

*promoting access to White Rose research papers*



**Universities of Leeds, Sheffield and York**  
**<http://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/>**

---

This is an author produced version of a paper published in **The Journal of Ecclesiastical History**.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:  
<http://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/10455>

---

**Published paper**

Thompson, K. (2009) *The other Saint Bernard: The 'troubled and varied career' of Bernard of Abbeville, Abbot of Tiron*, *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 60 (4), pp. 657-672

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0022046909990042>

---

## **The Other Saint Bernard: the ‘troubled and varied career’ of Bernard of Abbeville, Abbot of Tiron**

‘A troubled and varied career.’<sup>1</sup> Such is David Knowles’ assessment of Bernard of Abbeville, founder of the abbey of Tiron, which lies in the wooded landscape of the Perche region between Alençon and Chartres in western France.<sup>2</sup> Bernard’s career is conventionally coupled with those of Robert of Arbrissel and Vitalis of Mortain, all of them important figures in the ascetic revival in monasticism which gripped western Europe in the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries.<sup>3</sup> Yet while the Fontevraudine and Saignac affiliations that derived from Robert and Vitalis’s activities have been much discussed, there is no major history of the abbey of Tiron. The rigour of Bernard’s approach to monastic life, however, was much admired by contemporaries, including the kings, Henry I of England, David I of Scotland and Louis VI of France. His abbey of Tiron was the source for over a hundred communities throughout France and perhaps surprisingly in Scotland, Wales and England.<sup>4</sup> The speed with which these daughter houses were established over such a broad area was remarkable, but the impetus was not sustained, and the so-called ‘Order of Tiron’ had ceased to be an influential force within the western monastic tradition by the beginning of the thirteenth century.

The sources for the early history of the abbey of Tiron are fuller than for many other contemporary foundations. There is a cartulary or register of titles to property, compiled, according to its nineteenth century editor, in the 1160s and several references in near contemporary sources, the earliest of which dates from the 1120s.<sup>5</sup> Above all, however, there is a life of Bernard of Abbeville, apparently written at Tiron, by Geoffrey<sup>6</sup>, who describes himself as the least of monks, *monachorum omnium infimus*, probably within twenty five years of Bernard’s death in April 1116.<sup>7</sup> The *Vita Bernardi* lies in a tradition of hagiographical writing that stretches back to Athanasius’ life of St Anthony. By the eleventh century collections of founders’ miracle stories<sup>8</sup> had evolved into a powerful tool that could serve a political purpose in defending communities from lay interference, and it was not uncommon for houses to commission lives of their founders.<sup>9</sup>

Marbod, bishop of Rennes was commissioned, for example, to write a life of Abbot Robert of Chaise Dieu and in the twelfth century Baudri of Bourgeuil would write a life of Robert of Arbrissel at the request of Abbess Petronilla of Fontevraud.<sup>10</sup> The *Vita Bernardi* returns to the older approach, however, in which members of a community recorded the traditions of their houses.

It is a lengthy and repetitious work, which, at the turn of the twentieth century, was the subject of detailed scrutiny by the German scholar, Johannes von Walter. He concluded that it was an amalgam of two earlier works: a life of Bernard that emphasised his links with his local aristocratic patrons, the Rotrou family, and another that described his connection with the cathedral at Chartres.<sup>11</sup> Further investigation is required to nuance Walter's work, but his suggestion is important for highlighting the erratic quality of the *vita*.<sup>12</sup> Bernard's life before the foundation of Tiron is portrayed as a restless round of wanderings, interspersed with a series of incidents bearing remarkable similarities to one another, which prompted David Knowles to remark that Bernard's 'biographer gives us glimpses without supplying the links of causality that might join the disconnected episodes.' A re-examination of Bernard's career in the context of those of his contemporaries and in the light of recent work on the twelfth century reformation may however begin to recover those links of causality.

The *vita* tells us little about Bernard's parents or his childhood in Abbeville. Unlike the lives of Vitalis of Mortain and Robert of Arbrissel, the *Vita Bernardi* does not even record the names of Bernard's parents, although the prominence of the name Bernard among twelfth century Ponthévin lords perhaps links him with the elite of that area.<sup>13</sup> It does assert, however, that he enjoyed the best education that was available,

Encouraged by his family to the study of letters, God's grace took him from the bosom of his family to give him ready access to everything that would educate him. As a result his understanding of grammar and rhetoric flourished, as did his considerable skills in the art of literature.<sup>14</sup>

No indication is given about the location of these studies, but since Bernard died as an old man in the 1110s, he must have been educated around the 1050s, and therefore he probably studied in a cathedral or monastic school. For a Ponthevin Amiens or Laon would have been the nearest option, although the *vita* gives the impression that Bernard's studies took place in Ponthieu.<sup>15</sup> Bernard may therefore have studied in his native Abbeville at the monastery of Saint Riquier.

Bernard led an upright life throughout the period of his studies, according to the *vita*, and its reference to his adopting the regular habit of a canon may hint that he was intended for a cathedral chapter, or that he was already showing interest in the communal life. Such an interest might account for his decision to go southwards towards Aquitaine, for Walter of Autheil's foundation at Lesterps in the diocese of Limoges was at the peak of its fame.<sup>16</sup> In the event, however, he settled in Poitiers, the stronghold of the counts of Poitou, who were also dukes of Aquitaine. In the 1040s and 1050s, the city was a major centre of learning. It had a long intellectual tradition dating back to Roman times and in the early eleventh century the school at Saint-Hilaire-le-Grand was made famous by Hildegard, a pupil of Fulbert of Chartres. Although the author of the *vita* suggests that Bernard came to Poitiers in search of the monastic life, it is possible that he also sought to study and a *magister scholarum* at Poitiers does appear in a charter of 1060 at precisely the point when Bernard is likely to have been living in the city.<sup>17</sup>

