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052154808X - The Monastic Order in England: A History of its Development from the Times of St Dunstan to the Fourth Lateran Council 940-1216, Second Edition - Dom David Knowles

Excerpt

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Part One. Historical

- I. INTRODUCTION: Chapters I-II
- II. 940-1066: Chapters III-IV
- III. 1066-1100: Chapters V-IX
- IV. 1100-1135: Chapter X
- V. 1135-1175: Chapters XI-XVI
- VI. 1175-1216: Chapters XVII-XXII

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[More information](#)

CHAPTER I
THE RULE OF SAINT BENEDICT

I

The period of monastic history with which these chapters are concerned opens some two hundred years before the close of what has been called the era of the Benedictine Centuries. This name, convenient in itself and correct enough if it is recognized as being nothing more than a very loose title, may be taken to imply that for some five hundred years (c. 650–c. 1150) in Italy and the countries of Europe north and west of Italy (with the important exception of the Celtic civilization) monastic life based on the Rule of St Benedict was increasingly the norm and exercised from time to time a paramount influence on the spiritual, intellectual, liturgical and apostolical life of the Western Church. In other words, during these centuries the only type of religious life available in the countries concerned was monastic, and the ruling monastic code was the Rule of St Benedict. This period may be said to have begun with the great expansion of Benedictine monasticism in France and in England and to have ended, in essentials, with the rise of the new orders of monks and canons c. 1100, but monastic influence of one kind or another continued to be dominant in the Church until the emergence of the Universities in the second half of the twelfth century, followed shortly afterwards by the foundation of the orders of Friars. As, therefore, the first part of our period is dominated by the religious ideal of the black monks, and the later part still greatly influenced by it, it is necessary to have some understanding of the nature and scope of the document on which the monastic life of the West was based.

The Rule is a relatively short piece of writing. About a quarter of its pages are occupied with detailed liturgical and penal provisions; the remainder consists of legislation covering every department of the life of the monastery, and passing almost imperceptibly from formal enactment to deep spiritual instruction. A few chapters, but those the longest and most celebrated, such as the Prologue and the chapters on the Abbot and on Humility, are wholly on this lofty level; a number of others, composed largely of formal precepts, contain a wealth of practical advice, conveyed in the most pregnant form, for all the members and officials of a monastic family.¹

¹ The most informative edition of the text of the Rule is still that of Dom Butler, *S. Benedicti Regula* (Freiburg-im-Breisgau, 1912; 2 ed. 1927). I quote from this throughout by chapter and line. The edition (1960) of O. Hanslik (see p. 749) is completely critical, with elaborate apparatus and full concordance. For a general view of Benedictine history, polity and life Abbot Butler's *Benedictine Monachism* (1919; 2 ed. 1927) stands in a class by itself. The best commentary on the Rule is that of Dom Delatte, *Commentaire sur la Règle d*

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[More information](#)

Although some details of the Rule have given rise to controversies among both monks and scholars, it is not difficult to grasp the broad lines of the monastic life for which it was written, and which, therefore, it always tended of itself to reproduce. The monastery which it describes is a unit, completely self-contained and self-sufficient, both economically and constitutionally.¹ A community, ruled by an abbot elected by the monks for life, is supported by the produce of its fields and garden and has within the wall of its enclosure all that is necessary to convert the produce into food and to make and repair clothing and other articles of common use. It has no function in the life of the Church save to provide an ordered way of life based on the teaching of the gospel, according to which its inmates may serve God and sanctify their souls apart from the life of the world. No work done within it, whether manual, intellectual or charitable, is directed to an end outside its walls. It is the home of a spiritual family whose life and work begin and end in the family circle; like other families it may on occasion support dependents, give hospitality and relieve the spiritual and bodily necessities of those who dwell in its neighbourhood or who seek from it such relief, but its primary concern is with itself, not with others, and the evils of corporate selfishness are excluded by its *raison d'être*, which is the service of God in simplicity of life and without contact with the world.

