

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-12393-8 - Silence and Sign Language in Medieval Monasticism: The Cluniac Tradition, c. 900-1200

Scott G. Bruce

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION: THE DORMANT LANGUAGE

“Every angel is terrifying.” The sentiment of this line from Rainer Maria Rilke’s poem *The First Elegy* (1912) seems as cold and distant as starlight.¹ It contrasts markedly with the sympathetic and comforting images that late modern people usually evoke when they think about the messengers of God. Over the past century, one of the most understated achievements of western culture has been the successful domestication of these immortal beings of light. While Rilke could still imagine that any contact with angels would consume him in their “overwhelming existence” (*stärkeres Dasein*), the notion that their beauty is the beginning of terror has lost its meaning in the cultural vocabulary of the west.² With softened gazes, these celestial beings now accompany us through the paces of our mundane lives, sigh along with us at our troubles, and offer up to us as comfort a longer, more balanced, perspective on the anxieties that attend our mortal condition. Even the most sublime articulations of this image, like Wim Wenders’ celebrated film *Der Himmel über Berlin* (1986), subvert Rilke’s hierarchy in ways that ensnare angels in our own narcissistic preoccupations.

Despite the gulf of centuries that separate them, Rilke’s depiction of angels as remote and untamable agents of God that inspired sincere awe and fear in those mortals fortunate (or unfortunate) enough to encounter them had much in common with the sensibilities of the early medieval monks who are the subject of this book. Angels in the Middle Ages had little tolerance for human frailties. Take this anecdote told by an eleventh-century chronicler. According to Ralph Glaber, a certain monk at the

¹ Rainer Maria Rilke, *Die erste Elegie*, line 7: “Der jener Engel ist schrecklich.” ed. Rilke Archiv with Ruth Sieber-Rilke, in *Sämtliche Werke*, 7 vols. (1955–1997), vol. I, p. 685.

² *Ibid.*, lines 1–6: “Wer, wenn ich schrie, hörte mich denn aus der Engel / Ordnungen? und gesetzt selbst, es nähme / einer mich plötzlich ans Herz: ich verginge von seinem / stärkeren Dasein. Denn das Schöne ist nichts / als des Schrecklichen Anfang, den wir noch grade ertragen, / und wir bewundern es so, weil es gelassen verschmätzt, / uns zu zerstören.”

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-12393-8 - Silence and Sign Language in Medieval Monasticism: The Cluniac Tradition, c. 900-1200

Scott G. Bruce

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Silence and sign language in medieval monasticism*

church of St. Germain in Auxerre habitually spat and dribbled while praying at the altar of Mary. His unseemly conduct in such a holy place prompted a terrifying rebuke from an angel, who appeared to him in a vision as a man dressed in white garments. “Why do you shower me with spittle?” the angel asked in annoyance. “As you see, it is I who receive your prayers and bear them to the sight of the most merciful judge!” Upon waking, the monk was beside himself with fear and vowed to exercise more rigorous control over his comportment when he prayed. He strongly encouraged his brethren to do likewise.³

As this episode makes clear, the visitation of an angel evoked reverential awe and more than a touch of trepidation in early medieval viewers, who valued and feared these immortal beings precisely because they were favored to enjoy the eternal presence of God. So great was the allure of their privileged place in the celestial hierarchy that monks and other religious specialists in the Christian tradition attempted to model their behavior on the unearthly characteristics of angels. By renouncing the transient satisfactions of the world and cultivating in cloistered seclusion the unchanging qualities of their angelic exemplars, early medieval monks conformed their lives as far as possible to emulate their counterparts in heaven in the hope of meriting a place among the ranks of the Christian elect at the end of time.⁴