During his time in the city, Bernard joined the abbey of St Cyprian, a traditional Benedictine community with close links to the comital dynasty.<sup>18</sup> Its leader was Abbot Reginald, who had taken up office in November 1073, and Bernard's profession must have taken place after that date since the *vita* says that Bernard was much influenced by the abbot's teaching. Reginald was a learned man, with a reputation as an advocate, and a correspondent of Lanfranc, as well as one of the earliest readers of Anselm's *Monologion*.<sup>19</sup> He had spent a period as a teacher, probably in Poitiers, since he was a native of Poitou, and had then become first a monk and subsequently prior at La Chaise Dieu, the community that had gathered in the 1040s in the Livradois. Under the leadership of Robert of Turlande (d. 1067), this community attempted, in the words of its modern

historian, “une sorte de synthèse entre l’érémétisme et le monachisme”.<sup>20</sup> During the 1050s and 1060s a number of houses dependent on Chaise Dieu had been founded and Abbot Reginald retained his friendship network within that community after his appointment to St Cyprian. Nevertheless the monastery that he directed and Bernard of Abbeville entered remained one of the wealthiest in Aquitaine.<sup>21</sup> Abbot Reginald himself was a man with considerable administrative, as well as spiritual experience, for he was a valued servant of Pope Urban II, for whom he collected a papal aid from the prelates and abbots of Aquitaine, Gascony and lower Burgundy.<sup>22</sup>

From this point on then Bernard was committed to the monastic life, but he had entered a house where his talents and his education might prove useful, for St Cyprian was a community much favoured by the dukes of Aquitaine. In taking monastic vows Bernard differed from Vitalis of Mortain and Robert of Arbrissel who both remained secular clergy and retained links with their places of origin; Vitalis served as a chaplain to Robert, count of Mortain, lord of his birthplace of Tierceville, while Robert entered the household of Bishop Sylvester of Rennes, in whose diocese Arbrissel lay.<sup>23</sup> Although the opportunities of the secular church were not available to Bernard, he none the less appears, of the three, to have enjoyed the most success as a career churchman. The *vita* indicates that he rose to be Prior of Saint-Savin-sur-Gartempe, an important and ancient foundation that had led the monastic recovery after the Viking attacks, and from that position became Abbot of St Cyprian in Poitiers in succession to Abbot Reginald.<sup>24</sup> There is little independent evidence on Bernard’s achievements in these offices, but St Cyprian’s cartulary refers to him as abbot and art historians tell us that the rebuilding of the abbey church of Saint-Savin, with its remarkable frescoes, dates from the late eleventh century, the period of when the *vita* says he held office there.<sup>25</sup>

Like Abbot Reginald before him, Bernard promoted the reforms that gathered pace in the church after the papacy of Gregory VII (1073-85) and he insisted on the strictest monastic observance. In this he would have received support from the diocesan, Bishop Peter II of Poitiers (1087-1115), who was also a noted advocate of reform.<sup>26</sup> On occasion, we are told that Bernard encountered

opposition within the communities which he strove to reform, both from those who did not share the same standards of communal observance and from those who wished to continue the old relationships with the secular world. The *vita* indicates that at Saint-Savin he had supported Abbot Gervase in raising standards of monastic conduct, but he was unable to support Gervase when the abbot sought to secure the revenues of a particular church for the community.<sup>27</sup> This unwillingness to pursue the traditional revenues that had been commonly used to sustain Benedictine houses indicates the line of Bernard's thinking, for it shows his interest in the apostolic approach to communal living, which stressed the need to avoid involvement in worldly business and to embrace poverty.<sup>28</sup>

By this stage in his career, moreover, while pursuing higher communal standards, Bernard is portrayed in the *vita* as experimenting with periods as a hermit. Perhaps his interest had been stimulated by Abbot Reginald's connections with La Chaise Dieu, or by a friendship with a near neighbour at Saint-Savin, Peter of l'Etoile, whose oratory dedicated to St Julian became the focal point of a monastery at Fontgombault on the River Creuse.<sup>29</sup> There was no shortage of models,<sup>30</sup> and an eremitic period may indeed have been expected of those who were experienced monks, for the very first chapter of Benedict's rule describes anchorites or hermits

These are they who are no longer in the first fervour of their religious life but have been tested for a long time in the monastery and have learnt, with the assistance of many brothers, how to do battle against the devil, and now, well equipped to leave the fraternal battle-line for the solitary combat of the desert, they are strong enough to do battle against the vices of the body and the mind on their own, with their own resources, relying on God's aid, but now without the support of anyone else.<sup>31</sup>

During his tenure of the abbacy of St Cyprian, Bernard encountered another figure who was to be influential in the new monasticism, Robert of Arbrissel. At the Council of Poitiers in November 1100 the two men were apparently highly critical of King Philip I's marital conduct and were the only members of the council to withstand the displeasure of Duke William IX of Aquitaine (1086-

1126), who acted on the king's behalf. Such is the assertion of the *vita*, although there is no mention of Bernard and Robert in the other sources that cover the council, nor of the incident in either of Robert of Arbrissel's own *vitae*.<sup>32</sup> It is quite possible however that Bernard, as a prominent local churchman and advocate of reform, and Robert, a friend of the reforming diocesan, Peter of Poitiers, might well have been vocal in reaffirming the king's excommunication, since the development of canon law on marriage was one of the outcomes of reform.<sup>33</sup>

At this point, however, Bernard's hitherto extremely successful career stalled. As Abbot of St Cyprian he makes little impact on contemporary sources, which are united only in their observation that he left the house. William of Malmesbury, writing in the 1120s mentions Bernard's apparently voluntary departure: *relicto amplissimarum divitiarum coenobio*,<sup>34</sup> while the chronicle of Saint-Maixent, also dating from the mid 1120s, comments specifically on Bernard's resignation: *Anno millesimo centesimo... Obiit quoque Rainaldus, abba Sancti Cipriani, cui successit Bernardus qui reliquit abbatiam*.<sup>35</sup> These laconic observations suggest that Abbot Bernard's departure from St Cyprian was a great cause célèbre of the day, so well-known at the time that it needed no amplification. The events that led up to it, however, can now be reconstructed only with difficulty.