The life within the monastery is a common life of absolute regularity, of strict discipline, of unvarying routine. The whole ordering of the day is concerned with furthering the spiritual welfare of those who form the family, and falls into three clear divisions of not unequal length. If an average is struck over the whole year, the monk is found to be engaged for some four hours (or a little less) in the liturgical prayer of the oratory, for some four in meditative reading or prayer, and for some six (or more) in work which is either domestic, or strictly manual, or the pursuit of some simple craft.² The whole day, and the whole year, is spent in an atmo-

Saint Benoît (Paris, 1913; frequently reprinted; there is an English translation by Dom Justin McCann); it is the work of a scholar who was also for long abbot of Solesmes. Excellent short works by competent specialists on the spirit and history of the black monks abound; among them may be mentioned especially the two books by Dom Ursmer Berlière, *L'Ordre Monastique* (Paris, 1912; 3rd ed. 1924) and *L'Ascèse Bénédictine* (Paris, 1927), both covering the period from St Benedict to the end of the twelfth century, and that of Dom Henri Leclercq, *L'Ordre Bénédictin* (Paris, 1930). Dom Chapman's *St Benedict and the Sixth Century* (1929), along with much that is valuable and ingenious, contains many judgments which should be received with caution. To these may be added the articles on St Benedict and Benedictine history in the *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité* (Paris, 1935), by Dom de Puniet, Dom Schmitz and Dom Mähler, which contain very full bibliographies.

¹ *Regula*, lxvi, 12: "Monasterium... ita debet constitui, ut omnia necessaria, id est, aqua, molendinum, hortus, vel artes diversae intra monasterium exercentur."

² St Benedict's horarium, as deducible from the Rule, has been worked out with care by Butler, *Benedictine Monachism*, 275-88, by Berlière, *L'Ascèse Bénédictine*, 51-2, and by Dom Philibert Schmitz, *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, art. *Benoît, S.—La Règle*. The silences of the Rule, together with absence of clock-times and the variations introduced for seasonal or liturgical reasons, make complete accuracy unattainable. It must also be remembered that while the time allowed for public prayer could never be broken into, that allotted to work doubtless covered the performance of numberless small and necessary duties.

sphere of silence and abstraction from the world which, while not rigidly absolute, are not broken by any specific opportunities for conversation or for departure from the monastic enclosure. For his spiritual nourishment the monk has the teaching and counsel of the abbot and elders, the treasures of earlier monastic and patristic literature, and the prayers of the psalter and the liturgy. For almost all the practical contingencies of such a life something is laid down in broad principle in the Rule.

Such, in briefest outline, is the framework which St Benedict adopted and established. Three points in it, familiar to all students of monasticism but not so familiar to the reader acquainted only with the later Middle Ages, seem to call for some remark.

The first is the liturgical service of the monks of the early sixth century. For more than a thousand years the elaborate celebration, with chant and ceremony, of the Divine Office and other liturgical functions has been considered a principal monastic duty to be accomplished by the monks of St Benedict in a manner different from that of other religious bodies, such as the Friars, who are also bound to the choral recitation of the Office; and at the present day this is often regarded as the task *par excellence* and as the peculiar province of the Benedictines. We shall see in the course of a few pages how rapidly and how naturally the Divine Office came to hold such a position, but as a matter of historical perspective we must remember that it was a development from the idea of St Benedict. In the Rule—as in other earlier and contemporary rules—the liturgical service is a simple, regular form of reading, prayer and praise, chanted in the oratory with simple modulation and without ceremonial. St Benedict does indeed say, in words which are among the most familiar of all in his Rule, that nothing shall take precedence of the Work of God, but this, as a glance at the context and sources of the words shows, is simply an assertion that of the various employments of the monk the public prayer, the direct worship of God, must take pride of place.¹ The *Opus Dei* is thus only a part, though in itself the most noble part, of the monk's daily employment; it is not the *raison d'être* of the institute.