It is a central argument of this book that the brethren of Cluny, an abbey founded in 910 in Burgundy, developed this monk–angel analogy to a degree that was unprecedented in the monastic tradition. The active promotion of this ideal and the terms by which they defined and pursued it account for Cluny’s rapid rise to prominence in the late tenth and eleventh centuries. Undistinguished at the time of its foundation, this monastery achieved its reputation for sanctity in no small part because the ideal of angelic conduct fostered by its monks led contemporaries to believe that their prayers had an unrivalled efficacy among the heavenly host in whose image they modeled their lives. Building the ideals of

³ Rodulphus Glaber, *Historiarum libri quinque* 5.1.7: “Apparuit ei stans iuxta altare quidam candidis indumentis circumdatus, preferens in manibus pannum candidissimum, atque in huiusmodi erumpibat uerba: ‘Cur me’ inquires ‘sputis propriis uerberando inlinis? Nam ego, ut cernis, suscipio munus tuarum orationum, deferens illud ad conspectum misericordissimi iudicis.’ Qua uisione correptus, frater ille et sese continuit, et ceteros ut se, in quantum ualerent, in sacris locis continerent ammonere curauit.” ed. and trans. John France, in *Rodulphus Glaber: The Five Books of Histories and the Life of St. William* (Oxford, 1989), p. 224.

⁴ Useful starting points on this topic include Suso Frank, *ΑΓΓΕΛΙΚΟΣ ΒΙΟΣ: Begriffsanalytische und begriffsgeschichtliche Untersuchung zum “engelgleichen Leben” im frühen Mönchtum* (Munster, 1964); and Conrad Leyser, “Angels, Monks, and Demons in the Early Medieval West,” in *Belief and Culture in the Middle Ages: Studies Presented to Henry Mayr-Harting*, ed. Richard Gameson and Henrietta Leyser (Oxford, 2001), pp. 9–22.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-12393-8 - Silence and Sign Language in Medieval Monasticism: The Cluniac Tradition, c. 900-1200

Scott G. Bruce

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction: the dormant language*

their community on the foundation of this program of celestial discipline, the abbots of Cluny eventually rose to positions of great influence in European society.⁵

Cluniac monks imagined angels in terms of three fundamental qualities, the emulation of which became central to their monastic vocation. The first of these was sexual purity. The monks of Cluny preserved their chastity by denying their desire for carnal pleasure and by cleansing their minds of sinful fantasies. The second was the celebration of an elaborate and protracted psalmody, that is, the intonation of biblical psalms sung in praise of God. Gathered together in their church, the brethren of Cluny directed their voices to heaven in imitation of the celestial chorus that glorified God throughout time. The third expression of angelic mimesis fostered by the Cluniacs was also the most innovative and contentious: the cultivation of a profound and reverential silence. Many early monastic communities encouraged the regulation of speech as a precaution to prevent negligent monks from indulging in gossip and other sins of the tongue that corroded their communal way of life. The monks of Cluny were different. They were the first to understand the discipline of silence as a powerful and admirable virtue in its own right. The collective denial of the will to speak rivaled the celebration of the divine office as a unifying practice that actualized in their community the dwelling place of the angels in heaven. This new way of thinking about silence was not universally welcomed by their contemporaries, however. In the early tenth century, the Cluniacs roused indignation among other ascetics, who claimed that they introduced unprecedented novelties at the expense of age-old traditions governing the cultivation of silence in cloistered communities. They responded to these criticisms by defending their custom of silence with biblical authority as a virtue sanctioned in the Old and New Testaments and witnessed by the saints of Christian antiquity. In doing so, the monks of Cluny articulated a new ideology of Christian asceticism that married the glorification of silence to the ideal of an angelic life realized in mortal bodies.