Our first piece of evidence is a letter sent by Pope Pascal II to Bishop Peter of Poitiers, in which he instructs the bishop to deprive the "abbot of the Poitevin monastery of St Cyprian" of his office and castigates the bishop for permitting the appointment without the approval of the abbot of Cluny.<sup>36</sup> The letter is undated, so we do not know how quickly this challenge to Bernard's appointment was made, but we do know, both from the *vita* and from the independent testimony of Orderic Vitalis, that Bernard resisted it in the papal court itself at Rome.<sup>37</sup> In the years after Pope Urban's visit to France in the mid 1090s there was increasing reliance on papal justice, so Bernard's recourse to the papal court is not surprising. The time that he had spent at St Cyprian under the leadership of the *pererator... eloquentissimus*, Abbot Reginald, had presumably developed Bernard's skills as an advocate, preparing him for the defence of his house, but why did Bernard find himself caught up in an ecclesiastical power struggle in which the abbot of Cluny sought to control the abbey of St

Cyprian? Was it simply a manifestation of Cluniac influence that had been increasing in Poitiers throughout the eleventh century? Under Duke William VIII (1058-86), a Cluniac foundation, the abbey of Montierneuf, had been made in the north of the city and the pope's letter to Bishop Peter mentions Cluniac interest in another Poitevin abbey, that of Maillezais.<sup>38</sup> Their claims over St Cyprian went back at least to the tenth century, when Abbo of Fleury had referred to Abbot Odo of Cluny's *ditio* or authority over the Poitevin house,<sup>39</sup> and they may have sought simply to seize their moment.

This interpretation is supported by a passage inserted in the early folios of the cartulary of St Cyprian. It appears with others between folios 8 and 21 and, like them, does not fit in with the geographical arrangement of the cartulary.<sup>40</sup> Its editor remarks that it was *écrite avec négligence*, and its drafting and position seem therefore to indicate some disorder and uncertainty in the community around the turn of the eleventh and twelfth centuries.<sup>41</sup> In it the achievements of Abbot Reginald's abbacy are outlined, including his resistance to Cluniac ambitions and a successful law suit against Marmoutier that supports his reputation as a famous advocate. On his death and while he was yet unburied, Bernard was hurriedly elected on his place, but his election was challenged by the Cluniacs who had recently taken papal advice. Bernard then set off for Cluny, where he informed the abbot and community that he was going to Rome to reply to these objections. He pleaded his case before the pope but without effect and he returned to Poitiers, where he realised that he would be unable to sustain the challenge and withdrew to the wilderness.<sup>42</sup>

Such is the account in the St Cyprian's cartulary, but the *vita* provides an additional dimension, for in its picture of Bernard's abbacy at St Cyprian, there is a description of how a disaffected element within the monastery resented Bernard's apostolic approach and sought to undermine him.

Overflowing with love, he began to admit everyone into the house and to lead the poor and humble to God. The monks, however, were lukewarm or cold, and more anxious about their present life than their future. From envy opposition began to develop and they said that the monastery lacked the means to accept so many.<sup>43</sup>

Attempts were made by this disaffected element to withhold the resources that Bernard used to minister to the poor, and when that failed Bernard's opponents fled to the Cluniacs, providing the material that would revive the eleventh-century attempts to take over St Cyprian.<sup>44</sup> This tension within St Cyprian illustrates a clear dilemma in monasticism at the turn of the eleventh and twelfth centuries. The monastic ideal required that the monks be separate, but Bernard was bringing the external community into the monastery. His opponents may genuinely have preferred the Cluniac approach with its emphasis on a highly developed liturgy, but it was Bernard's interest in the relief of the poor and his commitment to the apostolic life that triggered their attempt to bring him down.

Bernard was not at the abbey, but in a period of eremetical retreat when the news of his deposition was received, for the *vita* indicates that the monks sought him out with an episcopal mandate.<sup>45</sup> His response was immediate: he returned briefly to Poitiers and then, accompanied by a few of his closest associates from the wilderness retreat, he took himself to Rome. There he challenged the pope's decision personally and, it seems, bravely, for he appears to have alleged that the pope's decision owed more to his links with Cluny than to the application of the principles of justice. The *vita* includes a lengthy speech in which Bernard develops an argument against the overbearing powers of the "Archabbot" of Cluny. Here Bernard refers to the pre-eminence of the abbot of Cluny, who controlled appointments to lead its daughter houses, in contrast to the looser ties binding the affiliations which grew up around, for example La Chaise Dieu, and later the newer orders. His courage was apparently applauded and at some point someone appears to have quoted Prov. xxviii.1, for reference to the righteous man being as confident as a lion found its way into both the *vita* and Orderic's Ecclesiastical History.<sup>46</sup>

The outcome, as presented by St Cyprian's cartulary, is distinctly lower key than the triumph portrayed in the *vita*. While the cartulary consigns Bernard to the wilderness, acknowledging failure and tacitly alleging a lack of backbone, the *vita* suggests that Bernard chose not to resume his office when the pope restored it to him, remained for a period at the papal court and then withdrew to a hermit life in western Normandy with a papal commission to preach.<sup>47</sup> The cartulary

presents the view of a community which Bernard was unable or unwilling to defend against Cluniac pretensions and reflects St Cyprian's disappointment; the *vita* was written in the house that Bernard eventually established at Tiron, where his later achievements were celebrated and his reputation revered. In the *vita* therefore Bernard does not beat a retreat to the wilderness; the pope takes an active role in his career and suggests alternative opportunities for him. Paschal recognises a talented individual at the forefront of monastic thinking, whose attempts to implement new ideas are meeting with resistance. The *vita* presents Bernard's withdrawal to the wilderness in a positive light; he receives a roving commission from Pope Paschal, similar to that offered by Pope Urban to Bernard's friend, Robert of Arbrissel, so that Bernard's talents can be used in the service of reform.<sup>48</sup> The *vita*'s implication is that the pope removed Bernard from his old-fashioned community at St Cyprian, because he was too good for it, and there is even a hint, in its account of Bernard's role in the Council of Poitiers, that his outspoken advocacy of reform had offended the local potentate, Duke William.