The second point concerns the second chief employment, *lectio divina* or spiritual reading. The Rule allows a very long period daily for reading, but this reading is directed solely to the spiritual good of the individual, and the books to be read were, as St Benedict's explicit recommendations and tacit quotations show, exclusively the Scriptures, the early monastic literature and the writings of the Fathers of the Church. So much is clear from the text of the Rule, though almost every careful reader will have found difficulty when endeavouring to reconstruct in imagination St Benedict's community, made up as it was of men of the most varied mental capacity and education, and to picture it devoting between three or four

¹ *Regula*, xliii, 5: "Ergo nihil Operi Dei praeponatur." Butler, *ad loc.*, gives as a source the Rule of St Macarius: "nihil orationi [*sc.* publicae] praeponendum est." For the chanted office *v.* Dom A. Watkin, *DR*, xl (1941), 311–26.

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hours daily and even more on Sundays and feast days, year in year out, to spiritual or theological reading. Doubtless, of all the allocations of time in the Rule, this is the most summary; much of the time would be spent by many in prayer and in necessary individual occupations; the Rule itself makes provision that the slothful and the illiterate shall have some manual employment given them.¹ But the large space of time for *lectio divina* remains, and it was a spiritual and not at all an intellectual occupation. There is a considerable difference between the Monte Cassino of Benedict and the Vivarium of Cassiodorus, though in time there was something of a fusion between the types. Yet even at Monte Cassino there must have been a number of corollaries to the *lectio divina* which do not appear in the Rule. There must have been in the monastery, for instance, a certain amount of copying of manuscripts for this and for liturgical purposes; there must also have been some literary education given to the children dedicated in early years to the monastic life. And continual familiarity with the writings of the greatest of the fathers and ascetical writers could not but have exercised a considerable influence of a purely intellectual kind upon minds in any degree receptive and speculative.² In brief, there were already present in germ in the monastery of the Rule some of the pursuits that were in course of time to be regarded as being wholly monastic; but it is not with them that the Rule is concerned.

Thirdly, there is the question of the *opus manuum*, the manual work of the monks. The casual reader, especially if he is at all familiar with the history of the Cistercians, inevitably takes the work (*labor, opera manuum*) of the Rule to denote field and farm work. Yet here, as elsewhere, the hints and silences of the Rule and of St Gregory's *Life* of Benedict become the more tantalizing in proportion as they are more carefully noted, and there is room for a considerable difference of opinion on the point, for while St Benedict consistently supposes the field and the garden to be among the scenes of a monk's toil, it is equally clear that the harvesting of various kinds was normally done by others. Lay brothers are of course unknown to the Rule, nor is there any place in it for domestic servants; there would therefore be employment for many in every kind of domestic work, and in the domestic arts and crafts; very few of the members of the primitive Monte Cassino were clerics or in orders. Certainly, to imagine the whole community each day going out in a body to field work would be incorrect, but it would perhaps be nearer the truth than to picture the majority as occupied in quasi-intellectual or artistic work. That on

¹ *Regula*, xlvi, 53: "Si quis ita negligens et desidiosus fuerit, ut non velit aut non possit meditare aut legere, iniungatur ei opus quod faciat."

² It is, however, worth remarking that St Benedict, for all his wide acquaintance with ecclesiastical literature, shows far fewer traces in his style and methods of thought of any training than do many of his contemporaries in the Church, thus fully bearing out the words of Gregory (*Dialog*, II, I) that he was *scienter nescius, et sapienter indoctus*.

THE RULE OF SAINT BENEDICT

7

occasion the whole body would go out to the fields is clear from the Rule and from St Gregory; that individuals had charge of scattered fields and plots is equally clear from the Rule. But the heavy normal work of the fields was done by *coloni*, and the majority of the community probably found its normal employment within the sheds and offices of the monastery building.¹

II

The history of monasticism before St Benedict, and the estimating of his debt to the past and his influence upon succeeding ages, has occupied the attention of a number of able scholars in the past fifty years, and their findings have become a commonplace of textbooks.² It is universally agreed that while St Benedict was undoubtedly more familiar with earlier forms of monastic life than was at one time supposed, he nevertheless shows himself as a legislator of great originality and creative genius. It is accepted that he gave, first to central Italy, and then by transmission to the rest of Europe, a form of religious life peculiarly suited to Western temperaments and needs, and that he did this by turning away both from the eremitical ideal as it existed in Italy in his day, with its extreme physical austerity, and from the conception of the monastic life as a search for perfection now in this monastery and now in that, and by firmly basing his system on a Rule to which absolute obedience was vowed, applied by an abbot to whom that obedience was paid, in a monastery from whose family circle only death could separate the monk who had once joined himself to it. The great and permanent influence of St Benedict upon the spiritual life of the Church has thus been fully recognized; less attention has been paid to those characteristics and limitations in his teaching which were due to the age and country in which he was born, and to the natural temper of his mind. A brief consideration of some of these will help to an understanding both of the unique influence which the Rule had upon European life in the early Middle Ages, and of the waning of this influence into that of one amongst many at the renaissance of the eleventh and twelfth centuries.