The refashioning of religious ideals that elevated the practice of silence to the highest constellation of Christian virtues confronted the Cluniacs with an unexpected challenge. In cloistered communities that sometimes numbered hundreds of monks, the cultivation of a strict and reverential silence conflicted with the fact that some form of communication was

⁵ The early history of the Cluniacs and the development of their ascetic ideals are discussed at length in Chapter 1, pp. 15–28, below. For an eleventh-century example of the influence wielded by an abbot of Cluny at the highest level of secular affairs, see Joseph H. Lynch, “Hugh I of Cluny’s Sponsorship of Henry IV: Its Context and Consequences,” *Speculum* 60 (1985): 800–826.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-12393-8 - Silence and Sign Language in Medieval Monasticism: The Cluniac Tradition, c. 900-1200

Scott G. Bruce

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Silence and sign language in medieval monasticism*

necessary for the operation of the abbey and the orchestration of its rituals. Rather than relinquish their ideal of silence as an essential virtue, the monks of Cluny created a silent language of hand signs that enabled them to express their needs without recourse to any verbal exchange. Sources for the internal life of Cluniac abbeys in the tenth and eleventh centuries provide considerable insight into the character of this important, but seldom imagined, aspect of medieval monastic discipline. These texts also allow us to make inferences about the parameters of this little known custom and the context of its use.

The replacement of spoken words with silent signs raises the same questions today as it did for these monks a millennium ago. Since they were instructed to avoid the perils of human discourse, how could cloistered individuals condone the use of a silent form of information exchange like a sign language that seemed to provide them with the means to evade their precepts against speaking? More to the point, what prevented otherwise silent monks from sinning through the garrulous use of their hands? While monastic signs were introduced to safeguard the brethren of Cluny from sinful utterances as they pursued their ascetic program of angelic imitation, it was clear to them that this custom threatened to provide negligent individuals with a ready outlet for the expression of idle or indulgent thoughts. As we will see, these concerns shaped the linguistic character of the Cluniac sign system and influenced the mechanisms of observance and control that were intended to curb its misuse in the monastery.

This book sets out to explain the relationship between silence and sign language and the role of these customs in the realization of the angelic ideals fostered in the Cluniac tradition from the founding of the great Burgundian abbey in 910 to the end of the twelfth century, by which time the custom of using signs in place of speech had become widespread in religious communities throughout western Europe. In recent decades, the near ubiquitous concern for the preservation of silence in medieval religious houses has drawn the attention of several scholars, although none of them has directed attention toward the centrality of silence in the ascetic program fostered at Cluny.⁶ The same cannot be said of the custom of sign language. This seemingly esoteric practice has attracted very little attention, even from experts in the history of Christian asceticism. In the early eighteenth century, Edmond Martène reproduced the

⁶ Ambrose G. Wathan, *Silence: The Meaning of Silence in the Rule of Saint Benedict* (Washington, DC, 1973) remains a reliable guide to the study of this topic and covers a broader range of material than its title implies. See also Paul F. Gehl, "Competens Silentium: Varieties of Monastic Silence in the Medieval West," *Viator* 18 (1987): 125-160.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-12393-8 - Silence and Sign Language in Medieval Monasticism: The Cluniac Tradition, c. 900-1200

Scott G. Bruce

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction: the dormant language*

earliest sources for monastic sign language in his monumental work on the historical significance of liturgical texts from the Middle Ages, but the impact of his efforts was minimal.⁷ The small handful of historians who have explored the topic since Martène's time have done so with varying degrees of intellectual investment.⁸ The marginalization of this practice was only offset by its exotic appeal, which assured it an anecdotal role in general histories of medieval monasticism, where it was often presented in disparaging or comical terms.⁹ The appearance in 1981 and 1989 of critical editions of the most important Latin lexicons of Cluniac and Cistercian sign-forms has failed to recuperate the image of this practice.¹⁰ As a result, a comprehensive account of the origin and functions of monastic sign language and its relation to the discipline of silence at Cluny has never been written.