In the opening years of the twelfth century then, Bernard found himself in an almost unique position. Although he remained a respected figure, he was an abbot without a house. He had progressed within the ecclesiastical establishment, but he had failed in his attempts to implement the more advanced, apostolic thinking that was being explored in the eremetical experiments of his friends, Vitalis of Mortain and Robert of Arbrissel. Although Bernard might appear to be one of the wandering monks, castigated at the beginning of the Benedictine Rule, his period in the wilderness gave him time to rethink and to find his space and his patron. The lesson seemed to be that, while charismatic figures, such as Walter of Lesterps, Robert of Turlande and latterly Peter of L'Etoile and Vitalis of Mortain, attracted followers and might eventually set up religious houses, it was hard to import their thinking into established communities. Advanced thinking apparently required new communities, yet even that was not without its risks, for Robert of Arbrissel had already had one unsuccessful attempt to institutionalise his approach when he had tried and failed to lead a community of canons at La Roe.<sup>49</sup>

Orderic Vitalis' account provides no details of this period of Bernard's life, stating simply that "after long wandering" Bernard settled in the vicinity of Chartres, but the *vita* places him in western Normandy, living on the Iles de Chausey and preaching in Coutances against the twin evils identified by eleventh-century reformers, clerical marriage and simony.<sup>50</sup> Again there is no independent evidence to corroborate this assertion, but it is interesting that Adam de Port, one of the benefactors of the Tironensian order in England, originated from the area, and King Henry I of England (1100-35), who later supported Bernard, had been count of the Cotentin at the turn of the eleventh and twelfth centuries.<sup>51</sup> The *vita*'s next image is of a community settling around Bernard at Chenedet in the forest of Fougères<sup>52</sup>:

When it became known by word of mouth that he would not return to St Cyprian, nor to his dwelling on the island, which was unpopular with everyone because of the difficulty of access and departure, many began to flock to him, wishing to be instructed by his teaching and strengthened from the example of his life.<sup>53</sup>

Although Bernard, the hermit and teacher, was now more accessible, space and patron were still not yet appropriate. The *vita* tells us that the local lord, Ralph of Fougères, was anxious about the community's effect on the hunting in his forest, and sent Bernard to a site not far from Savigny, where Vitalis of Mortain had already established a cell. For Bernard, and probably for Vitalis too, this was unacceptable and Bernard began to search for another patron. He opened negotiations with Rotrou, Count of Mortagne, son-in-law of King Henry I of England and one of the members of the first crusading expedition to Jerusalem.<sup>54</sup> Rotrou, who was increasingly calling himself count of the Perche, offered Bernard a place to settle in the Perche at Arcisses (Eure-et-Loir, cant. Nogent-le-Rotrou, comm. Brunelles), some five kilometres north-east of the comital stronghold of Nogent-le-Rotrou.<sup>55</sup> Although the settlement process would be far from straightforward, it was in the Perche that Bernard eventually established Tiron, the community in which he would pursue the monastic ideal he had failed to instil at St Cyprian.

The *vita* is at pains to portray the virtues of a holy man, but it cannot disguise the important part played in Bernard's career by the local elite that supported him. Negotiation took place between Bernard and the lords who controlled the localities, and there is even a hint that these patrons may have competed for the favours of the holy man. Bernard left the protection of Ralph of Fougères to enter that of Count Rotrou of Mortagne, and he had other noble patrons.<sup>56</sup> Countess Adela of Blois, the daughter of William the Conqueror, attempted to persuade Bernard to a new site, and by the time of his death in 1116 Bernard had attracted royal patronage, as well as a popular following.<sup>57</sup> Both Louis VI of France and Henry I of England made gifts to his foundation, while David, brother and eventual successor of the Scottish king, Alexander I (1107-24), came to Tiron to visit Bernard.<sup>58</sup> Kings and princes had always sought the advice of holy men;<sup>59</sup> Simon of Crépy after his entry into religion had promoted peace between William the Conqueror and his eldest son, Robert Curthose, while Vitalis of Mortain would try to reconcile Robert Curthose and Henry I before the battle of Tinchebrai.<sup>60</sup> Robert of Turlande had succeeded in securing the patronage of the lords of the Auvergne for La Chaise-Dieu, yet Bernard, like his friend, Robert of Arbrissel, seems to have been particularly adept at building relations with local magnates and attracting the attention of the mighty.<sup>61</sup>

The warmth of these relationships is perhaps surprising. All the accounts of Bernard's activities stress that he attracted large numbers of followers, although at no point do they commit to numbers, and the presence of large and unstable populations within a locality can only have unnerved local magnates.<sup>62</sup> Ralph of Fougères' discomfort is described in the *vita* and he took action to manage the hermit population by relocating Bernard's part of it.<sup>63</sup> Other lords seem to have admired Bernard the man, but misunderstood the nature of the new approach. Count Rotrou of the Perche's initial attempt to support Bernard was inappropriate, for he offered him a well-appointed site with every amenity, while the *vita* asserts that Bernard preferred the harsher conditions of the undeveloped forest, where the community of Tiron was eventually established.<sup>64</sup> In a gesture reminiscent of Peter Damian's attempt to express his admiration for the monks of Fonte Avellosa, the count of Nevers offered Tiron a great vase, which was presumably intended for liturgical use.

Nobles' gifts of gold and plate to monastic communities were not unusual and were one of the traditional ways in which the community's intercession could be purchased and religious ritual embellished.<sup>65</sup> This was not the right thing for Bernard's house, however, for he sought to escape the worldly temptation of wealth, and the vase was sold to sustain the community during the great famine of 1110.<sup>66</sup>

All this makes it abundantly clear that Bernard, despite his 'troubled and varied career', was more than able to operate within contemporary power structures. He had functioned as a prior and abbot of important and well-established houses and he had won the praise of a pope. Although the equilibrium of his career was disturbed by tensions with some members of the communities that he led and through them with the Cluniacs, Bernard was an eleventh-century career churchman and skills appropriate to that career are apparent. He retained close ties with his diocesans, Peter of Poitiers and Ivo of Chartres, and above all, Bernard knew how to deal with nobles. He easily reached an understanding with Count Rotrou of the Perche., and the *vita* describes how the countess Beatrix, mother of Count Rotrou, settled at Tiron in her retirement. After her death her daughter, Juliana, lived there in the house that the countess-dowager had built.<sup>67</sup> This is reminiscent of the unreformed Anglo-Saxon church, where noble women might live with religious communities, but even more of the empress Matilda's close association with the monks of Bec at Notre-Dame du Pré in Rouen.<sup>68</sup> Finally Bernard was content to accept royal hospitality in visiting Henry I in Normandy and did not disdain to baptise the sons of the king of France at Tiron.<sup>69</sup>