The series of profound changes in every department of human life, racial, political, social, economic and intellectual, which we call the passing of the ancient civilization and the birth of the medieval world took place over a number of centuries. The transition which was beginning at the

¹ The question of the *opus manuum* of the Rule has been debated since early times, often by disputants *de parti pris*. The only sources of evidence are the Rule and Book 11 of St Gregory's *Dialogues*; their evidence is well summed up in Butler, *Benedictine Monachism*, 285-6, and the attempt of Dom Chapman, *St Benedict and the Sixth Century*, 169-72, to modify his conclusions is successfully rebutted by Abbot Butler in the article *St Benedict and the Sixth Century* in the *Downside Review*, XLVIII (1930), 179-97.

² See especially Butler, *The Lausiac History of Palladius* (Cambridge, 1898, 1904), the works quoted above in the first note, and C. Heussi, *Der Ursprung des Mönchtums* (1936).

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death of Marcus Aurelius was complete shortly before the crowning of Charlemagne. But if we consider, not the whole of western Europe but its heart, Italy and southern Gaul, and look for the moment when the new rather than the old is in possession—the moment in the dawn when it is day and not night, even if it be not fully day—many will tell us that this is to be found in the reign of Theodoric in Italy.¹ Theodoric reigned from 493 till 526; Benedict's life in central Italy fell between the years 480 and 550; his lifetime, therefore, coincided exactly with the crisis of change, and a careful reader will perceive that, short and simple as the Rule is, it yet contains an extremely subtle blend of old and new. Benedict, like those other two, Augustine and Gregory, who were to influence European thought so deeply for six or seven centuries, while he anticipated so exactly the modes of feeling and ways of life of the future, had himself a grasp of the past which future generations were to lack.

Recent intensive study of pre-Benedictine monachism and of the sources of the Rule has revealed the richness of the legacy of the past which was at the disposal of Benedict;² in a well-known passage he specifically refers his monks to the threefold inheritance from the Fathers of Rule, of doctrine and of spiritual instruction.³ He uses these three sources amply himself, and though he was not, like Augustine or even like Gregory, possessed of a share of the wide and poised culture of the ancient world, he had nevertheless a selective and critical faculty and a self-possession of mind which could only come to the child of a great civilization and which few show signs of possessing in the centuries after his death. Nor is it fanciful to see in his character and Rule, with its gravity and its constant reference to justice and to measure, the stamp of antique Rome.⁴ Moreover, though Western culture and political life were rapidly declining, the life of the Church in Rome and central Italy attained a summit of order and legal and disciplinary control in the age of Leo the Great (440–61), Gelasius (492–6) and Hormisdas (514–23) which was not abandoned till after the days of Gregory the Great. Justice has been somewhat tardily done to this age of greatness in Rome, but within recent years the legal and administrative achievements of Gelasius, Hormisdas and their circle have been fully recognized, as also the power of Romans of the fifth and sixth centuries to think and to speak with precision, depth

1 This is the date taken for the beginning of the Middle Ages and final separation of East and West by H. St L. B. Moss, *The Birth of the Middle Ages* (1935).

2 Butler, in his edition, notes some thirty authors quoted, apart from Scripture; about twenty of these are quoted with some frequency. Chapman and others have made additions to the list. *V.* also Additional Note A, *The Regula Magistri* (p. 749).

3 *Regula*, lxxiii, 8 *seqq.*: “Quae enim pagina . . . Veteris ac Novi Testamenti . . . aut quis liber sanctorum Catholicorum Patrum . . . nec non et Collationes Patrum, et Instituta et Vitas eorum, sed et Regula sancti patris nostri Basilii, quid aliud sunt nisi . . . monachorum instrumenta virtutum?”