The lack of scholarly attention to Cluniac sign language is especially surprising given the recent interest that historians of medieval art, vernacular literature and political performance have shown in deciphering the meaning of gestures in the premodern period. Many studies have attempted to isolate and identify visual and narrative depictions of physical actions that express emotional states and social relationships among medieval people, from private acts, like pointing and winking, to public rituals, like the clasping of hands that cemented oaths of fealty or the posture of submission expected of a supplicant. Working with the presumption that the meaning of premodern gestures is unintelligible to modern readers, historians have attempted to reconstruct their social

⁷ Edmond Martène, *De antiquis monachorum ritibus libri quinque* 5.18: "De locutione per signa," in *De antiquis ecclesiae ritibus libri*, 4 vols., 2nd edn (Antwerp, 1736; repr. Hildesheim, 1967–1969), vol. IV, cols. 826a–837a.

⁸ See, for example, Louis Gougaud, "Le langage des silencieux," *Revue Mabillon* 19 (1929): 93–100; Gérard van Rijnberk, *Le langage par signes chez les moines* (Amsterdam, 1953); Eric Buysens, "Le langage par gestes chez les moines," *Revue de l'Institut de Sociologie* 29 (1954): 537–545; and Paul Gerhard Schmidt, "Ars loquendi et ars tacendi: Zur monastischen Zeichensprache des Mittelalters," *Berichte zur Wissenschaftsgeschichte* 4 (1981): 13–19.

⁹ G. G. Coulton, *Five Centuries of Religion*, 4 vols. (Cambridge, 1923–1950), vol. I, pp. 87–88; Eileen Power, *Medieval People* (Boston and New York, 1924), p. 67, where she remarked that "[t]he sort of dumb pandemonium which went on at Eglington's dinner table must often have been more mirth-provoking than speech"; Joan Evans, *Monastic Life at Cluny, 910–1157* (London, 1931), pp. 88–89, who called it "a strange monastic language" (p. 89); and C. H. Lawrence, *Medieval Monasticism: Forms of Religious Life in Western Europe in the Middle Ages*, 2nd edn (London and New York, 1989), pp. 118–119. For the best general treatment of this custom, reflective of the new prestige afforded to monastic customaries as historical sources, see Anselme Davril and Eric Palazzo, *La vie des moines au temps des grandes abbayes, Xe–XIIIe siècles* (Paris, 2000), pp. 89–93.

¹⁰ Walter Jarecki, *Signa Loquendi: Die cluniacensischen Signa-Listen eingeleitet und herausgegeben* (Baden-Baden, 1981); and Walter Jarecki, "Die 'Ars signorum Cisterciensium' im Rahmen der metrischen Signa-Listen," *Revue bénédictine* 99 (1989): 329–399. See also the comprehensive reviews of Jarecki's book by Giles Constable in *Mittellateinisches Jahrbuch* 18 (1983): 331–333; and by Kassius Hallinger in *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* 44 (1983): 145–150.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-12393-8 - Silence and Sign Language in Medieval Monasticism: The Cluniac Tradition, c. 900-1200

Scott G. Bruce

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Silence and sign language in medieval monasticism*

and political context in order to determine what they communicated to a medieval audience. The goal of their collective project is to decode the meaning of the vast repertoire of expressive motions and postures employed during the Middle Ages.¹¹ Monastic signs have generally fallen outside of the purview of this historiography because, unlike the social and political gestures depicted in medieval art, literature and narrative sources, their meaning is readily available in descriptive lexicons of sign-forms that Cluniac monks composed to aid in the instruction of their use.¹² The only work of scholarship in this field that treats monastic sign language at all is Jean-Claude Schmitt's wide-ranging *La raison des gestes dans l'occident médiéval*, published in 1990.¹³ Cluniac signs fit uneasily, however, into Schmitt's general thesis, which locates a renewed emphasis on the relationship between bodily control and monastic discipline in a twelfth-century treatise on the instruction of novices composed by Hugh of Saint Victor.¹⁴ To be sure, Hugh presented his readers with a vivid taxonomy of physical gestures and the moral traits encoded by them, but as this book aims to demonstrate, the explicit relationship between comportment and personal virtue expressed by Hugh and his contemporaries was already an implicit characteristic of monastic sign language in the tenth century. In this regard, the turning point that Schmitt locates in the twelfth century probably had more to do with the new vocabulary with which prelates ordered and communicated their ideas than with changes in the moral presumptions that guided the physical behavior of common monks. With this information in hand, the present study is quite different in its aim and scope from other scholarly treatments of medieval gesture. Since the meaning of individual monastic signs is expressly transparent, this work sets out to explain the Cluniac rationale for creating a silent language of hand signs and examines how these signs functioned as a vehicle for communication within the material context of the abbey and the moral context of religious discipline.