So what was new about Bernard's approach? He had spent some time in the western parts of Normandy; might he have been influenced by Celtic traditions? Could his approach be a descendant of the Celtic ascetism which Julia Smith contrasts with Carolingian authority<sup>70</sup>? Many of the practices described in the *vita* are reminiscent of the spirituality of the Celtic monks; Bernard is not depicted in prayer up to his neck in water in the manner of St Cuthbert, but he did live on an island and search out roots for his food.<sup>71</sup> He could also be described as a wandering preacher like the *peregrini*, the Irish monks who contributed to the Merovingian missions.<sup>72</sup> Bernard's personal

ascetism is not in doubt; he was interested in the imitation of Christ, the apostolic life of poverty and the route to God with the least worldly distraction.<sup>73</sup> By the turn of the twelfth century however these interests were becoming mainstream, and his career mirrors those of several other conscientious eleventh century ecclesiastics, who sought personal and institutional revitalisation in the ascetic tradition. There is therefore no hint that Bernard was suspected of heresy. While Marbod of Rennes might express reservations about Robert of Arbrissel's practices and Bernard's protector, Ivo of Chartres, might be ambivalent towards another wavering monk, Bernard did not fall foul of the episcopal authorities in the same way as Henry of Lausanne.<sup>74</sup> Bernard had condemned the behaviour of the married priests at Coutances, but his preaching did not raise popular resentment against the clergy, as did Henry's at Le Mans in the 1110s and other sites for the next thirty years.<sup>75</sup> Bernard's background as a career churchman perhaps enabled him to deal on equal terms with bishops and to explain his thinking. He was, in the end, in and of the ecclesiastical establishment and so presented no challenge to the hierarchy.

Bernard's contribution to reform was to insist on improved discipline: clergy should not be married; monastic communities should not hold parish church revenues; the individual monk needed to discipline himself and in self-denial achieve his route to God. There is little that is radically new here, but he must have delivered it with a verve and force that impressed his contemporaries.<sup>76</sup> We know about the power of Bernard's oratory from the effect he had in the papal curia, when the pope himself was moved, and his preaching appears to have carried similar conviction. Bernard clearly possessed a personal charisma that was out of the ordinary. His preaching and above all his personal example seem to have attracted and motivated followers. Just as students were attracted to the great figures of the the eleventh century cathedral schools by the force of their personality and their example,<sup>77</sup> so crowds flocked to Bernard.

Many monks, holy men and religious from various monasteries, prompted by his reputation for holiness, hurried to him in crowds, in order to see the new Anthony, living in the wilderness, and to follow in the footsteps of his poverty. Nobles also gathered from all

parts and, submitting themselves as new recruits to almighty God, sought to live with him.<sup>78</sup>

The *vita* shows us a charismatic holy man around whom a following had settled in forested and inaccessible locations, but it would be wrong to see Bernard as an 'alternative' figure, one who stood outside society and its hierarchies. While he worked among social outcasts and attracted large numbers of followers, he dealt with those followers in entirely conventional ways.<sup>79</sup> Faced with growing numbers of adherents, Bernard was obliged to order their lives and he did so in the only way that he, a career monk, understood - he imposed a rule. The rule as he knew it was not quite appropriate, so he adapted it. He eliminated some of the psalmody and he substituted manual labour.<sup>80</sup> These changes freed his community from dependency on the lay world, but it was also likely that, without the benefit of the spiritual revenues available to Benedictine communities, they were necessary for survival in a woodland environment. Contemporary commentators are agreed on the contrast between the increasing numbers of Bernard's followers and the meagreness of their endowments. It seems plain, however, that, as numbers grew, new communities would need to be established before their immediate environment became exhausted. This might perhaps account for the rapid spread of Tironensians, for there is evidence of communities in the Perche and Poitou well before Pope Calixtus's confirmation in 1119.<sup>81</sup> Thus a network of communities evolved not unlike that which had grown up in emulation of La Chaise Dieu, where Bernard's former mentor, Abbot Reginald, had received his monastic formation.

Bernard and others such as Robert of Arbrissel or Vitalis of Mortain established communities for their followers, but the second generation was a crucial turning point. Where Cîteaux, for example, was blessed with an organiser in Stephen Harding for its second abbot, Tiron's second abbot is known only by name, Hugh, and as the twelfth century passed, the community appears to have lost some of its appeal. The Cistercian order continued to attract individuals of the highest calibre and in the formidable personality of Bernard of Clairvaux it had, among much else, a publicist of no mean talent. The Savignac order was marginally more successful than Tiron because it attracted

the support of King Stephen of England, but it eventually amalgamated with the Cistercians. Fontevraud's formula was novel and its royal connections spectacular - first with the French queen, Bertrada de Montfort, and then with her descendants, the Angevin kings of England. Tiron, meanwhile, faltered. Without its charismatic leader it was simply one more monastic foundation. In modern marketing parlance its 'brand' was not distinctive. Although it produced its founder's *vita* and his tomb received royal visitors in the early days after his death, the *vita* was not widely disseminated in the middle ages, and it is likely that it survived only in a manuscript preserved at Tiron itself. "The links of causality" for which Dom David Knowles searched the *vita* in vain are perhaps supplied by viewing Bernard of Abbeville as a career churchman of great talent and personality, whose interest in the apostolic approach alienated some members of the well-established community he led at Poitiers, forcing him to leave and seek a new patron who could guarantee the conditions he required for his particular experiment in communal living.

Kathleen Thompson

---

The author would like to thank Michael Clanchy, Lindy Grant, Christopher Holdsworth and Edmund King for their comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

<sup>1</sup> David Knowles, *The monastic order in England*, 2nd ed., Cambridge 1966, i. 200-2.

<sup>2</sup> Thiron-Gardais (Eure-et-Loir, ch. I. du cant.). A tour of the site can be found on the internet at [http://www.perchethironnais.com/patri\\_info\\_thiron.htm](http://www.perchethironnais.com/patri_info_thiron.htm)

<sup>3</sup> For general accounts, see L.K. Little, *Religious poverty and the profit economy in medieval Europe*, London 1978, 76-8; C.H. Lawrence, *Medieval monasticism: forms of religious life in Western Europe in the middle ages*, 2nd ed., London 1989, 156; Giles Constable, *The reformation of the twelfth century* (Trevelyan lectures, 1985), Cambridge 1996.

<sup>4</sup> G.W.S. Barrow, 'The royal house and the religious orders', *The kingdom of the Scots: government, church and society from the eleventh to the fourteenth century*, London 1973, 165-87, originally published as 'Scottish rulers and the religious orders, 1070-1153', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5s, iii (1953), 77-100. See now also, Kathleen Thompson, 'The first hundred years of the Abbey of Tiron: institutionalizing the reform of the forest hermits', *Anglo-Norman Studies XXXI: proceedings of the Battle Conference 2008*, ed. Christopher Lewis (forthcoming 2009).