4 *Gravitas* occurs as a moral quality some five times in the Rule; *mensura* and its derivatives ten times.

and eloquence.¹ It would seem beyond question that Benedict derived from the firm constitution of the Roman Church, as expressed in synods and decretals, the simple, strong outline of government handed down the ages by the Rule.

But if the Rule holds within it so much of the wisdom and experience of the past, its anticipation of the future is even more striking. The ancient world, with its city life, its great seats of culture, its graded society and its wide and rapid means of communication, was rapidly disappearing. In the Empire, as in the countries of the modern world, it had been possible for men to travel far to satisfy mental or spiritual needs. In the new world that was coming into being the estate, the village, the district were the units; Europe, from being a single complex organism, was becoming an aggregate of cells, bound to one another by the loosest of ties. St Benedict lived in a society where the scope and opportunities of education, secular and theological, were yearly narrowing, and in which the numbers of the educated were yearly lessening; a society in which the family, the farm, the estate was strong and all collective organization weak; a society made up of self-contained and self-supporting units rather than of interdependent trades, industries and professions; a society continually threatened with extinction in this part or that by invasion or chaos, and which therefore needed above all some clear, simple, basic principles to which it might hold and rally.

This need was met, at every level of life, by the monastery of the Rule. Economically and materially it contained within its walls and fields all the necessities of life and the means of converting them to man's use; living upon its own fields and exercising its own crafts, it was perfectly adapted to exist through and survive all the changes of the invasions; economically and administratively a unit, it escaped all the dangers of dismemberment short of total destruction.

Still more perfect was this suitability to the needs of the time on the moral and spiritual levels. St Benedict's monastery is a microcosm. It holds all types, all classes and all ages. Children, brought almost in infancy by their parents, ex-serfs, sons of the poor and noble, clerics and priests, the highly intelligent as well as the Goth *pauper spiritu* and those who will not or cannot read—all are there, and among them there is no distinction whatever save in the service of the altar. Only in the early centuries or backward countries of medieval times could such a community continue to be the norm, and it did not in fact endure long in its

¹ Thus G. Le Bras, *Histoire des Collections Canoniques en Occident* (Paris, 1931), 1, 22, notes the middle of the fifth century as a culminating point of legal, conciliar and theological development, and writes (p. 7) of "ce temps de brillante activité qu'inaugure le pape Gélase et que s'achève par le pontificat d'Hormisdas". Dom Chapman, *St Benedict and the Sixth Century*, 51, refers to "the superb letters of St Leo" with their "sympathetic charity and wisdom" and "their exquisite wording, unsurpassed in Latin [ecclesiastical] literature except by Cyprian".

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

10

THE RULE OF SAINT BENEDICT

original comprehensiveness.¹ The growing identification of monks with clerics, and the many disabilities of the serf class, made of later monasteries less of a perfect microcosm. But as long as the chaotic, transitional period lasted in Europe—that is, till the emergence of the perfect feudal state in the eleventh century—the conception of a monastery as a little world, into which souls were dedicated in infancy, continued to endure, and it need not be said that such an idea was most powerful in the centuries which saw the new nations of Europe struggling from infancy to adolescence.

III

For such a little world the legislation of the Rule is exquisitely adapted. Its proverbial discretion, shown in the careful allotment of common measures and of a due place to every element in the life, its insistence on the external, visible, audible voice and action of authority, its elementary, germinal, pregnant teaching—all this, intrinsically valuable at any time, was indispensable in a code that was to be the alphabet of the religious life to a civilization in travail. St Benedict in more than one passage, but in particular in the last chapter of the Rule, insists that his work is a code for beginners.² The phrase has caused some uneasiness to commentators, and those who have felt it necessary to free the legislator from a charge of false humility have often pointed to the more severe asceticism of the Eastern monks from which Benedict was consciously retreating. The explanation does not wholly satisfy, for it would logically involve the saint in a more subtle form of insincerity, in which while setting up a truer and more interior standard of perfection he would pay lip service to that which he was supplanting. The truth would rather seem to be that St Benedict intended the preceptive portions of the Rule to be, as it were, the minimum standard of an evangelical life, which could be demanded of all, but which proficients could transcend while yet fulfilling, as a skilled musician transcends without transgressing the laws of harmony. But it is also true that in the Rule the legislator addresses himself of set purpose to the beginner in a way peculiar to himself. Large sections are directly and explicitly devoted to one who is entering upon its observance,³ or deal with penal regulations concerning those who have certainly not advanced far towards