As an historical phenomenon, the silent language of the Cluniacs was a living system, a dynamic process of visual communication that relied on

¹¹ The literature on these topics is vast, but there is a convenient bibliography in *New Approaches to Medieval Communication*, ed. Marco Mostert (Turnhout, 1999), pp. 219–221. Recent studies of importance on aspects of medieval gesture include: Jean-Claude Schmitt, *La raison des gestes dans l'occident médiéval* (Paris, 1990); Geoffrey Koziol, *Begging Pardon and Favor: Ritual and Political Order in Early Medieval France* (Ithaca and London, 1992); *Gesture in Medieval Drama and Art*, ed. C. Davidson (Kalamazoo, 2001); and J. A. Burrow, *Gestures and Looks in Medieval Narrative* (Cambridge, 2002).

¹² On the Cluniac sign lexicon, see Chapter 2, pp. 63–66, below.

¹³ Schmitt, *La raison des gestes*, pp. 253–257.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 173–205. This treatise is discussed in the context of canonical views of silence in Chapter 5, p. 156, below.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-12393-8 - Silence and Sign Language in Medieval Monasticism: The Cluniac Tradition, c. 900-1200

Scott G. Bruce

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction: the dormant language*

the studied movement and learned perception of its participants. It is now a dormant language.¹⁵ Knowledge of it does not derive from lived experience or pictorial representations, but rather from descriptions of individual sign-forms and oblique references to their use preserved in medieval saints' lives, exempla collections, personal letters and especially monastic customaries.¹⁶ Monastic customaries were compilations of legislation that provided detailed information about the customs observed in cloistered communities, such as liturgical ceremonies, the duties of officials and the training of novices, including their instruction in sign language.¹⁷ Some scholars have cast doubt on the reliability of this genre as an historical source, expressing concern that the contents of customaries represented the normative ideals of monastic legislators rather than the lived experiences of individual monks.¹⁸ This statement of caution is well founded with respect to customaries imposed on religious communities explicitly to introduce new observances following a period of reform, but it ignores the possibility that this genre could serve other purposes. In fact, many customaries written in the tenth and eleventh centuries were directive or descriptive in function.¹⁹ Directive customaries were written for internal use to affirm existing customs during times of crisis or transition, while descriptive customaries were composed to

¹⁵ Some present-day monastic communities, particularly those in the Trappist tradition, still employ sign languages and thereby forge a link between their current practices and those of their predecessors. In fact, most of these modern monastic sign systems bear little resemblance to their medieval antecedents. See Robert A. Barakat, *Cistercian Sign Language* (Kalamazoo, 1975); and Suzanne Quay, "Signs of Silence: Two Examples of Trappist Sign Language in the Far East," *Cîteaux: Commentarii Cistercienses* 52 (2001): 211–230.

¹⁶ The present study relies exclusively on textual evidence. Although medieval sculpture and manuscript illumination are richly populated with gesturing figures, I have been unable to find convincing depictions of the use of monastic sign language among them. For a catalogue of illustrative gestures in medieval art, see François Garnier, *Le langage de l'image au moyen âge*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1982). Kirk Ambrose has recently shown, however, that awareness of this custom can inform art historians in their understanding of gestures in Romanesque sculpture created for a monastic milieu. See Ambrose, "A Visual Pun at Vézelay: Gesture and Meaning on a Capital Representing the Fall of Man," *Traditio* 55 (2000): 105–123; and, more generally, Ambrose, *The Nave Sculpture of Vézelay: The Art of Monastic Viewing* (Toronto, 2006).