<sup>5</sup> Chartres, Archives Départementales Eure-et-Loir H1374: a quarto volume of 98 parchment leaves, published as *Cartulaire de l'abbaye de la Sainte-Trinité de Tiron*, ed. L. Merlet, Chartres 1883. For the earliest reference, see William of Malmesbury, *Gesta regum Anglorum: the history of the English kings*, ed. and trans. R.A.B. Mynors, completed by R. M. Thomson and M. Winterbottom, Oxford 1998-9, i. ch. 440, 786-9.

<sup>6</sup> The epithet Grossus has become attached to Geoffrey's name. It appears to have been derived from the only manuscript of the *Vita* to have survived from the middle ages, which was used by René Courtin, an early historian of the Perche around the turn of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Courtin says that the *livret* he used was entitled *Vita venerabilis Bernardi, primi abbatis monasterii sanctissimae Trinitatis de Tironio, Ordinis sancti Benedicti, diocesis Carnotensis, scripta per Gaufredum grossum, monachum*, R. Courtin, *Histoire du Perche*, eds O. de Romanet and H. Tournouer, Mortagne, 1893, repr. Marseilles, 1980, 156.

<sup>7</sup> The most accessible text is *PL clxxii. 1362-1446*, hereafter VBT. A French translation has been published by Bernard Beck, *Saint Bernard de Tiron, l'ermite, le moine et le monde*, Cormeilles-le-Royal 1998.

<sup>8</sup> See for example, the Fleury compilation, *Miraculi s Benedicti*, published as *Les Miracles de saint Benoît écrits par Adrevald, Aimon, André, Raoul Tortaire and Hugues de Sainte Marie, moines de Fleury*, ed.

---

Eugène de Cartain, Paris 1858. Baudouin de Gaffier, 'L'hagiographie et son public au xi<sup>e</sup> siècle',

*Miscellanea historica in honorem Leonis van der Esse*, Brussels 1944, 135-166.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Head, *Hagiography and the cult of saints: the diocese of Orléans, 800-1200*, Cambridge 1990, 226 on Letaldus of Micy.

<sup>10</sup> *PL* clxii. 1058ff; 1043ff.

<sup>11</sup> Johannes von Walter, *Die ersten Wanderprediger Frankreichs: Bernard de Tiron, Vitalis von Savigny, Girard von Salles...* Leipzig 1903-6.

<sup>12</sup> Recent work on the *vita* presents it as an attempt to reconcile two traditions among Bernard's successors at Tiron, Jean-Hervé Foulon, 'Les Ermites dans l'ouest de la France: les sources, bilan et perspectives,' in A. Vauchez (ed.), *Ermites de France et d'Italie (XIe-XVe siècle)*, Rome 2003, 81-113 at 88.

<sup>13</sup> For the lords of St Valery, G.H. Fowler, 'De St Walery', *Genealogist*, ns. xxx (1914), 1-17. Cf the family connections of Abbot Geoffrey of Vendôme (1093-1132) with the nobility of western France, Geoffroy de Vendôme, *Oeuvres*, ed. G. Giordanengo, Paris/Turnhout 1996, viii.

<sup>14</sup> 'Hunc ab ipsis deputatum studiis litterarum, supernae dignationis gratia suae dilectionis exceptit gremio, ut ad omnia facile, quibus erudiebatur, attingeret, unde factum est ut in grammaticis ac dialecticis rationibus, aliisque litteratoriae artis aliquantis pervigeret facultatibus': VBT, para 6.

<sup>15</sup> 'Juvenis igitur sanctis inspirationibus acquiescens, ad quod trahebatur facere non distulit; Ponticum sibi natale deserens, Aquitaniae regionis partes ingressus est': VBT, para 9.

<sup>16</sup> Marbod, 'Vita Sancti Gualterii seu Gauterii abbatis et canonici Stirpensis in dioecesi Galliarum Lemovicense', *PL* clxxi. cols. 1563-76.

<sup>17</sup> Robert Favreau, 'Les Ecoles et la culture à Saint-Hilaire-le-Grand de Poitiers des origines au début du XII<sup>e</sup> siècle', *Cahiers de Civilisation Médiévale* (hereinafter cited as *CCM*), iii (1960), 473-8.

<sup>18</sup> Françoise Coutansais, 'Les Monastères en Poitou avant l'an mil', *Revue Mabillon* (hereinafter cited as *RM*), liii (1963), 1-21 at 18; Jean Verdon, 'Le Monachisme en Poitou au x<sup>e</sup> siècle', *RM*, lix (1976/8), 235-47. William III and William IV of Poitou retired to St Cyprian, D. F. Callahan, 'William the Great and the monasteries of Aquitaine', *Studia monastica*, 19 (1977), 321-42 at pp. 338-9.

<sup>19</sup> *Letters of Lanfranc archbishop of Canterbury*, ed. and trans. Helen Clover and Margaret Gibson, Oxford 1979, 142.

<sup>20</sup> Pierre-Roger Gaussin, *L'Abbaye de la Chaise-Dieu (1043-1518)*, Paris 1962, 92-119, at p. 105.

<sup>21</sup> See figures quoted by Callahan, 'William the Great and the monasteries of Aquitaine', 326, note 23.

---

<sup>22</sup> Letters of Urban II, *PL* cli. col. 368-9.

<sup>23</sup> Jaap van Moolenbroek, *Vital l'ermite: prédicateur, itinérant, fondateur de l'abbaye Normande de Savigny*, trad. Anne-Marie Nambot, Assen/Maastricht, 1990, 149; Jean-Marc Bienvenu, *L'Étonnant fondateur de Fontevraud: Robert d'Arbrissel*, Paris 1981, 16.

<sup>24</sup> Coutansais, 'Monachisme'.

<sup>25</sup> *Cartulaire de Saint-Cyprien de Poitiers*, (Archives historiques du Poitou, III), Poitiers 1874, nos 123, 285, 355; Yves-Jean Riou, *The abbey of Saint-Savin Vienne* (Inventaire général des monuments et des richesses artistiques de la France) Poitiers 1992, 5.

<sup>26</sup> George Beech, 'Biography and the study of 11th century society: Bishop Peter II of Poitiers 1087-1115', *Francia*, vii (1979), 101-21.

