to refute another critique of the Cistercians: the idea that Cistercian monks were hypocrites who criticized other monks but who themselves had lost track of the poverty and isolation they had initially espoused. This critique had a long lineage, starting with Peter the Venerable’s portrayal of the Cistercians as Pharisees in a letter he wrote to Bernard

⁷⁴*Exordium magnum* 1.2, in Ward and Savage, trans., Elder, ed., *Great Beginning of Cîteaux*, 50. All translations are from this volume. For the Latin text, see Conrad of Eberbach, *Exordium magnum cisterciense sive Narratio de initio cisterciensis ordinis*, ed. Bruno Griesser (Turnholt: Brepols, 1994).

⁷⁵*Exordium magnum* 1.6, in Ward and Savage, trans., Elder, ed., *Great Beginning of Cîteaux*, 58.

⁷⁶For Odo’s restoration of monastic observance, see *Exordium magnum* 1.7, in Ward and Savage, trans., Elder, ed., *Great Beginning of Cîteaux*, 58; but then for a long description of Cluny’s negligence, see *Exordium magnum* 1.9, in Ward and Savage, trans., Elder, ed., *Great Beginning of Cîteaux*, 67–68.

⁷⁷*Exordium magnum* 1.10–11, in Ward and Savage, trans., Elder, ed., *Great Beginning of Cîteaux*, 71–73.

⁷⁸*Exordium magnum*, prologue, in Ward and Savage, trans., Elder, ed., *Great Beginning of Cîteaux*, 27–39.

⁷⁹McGuire, “Structure and Consciousness,” 33–90.

⁸⁰*Exordium magnum* 1.10, in Ward and Savage, trans., Elder, ed., *Great Beginning of Cîteaux*, 69.

of Clairvaux; by the late twelfth-century, this picture of Cistercian hypocrisy had become a trope for satirical writers. Conrad did not mention this critique directly, but by supplying evidence that denied the Cistercians' unauthorized foundation, he responded to these other criticisms as well.

To address the Cistercians' critics, Conrad reproduced the dossier of documents that Stephen Harding had assembled, but he rewrote the linking narrative to combine the *Exordium cistercii's* emphasis on divine grace with the *Exordium parvum's* stress on the approval of ecclesiastical authorities. As a result, he argued for a special place for the Cistercian order in his history of the penitential ideal. He repeated the claim made by the author of the revised *Exordium parvum* that the Cistercian founders thought they had incurred the "sin of perjury" while at Molesme, but he elaborated on the actions of the legate Hugh in absolving them of this concern.⁸¹ Furthermore, he turned the accusations of apostasy back against Robert and the monks who returned with him to Molesme, expanding the *Exordium parvum's* earlier brief comment that these men "did not love the wilderness" into an account of men who could not endure the narrow path of the new monastery.⁸² And, more than previous accounts of the Cistercian foundations, Conrad's descriptions of God's grace in fostering the Cistercian project developed comparisons with other monasteries. It was at such a time "when charity is cold and iniquity abounds" that God planted the seed that became the Cistercian order, and it was God who again brought the Cistercian "pearl of monasticism out of the dunghill of vice."⁸³ Conrad defended the Cistercians' foundation using the *Exordium parvum's* dossier of documents, but he also articulated a reforming narrative in which the Cistercians revived Jesus's penitential ideal after Cluny and other black monks had fallen into negligence. A text that the first Cistercians had created as a kind of foundation charter—recording a single new monastery's purpose and celebrating its links with ecclesiastical authorities—now supported a narrative describing cycles of reform and negligence that has had a long afterlife in shaping our understanding of Cistercian history.

VII. Conclusion

Medievalists often endeavor to find medieval eras that seem to usher in aspects of modernity. We have located a series of medieval renaissances and reformations—although no one, to my knowledge, has yet claimed a medieval Enlightenment. The terminology of reform adopts this teleological progress toward modernization while at the same time reproducing a theological cycle of corruption and reform that intertwines confessional narratives of religious history with Max Weber's analysis of charisma and its eventual routinization. From these accounts, we inherit a suspicion of institutions and fundamentally Protestant assumptions that associate the development of modernity with a return to early ideals and an emphasis on the literal reading of foundational texts.

The Cistercians' twelfth-century histories contribute two points to current discussions about reform. First, an understanding of the early kernel of the *Exordium parvum* as akin to a foundation charter accords with Steven Vanderputten's argument that what we call reform is often the process of creating and defining organizations and institutions. Rather than seeing institutions as either the inevitable routinization of charisma

⁸¹*Exordium magnum* 1.11–12, in Ward and Savage, trans., Elder, ed., *Great Beginning of Cîteaux*, 73–75.

⁸²*Exordium magnum* 1.15, in Ward and Savage, trans., Elder, ed., *Great Beginning of Cîteaux*, 82.

⁸³*Exordium magnum* 1.13, 1.16, in Ward and Savage, trans., Elder, ed., *Great Beginning of Cîteaux*, 77, 85.

or the rejuvenation of an earlier ideal, we should focus on the creative processes by which organizations gradually form. This process is especially interesting in eleventh- and twelfth-century Europe, when people began to have the legal tools and technologies of communication that made the early development of institutions possible. The Cistercians' gradual institutionalization of their order is not a sign that they abandoned their reforming ideals; instead, the development of the reforming language in their histories suggests that they began to present themselves as reformers in conjunction with these institutional developments.

Second, the Cistercians' twelfth-century narratives of their history remind us that not all change is reform. The initial kernel of the *Exordium parvum* presented two models of religious life: the monastery that was Molesme and the life of the desert that the men who left Molesme hoped to establish in their new community. Stephen Harding certainly looked to past models for his idea of the desert life, but he did not present this as a reform of the monastic ideal. The ecclesiastical officials who approved the new foundation, however, were accustomed to highlighting models from the past and using a language of comparison to justify their efforts to regulate the behavior of priests and to form an institutionalized papacy. Gradually, the Cistercians also adopted a rhetoric of reform, but this was a retrospective development. It was only after they created their new monastery and their order—when they needed to explain their actions and defend their customs—that the monks appealed to the past and criticized their contemporaries.

An analysis of the Cistercians' rhetoric of reform suggests we should be attentive to the particular ways that medieval people articulated their projects, the circumstances to which their rhetoric responded, and the ways they modified their language over time. The Cistercians' changing narratives about their beginnings demonstrate that the process of rethinking reform should not just focus on specific words such as *reformatio* or *renovatio* but should also explore the ways that people look to the past to authenticate current practices and affirm that their interpretations are right and true. Such language is often comparative and often polemical, but it does not necessarily describe what eleventh- and twelfth-century monks initially did as they experimented with new forms of religious life. The first Cistercians recognized that their initial foundation was new, they described their life as one in a desert rather than a monastery, and they depended on the authority of ecclesiastical officials to confirm their foundation and way of life, but they did not to call their initial project a reform. If we recognize that a language of reform is a form of justification and authentication, we can avoid the difficulties that arise when we impose on others a reforming narrative that is not necessarily theirs.

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