¹⁷ On the character of the Cluniac customaries and their value as historical sources, see the articles collected in *From Dead of Night to End of Day: The Medieval Customs of Cluny / Du coeur de la nuit à la fin du jour: Les coutumes clunisiennes au moyen âge*, ed. Susan Boynton and Isabelle Cochelin (Leiden, 2005).

¹⁸ See, for example, Kassius Hallinger, "Consuetudo: Begriff, Formen, Forschungsgeschichte, Inhalt," in *Untersuchungen zu Kloster und Stift* (Göttingen, 1980), pp. 140–166, who stressed their prescriptive character ("Verpflichtungscharakter") in response to interpretations that treated them primarily as descriptive documents; and Lin Donnat, "Les coutumiers monastiques: une nouvelle entreprise et un territoire nouveau," *Revue Mabillon* n.s. 3 (1992): 5–21, esp. pp. 14–16.

¹⁹ Anselme Davril has employed the terms "directive" and "descriptive" as part of a useful system of taxonomy that categorizes examples of this genre by their readership and function. See Davril, "Coutumiers directifs et coutumiers descriptifs: D'Ulrich à Bernard de Cluny," in *From Dead of Night to End of Day*, ed. Boynton and Cochelin, pp. 23–28.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-12393-8 - Silence and Sign Language in Medieval Monasticism: The Cluniac Tradition, c. 900-1200

Scott G. Bruce

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Silence and sign language in medieval monasticism*

provide information about the traditions of one religious community for the benefit of another without otherwise implying an obligation for their adoption. Directive and descriptive customaries were thus primarily commemorative and indicative in character and therefore reflect more clearly the actual customs observed in early medieval abbeys, thereby providing remarkable insight into the daily lives of their inhabitants.

Despite their value as historical sources, several factors have conspired to keep monastic customaries at a distance from the concerns of current scholarship. Accessibility to reliable editions has certainly hindered research. Until recently, most monastic customaries were either unedited or available only in rare (and often faulty) transcriptions from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.²⁰ The series *Corpus consuetudinum monasticarum* (1963–present), devoted to the publication of critical editions of monastic legislation from the Middle Ages, has rehabilitated the genre somewhat by making more of these texts available to an academic readership.²¹ The impact of this endeavor has been most apparent in Europe. Over the past two decades, scholars working in Germany and other countries have formed the vanguard of an historiography on monastic orders and their legislative traditions that has brought the customaries to the center of wide-ranging discussions of literacy and the role of documents in the service of religious reform.²² In contrast, historians of medieval monasticism in North America have been occupied primarily, although not exclusively, with the study of gender construction and the social meaning of charters.²³ While several scholars in the United States

²⁰ Further on these early editions, see Marc Saurette, “Excavating and Renovating Ancient Texts: Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century Editions of Bernard of Cluny’s *Consuetudines* and Early-Modern Monastic Scholarship,” in *From Dead of Night to End of Day*, ed. Boynton and Cochelini, pp. 85–107.

²¹ On the achievements of the series to 1991 and plans for future editions, see Pius Engelbert, “Bericht über den Stand des *Corpus Consuetudinum Monasticarum* (CCM),” *Studien und Mitteilungen zur Geschichte des Benediktinerordens und seiner Zweige* 102 (1991): 19–24.