<sup>27</sup> 'Gervasius coenobii amplificandi ac ditandi gratia pro memorata acquirenda ecclesia avide insistebat; Bernardus vero nullatenus acquievit, animadvertens quod Simoniaca pestis ex latere subintrabat': VBT, para 14.

<sup>28</sup> E. McDonnell, 'The *vita apostolica*: diversity or dissent', *Church History*, xxiv (1955), 15-31; G. Olsen, 'Ecclesia primitiva', *Traditio*, 25 (1969), 61-86.

<sup>29</sup> On the origins of the house, Jacques de Bascher, 'Villesalem: l'ermitage fontgombaldian et les origines du prieuré fontevriste', *RM*, lxi (1986/8), 97-129 at 112-13.

<sup>30</sup> Jean Becquet, 'Les Chanoines réguliers en Limousin aux XI<sup>e</sup> et XII<sup>e</sup> siècles', *Analecta Praemonstratensia*, 36 (1960), 193-235 at 206.

<sup>31</sup> *The rule of Saint Benedict*, trans. David Parry, London 1984, 1.

<sup>32</sup> VBT, para. 48. On Robert, Jacques Dalarun, *L'Impossible sainteté: la vie retrouvée de Robert d'Arbrissel (v. 1045-1116) fondateur de Fontevraud*, Paris 1985.

<sup>33</sup> Georges Duby, *The knight, the priest and the lady: the making of modern marriage in medieval France*, transl. Barbara Bray, Harmondsworth 1984, 7-13.

<sup>34</sup> Malmesbury, *Gesta regum anglorum*, i. ch. 440, 787.

<sup>35</sup> *La Chronique de Saint-Maixent 751-1149*, ed. Jean Verdon (Les classiques de l'histoire de France au Moyen âge, 33) Paris 1979, 170-2.

<sup>36</sup> 'P episcopo Pictaviensi praecepit ut monasterio Cluniacensi satisfaciat de abbate S Cypriani consecratio eidem monasterio satisfieri ab abbate Malleacensis iubet': Philipp Jaffé, *Regesta pontificum romanorum ab condita ecclesia ad annum post Christum natum MCXCVIII*, 2nd ed., Leipzig 1885-8, i. 710.

---

<sup>37</sup> Orderic Vitalis, *Ecclesiastical history*, ed. Marjorie Chibnall, Oxford 1969-80, iv. 328.

<sup>38</sup> For the foundation of Montierneuf, F. Villard, 'La Fondation de l'abbaye de Saint-Jean', *Poitiers Saint-Jean-de-Montierneuf*, ed. R. Favreau, Poitiers 1996, 9-24.

<sup>39</sup> *PL* cxxxix. col. 438, letter xii.

<sup>40</sup> *Saint-Cyprien*, xiii.

<sup>41</sup> *Saint-Cyprien*, 44, n.1.

<sup>42</sup> 'Defuncto abbate R et necdum sepulto, statuitur dominus B. Hunc Cluniacenses recenter a parte apostolica commonent, qui, veniens Cluniaco, abbati et monachis indicat se in via jam esse positum et paratum respondere de objectis ante dominum apostolicum Rome. Veniens ergo Romam et causam suam presuli summo ostendens, sine effectu rediit; qui post non multum temporis videns se non posse sufficere tantis negociis, diligens otium, relictis omnibus, secessit in heremum': *Saint-Cyprien*, no. 43 at pages 45-6.

<sup>43</sup> 'uti erat diffusus charitate, coepit omnes intus introducere et pauperes et ignobiles ad Deum trahere. Monachi vero tepentes et frigidi, plus de praesenti quam de futura vita solliciti, ex invidia coepere pluries resistere, dicentes possessionem monasterio, quae tot recipere posset, deesse': VBT, para 47.

<sup>44</sup> 'dum sanctum virum hoc modo extrudere nequeunt, alium inquirunt. Cluniacensibus namque monachis fuerunt, sese in auxilium fore spondentes, ut S Cypriani monasterium suis legibus subijciant; quia si hoc fieret, Bernardum inde recessurum minime dubitabant. Qua suggestionis exhortatione animati Cluniacenses, dominum papam iterum adeunt, et ut Bernardum ab officio abbatis suspenderet nisi illis subderet monasterium denuo compulerunt': VBT, para 56; C. Treffort, 'Le Comte de Poitiers, duc d'Aquitaine et l'église aux alentours de l'an mil (970-1030)' *CCM*, 43 (2000), 395-445, esp at 430.

<sup>45</sup> 'Interea monachi S Cypriani, per annos ferme quatuor multis laboribus atque expensis satagentes, ut a calumnia Cluniacensium Ecclesiam suam liberarent, facere nequiverunt. Qua difficultate necessitatis compulsi, cum Pictaviensis episcopi litteris eremum adeunt, abbatem suum inveniunt; et ut Ecclesiae suae laboranti succurreret, rogaverunt': VBT, para 55.

<sup>46</sup> 'Zelo igitur justitiae accensus, illud Salomonis secutus: Justus ut leo confidens absque terrore erit, dominum papam, et omnes illius in hac re complices, non praesumptuosa audacitate, sed libera magnanimitate, in extremei iudicii examine ante iudicium, nullis ignorantiae, tenebris falli, aliquibus muneribus corrumpi nescium, constanter invitavit': VBT, para 57; 'Et quia scriptum est 'iustus ut leo confidit', in Romana sinodo contra Pachalem papam pro libertate aecclesiae litigavit': OV, iv. 328.

---

<sup>47</sup> 'Papa autem tantae constantiae tantaque sanctitatis hominem, qui nihil in mundo cuperet, nihil nisi Deum solummodo quaereret, quia secum retinere non potuit, ei hujusmodi officium injuxit: scilicet ut populis praedicaret, confessiones acciperet, poenitentias injungeret, baptizaret, regiones circuiret, et omnia quae publico praedicatori sunt agenda sollicitus expleret': VBT, para 59.

<sup>48</sup> Bienvenu, *L'Etonnant fondateur*, 42.

<sup>49</sup> idem, *L'Etonnant fondateur*, 34-6.

<sup>50</sup> On the licence to preach, G.G. Meerseman, 'Eremetismo e predicazione itinerante dei secoli xi e xii', in *L'eremetismo in occidente*, 164-181.