¹ That all these various elements were present, at least in some proportion, in the monasteries for which the Rule was written, is clear from its text and from St Gregory's *Dialogues*. Chapman, *St Benedict and the Sixth Century*, c. x, *The Social Condition of Monks*, argues with much learning that the ex-serf was very rare in the monastery, the ex-domestic slave also rare, though less so, and that the majority of recruits would have come from lower and middle class free families.

² *Regula*, lxxiii, 21–2: "Hanc minimam inchoationis Regulam."

³ Cf. *Regula*, Prol., 6 *seqq.*: "Ad te ergo nunc mihi sermo dirigitur, quisquis... Domino Christo vero Regi militaturus, oboedientiae... arma sumis." Cf. *ibid.* 122 *seqq.*: "non illico... refugias viam salutis, quae non est nisi angusto initio incipienda."

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Excerpt

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THE RULE OF SAINT BENEDICT

II

perfection. The possibility of grave failure is everywhere allowed for;¹ not only in the monks, but in the priests, the deans, the prior and even the abbot himself;² and at every stage, and when dealing with every function, St Benedict sets himself to advise the one who is entering upon it. His method, which is always to indicate the practical, external steps leading towards an unseen goal, is in strong contrast to the method of the abbots in Cassian's conferences who attract the reader to the perfect life by describing its essence and interior qualities. St Benedict, as we know from his own statement, intended that his monks should supplement his teaching with the other; in the event, the wisdom of the past was in large part lost to the new Europe here as in other fields, and only the teaching of Benedict remained. We may note and deplore the loss, but there is no doubt that of the two, the Rule and Cassian's writings, the former was far better suited to be a formative influence for the many.

A full acknowledgment of the unique excellence of the Rule does not imply that it has no limitations. Some such are inevitable in every code that bears the stamp of time and place, and are in a sense merely negative. We have just mentioned one; the loss to the majority of monks in the centuries to come of the body of earlier spiritual teaching which the Rule presupposed. Another, inevitable at the time and perhaps as much a benefit as a limitation, is the absence of any machinery of organization or control for a group of monasteries. Deeper than this is a characteristic of the Rule that comes from the temper of mind and soul of its author. Just as, in its discretion and wide wisdom, the Rule, considered as a code of life, has a value beyond the teaching of the monks of the desert, so their teaching, considered as a guide for the individual soul in its interior life, surpasses that of the Rule in clarity and depth. In the monuments of the desert, and above all in the Conferences recorded by Cassian, there is a depth, a penetration, an exactness of expression, a purity of insight, a clear vision of the heights which is not found in the Rule. The degrees of the spiritual life, the divisions of active and contemplative, of natural and supernatural, of ascetic and mystic, the stages of prayer, the provinces of the virtues, are all set out there with a simplicity, directness and certainty of touch never again equalled before the thirteenth century and surpassed, perhaps, only by the Spanish saints of the Renaissance. The Egyptian and Syrian monks of the early fifth century reached, indeed, a summit of excellence in spiritual doctrine, and were still possessed of the cultural resources and habits of thought of Greek civilization which made it possible for them to express their thoughts with luminous precision. St Benedict, as is well known, was intimately familiar with Cassian, whom he

1 Cf. *Regula*, ii, 33: "duris corde"; 78: "inprobos autem et duros ac superbos, vel inobedientes"; and the many references to the slothful.

2 *Regula*, xxi, 10 (of the deans): "si ex eis . . . quis inflatus superbia"; lxii, 17 (of the priests): "non sacerdos sed rebellio iudicetur"; lxxv, 42 (of the prior): "si repertus fuerit vitiosus aut elatione deceptus"; lxxiv, 10 (of the abbot).