²² See, for example, Joachim Wollasch, “Reformmönchtum und Schriftlichkeit,” *Frühmittelalterliche Studien* 26 (1992): 274–286; Klaus Schreiner, “Verschriftlichung als Faktor monastischer Reform: Funktionen von Schriftlichkeit im Ordenswesen des hohen und späten Mittelalters,” in *Pragmatische Schriftlichkeit im Mittelalter: Erscheinungsformen und Entwicklungsstufen*, ed. Hagen Keller, Klaus Grubmüller and Nikolaus Staubach (Munich, 1992), pp. 37–75; Florent Cygler, Gert Melville and Jörg Oberste, “Aspekte zur Verbindung von Organisation und Schriftlichkeit im Ordenswesen: Ein Vergleich zwischen den Zisterziensern und Cluniazensern des 12./13. Jahrhunderts,” in *Viva Vox und Ratio Scripta: Mündliche und schriftliche Kommunikationsformen im Mönchtum des Mittelalters*, ed. Clemens Kasper and Klaus Schreiner (Münster, 1997), pp. 157–176. Important studies of the customaries by Gerd Zimmermann and Dominique Iogna-Prat fall outside the scope of this tradition. My indebtedness to the scholarship of these two pioneering monastic historians will be apparent throughout the book.

²³ Barbara Rosenwein, “Views from Afar: North American Perspectives on Medieval Monasticism,” in *Dove va la storiografia monastica in Europa? Temi e metodi di ricerca per lo studio della vita monastica e regolare in età medievale alle soglie del terzo millennio*, ed. Giancarlo Andenna (Milan, 2001), pp. 67–84.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-12393-8 - Silence and Sign Language in Medieval Monasticism: The Cluniac Tradition, c. 900-1200

Scott G. Bruce

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction: the dormant language*

and Canada have made the Cluniac customaries the focus of their research, they have not pursued their work collectively with the thematic coherence that is so apparent in contemporary European scholarship.²⁴

The present study of silence and sign language at Cluny takes as its focus the customaries written at the great Burgundian abbey in the late eleventh century.²⁵ Books of customs composed by the monks Bernard and Ulrich offer the most detailed evidence for the practice of silence among the Cluniacs and the character of the sign language that they employed in place of speech.²⁶ There is considerable overlap in the content of the customaries of Bernard and Ulrich, which has complicated our understanding of their relationship to one another. In an influential article published in 1959, Kassius Hallinger argued that Ulrich's customary was dependent on that of Bernard.²⁷ In his view, Bernard composed his work in two books around 1074. Ulrich used this text as a model, but systematized its contents and reorganized them into three books around 1083. Hallinger then inferred that Bernard wrote a second redaction of his customary shortly thereafter (c. 1084–1086) as a way of explaining the parts of his text not found in Ulrich's work. Joachim Wollasch has challenged this thesis by arguing that the customaries of Bernard and Ulrich were independent compositions.²⁸ Claiming that there is no manuscript evidence for the two recensions of Bernard's work proposed by Hallinger, Wollasch argued that the textual parallels between the customaries were more likely the result of the authors' use of the same pool of available resources around the same time. He has offered a

²⁴ For a recent sampling of approaches to the Cluniac customaries by North American scholars representing several disciplines, see the articles by Susan Boynton, Scott G. Bruce, Jennifer A. Harris, Carolyn Marino Malone, Frederick S. Paxton, Diane J. Reilly and Marc Saurette, in *From Dead of Night to End of Day*, ed. Boynton and Cochelin.

²⁵ For the best introductions to the Cluniac customaries, with exhaustive references to earlier literature, see Isabelle Cochelin, "Evolution des coutumiers monastiques dessinée à partir de l'étude de Bernard," and Gert Melville, "Action, Text and Validity: On Re-Examining Cluny's *Consuetudines* and Statutes," in *From Dead of Night to End of Day*, ed. Boynton and Cochelin, pp. 29–66 and 67–83.