<sup>51</sup> L.C. Loyd, *The origins of some Anglo-Norman families*, eds C.T. Clay and D.C. Douglas (Harleian Society Publications, 103) Leeds 1951, 79.

<sup>52</sup> Identified as Chenedet (Ile-et-Vilaine, cant. Fougères, comm. Landéau), Beck, *Saint-Bernard de Tiron*, 29, n. 34.

<sup>53</sup> 'Comperto autem, fama referente, quod ille ad S Cyprianum ultra non rediret, nec ad insulae mansionem, omnibus inamabilem propter difficilem ingressum et exitum, remearet, multi ad eum confluere coeperunt, cupientes ejus eruditionibus institui, vitaeque exemplis roborari': VBT, para. 61.

<sup>54</sup> J.S.C. Riley-Smith, *The first crusaders, 1095-1131*, Cambridge 1997, 104-5, 136, 144-5, 155, 166, 222.

<sup>55</sup> Kathleen Thompson, *Power and border lordship in medieval France: the county of the Perche 1000-1226*, Woodbridge 2002.

<sup>56</sup> VBT, paras 62ff.

<sup>57</sup> VBT, para. 78.

<sup>58</sup> VBT, paras 96, 97, 99.

<sup>59</sup> See the general observations in Paul Antony Hayward, 'Demystifying the role of sanctity in western Christendom', in James Howard-Johnston and Paul Antony Hayward (eds), *The cult of saints in late antiquity and the middle ages: essays on the contribution of Peter Brown*, Oxford 1999, 115-142.

<sup>60</sup> H.E.J. Cowdrey, 'Count Simon of Crépy's monastic conversion', in *Papauté, monachisme et théories politiques, I: le pouvoir et l'institution ecclésiastique: études d'histoire médiévale offertes à Marcel Pacaut*, Lyons 1994, 253-66, repr. in *The crusades and Latin monasticism, 11th-12th centuries* (Variorum Collected Studies series) Aldershot 1999, and OV, vi. 86.

<sup>61</sup> Gaussin, *Chaise-Dieu*, 107ff. W. Scott Jessee, 'Robert d'Arbrissel: aristocratic patronage and the question of heresy', *Journal of Medieval History*, xx (1994), 221-35.

---

<sup>62</sup> OV, iv. 330; Malmesbury, *Gesta regum anglorum*, i. 770 and William of Newburgh, *Chronicles and memorials of the reigns of Stephen, Henry II and Richard I*, ed. R. Howlett, London 1884, i. 51-2.

<sup>63</sup> VBT, para. 62.

<sup>64</sup> VBT, para. 63.

<sup>65</sup> VBT, para. 70. For the gift of a cup and its lid to the Cluniacs at Nogent-le-Rotrou, see *Saint-Denis de Nogent-Le-Rotrou 1031-1789*, ed. Charles Métais, Vannes 1894, no. LIV. For gifts by Henry I's wife, Lois Huneycutt, *Matilda of Scotland: a study in medieval queenship*, Woodbridge 2003, 119 and by the empress Matilda, Marjorie Chibnall, *The Empress Matilda: queen consort, queen mother and lady of the English*, Oxford 1991, 189. For Peter Damian, see Lester K. Little, 'The personal development of Peter Damian', in William C. Jordan and others (eds), *Order and innovation in the middle ages: essays in honor of Joseph R. Strayer*, Princeton 1976, 317-41.

<sup>66</sup> VBT, para 70. For the famine, OV, vi. 166, 172.

<sup>67</sup> VBT, para 80.

<sup>68</sup> Barbara Yorke, 'The legitimacy of St Edith', *Haskins Society Journal*, xi (1998), 97-113, especially at 105 and references at 102. Chibnall, *Empress Matilda*, 151.

<sup>69</sup> VBT, paras 96 and 97.

<sup>70</sup> Julia M. Smith, 'Celtic asceticism and Carolingian authority in early medieval Brittany', in W.J. Sheils (ed.), *Monks, hermits and the ascetic traditions: papers read at the 1984 Summer meeting and the 1985 Winter meeting of the Ecclesiastical History Society*, Oxford 1985, 53-63; 'Oral and written: saints, miracles and relics in Brittany, c. 850-1250', *Speculum*, lxxv (1990), 309-43.

<sup>71</sup> Bede, *Life of Cuthbert*, cp. 10; VBT, para. 27.

<sup>72</sup> I. Wood, *The missionary life: saints and the evangelisation of Europe 400-1050*, London 2001, 34. A full study is available in A. Angenendt, *Monachi peregrini: Studien zu Pirmin und den monastischen Vorstellungen des frühen Mittelalters*, Munich 1972.

<sup>73</sup> Phyllis Jestice, 'A new fashion in imitating Christ: change spiritual perspectives around the year 1000', in M. Frassetto (ed.), *The year 1000: religious and social response to the turning of the first millennium*, New York 2002, 165-85.

<sup>74</sup> Marbod, *Epistola VI*, *PL* clxxi. col. 1480-86; D.G. Morin, 'Rainaud l'ermite et Ives de Chartres: un épisode de la crise du cénobitisme au xi<sup>e</sup>-xii<sup>e</sup> siècle', *Revue Benedictine*, xl (1928), 99-115.

---

<sup>75</sup> The most accessible account of Henry's career appears in R. I. Moore, *The origins of European dissent*, London 1977, 83-101.

<sup>76</sup> Cf 'beware of exaggerating the novelty of the twelfth century in the history of monasticism', J. L. Nelson, 'Medieval monasticism' in P. Linehan and J. L. Nelson (eds), *The medieval world*, London 2001, 586.

<sup>77</sup> C. Stephen Jaeger, 'Cathedral schools and humanist learning, 950-1150', *Deutsche Vierteljahrschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte*, lxi (1987), 569-616 at 586ff.

<sup>78</sup> VBT, para. 74.

<sup>79</sup> For social outcasts, VBT, paras 130, 135.

<sup>80</sup> VBT, paras 61-2. For a possible parallel with Robert of Arbrissel and the development of a rule at Fontevraud, Jessee, 'Robert', 232 and with Gilbert of Sempringham, Brian Golding, *Gilbert of Sempringham and the Gilbertine order c. 1130-c.1300*, Oxford 1995, 78 ff.

<sup>81</sup> *Tiron*, XX.