²⁶ I have relied on the standard editions of these texts throughout the book: Bernard of Cluny, *Ordo Cluniacensis sive Consuetudines*, ed. M. Hergott, in *Vetus Disciplina Monastica* (Paris, 1726; repr. Siegburg, 1999), pp. 136–364 (cited hereafter as "Bernard" followed by book, chapter and page number); and Ulrich of Zell, *Consuetudines Cluniacensis*, PL CXLIX, cols. 643–779 (cited hereafter as "Ulrich" followed by book, chapter and column number). For a diplomatic edition of Bernard's customary based on MS BN, Latin 13875, see *The Cluniac Customary of Bernard / Le coutumier clunisien de Bernard*, ed. and trans. Susan Boynton and Isabelle Cochelin, forthcoming. Critical editions of both customaries are in preparation by Laurentius Schlieker and Isabelle Cochelin for CCM.

²⁷ Kassius Hallinger, "Klunys Bräuche zur Zeit Hugos des Grossen (1049–1109)," *Zeitschrift der Savigny-Stiftung für Rechtsgeschichte: Kanonistische Abteilung* 45 (1959): 99–140.

²⁸ Joachim Wollasch, "Zur Verschriftlichung der klösterlichen Lebensgewohnheiten unter Abt Hugo von Cluny," *Frühmittelalterliche Studien* 27 (1993): 317–349.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-12393-8 - Silence and Sign Language in Medieval Monasticism: The Cluniac Tradition, c. 900-1200

Scott G. Bruce

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Silence and sign language in medieval monasticism*

conservative – and now generally accepted – redating of the customaries to 1078 or shortly thereafter (Bernard) and 1079–1084 (Ulrich).²⁹

The enterprise of recognizing and recovering references to monastic sign language and its use in legal and narrative sources from Cluny and elsewhere presents a number of interpretative challenges for the historian. Medieval authors drew from a wide range of words and phrases to describe this silent language, but their inconsistency often makes it difficult to ascertain whether they were referring specifically to monastic signs or generally to conventional gestures that were not part of a recognized sign system. Allusions to the use of monastic sign language appeared in a number of near synonymous Latin guises, sometimes in the work of a single author. The most common word for an individual hand sign was *signum* (“sign”). Less common was *nutus* (literally “nod,” but usually employed in its widest sense as “indicator”). Anglo-Saxon authors at the turn of the first millennium called monastic signs *indicia* in Latin and *tacn* in Old English (both words carry the broad meaning of “sign” or “indicator”). One tenth-century Cluniac author referred to them uniquely as *notae* (“marks” or “characters”). Verbs and phrases for the act of making monastic signs included *significare*, *signo petere*, *signo facere*, *per signa insinuari*, *indiciis indicare* and *nutibus ostendere*. Even the most frequent and transparent Latin word for sign (*signum*) must be treated with caution, however, because monastic authors used it to indicate all manner of signals and cues, like the striking of wooden tablets and the tolling of bells, as well as the silent motions of fingers and hands. Fortunately, in most instances, the context of the word or phrase provides a reliable measure of its meaning.

The semantic challenges attendant with the study of this practice are not limited to the medieval evidence. This book employs the term “sign language” as a generic designation for the system of meaning-specific gestures employed by the brethren of Cluny and their imitators from the tenth century onwards. Some will undoubtedly question the appropriateness of this choice of terminology. Most people associate “sign language” with the mode of visual-kinetic communication commonly used by deaf people.³⁰ In North America, this term is usually identified with American Sign Language (ASL). The practice of deaf people using signs

²⁹ I am persuaded by Wollasch’s conclusions and employ them in this study, but he does not have the final word on the issue. The validity of his findings has recently been questioned by Isabelle Cochelin, who has suggested subverting the traditional primacy of Bernard’s customary in favor of Ulrich. See Cochelin, “Evolution des coutumiers monastiques,” pp. 29–30, n. 3. A definitive resolution to this issue must await the appearance of critical editions of the two customaries in question (see n. 26, above).

³⁰ Harlan Lane, *When the Mind Hears: A History of the Deaf* (New York, 1984); and Oliver Sacks, *Seeing Voices: A Journey into the World of the Deaf* (New York, 1989).