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978-1-107-02124-2 - The Monks of Tiron: A Monastic Community and
Religious Reform in the Twelfth Century

Kathleen Thompson

Excerpt

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Introduction

In a memorable passage of his *Ecclesiastical History* the Anglo-Norman historian Orderic Vitalis describes how a “swarm of cowled monks spreads all over the world” and monasteries “are founded everywhere in mountain valleys and plains, observing new rites and wearing different habits”.¹ He begins his observations with the white monks, the Cistercians, recounting their origins in Abbot Robert’s foundations at Molesme and Cîteaux and the spread of these new ideas until, at the time of his writing, sixty-five abbeys had adopted the approach. In his treatment of these attempts to reinvigorate monastic tradition in the late eleventh and early twelfth century, Orderic then goes on to describe other initiatives, which, in contrast to the Burgundian background of the Cistercians, had their origins in the west of modern France. Two in particular are singled out: those associated with Bernard of Tiron and Vitalis of Mortain, and it is with the former that this study will be concerned.

There is no history of the network of houses that took its name from the abbey Bernard founded at Thiron-Gardais in the county of the Perche to the west of Chartres.² Yet arguably in comparison with the much discussed contemporary foundations, such as Fontevraud and Savigny, Bernard’s was the most successful. Commentators of the day describe how Bernard attracted large numbers of followers, and very soon the new abbey, which is always spelt as Tiron, although it was located at Thiron, became the head of an affiliation of houses, spread over northern France and the British Isles, with particularly important communities in Scotland. While Robert of Arbrissel’s foundation at Fontevraud developed in what would be described today as a “niche market” as a house

¹ OV, IV, 310: *In saltibus et campestribus passim construuntur cenobia, nouisque ritibus uariisque scematibus trabeata, peragrant orbem cucullatorum examina.*

² The abbey and the order are conventionally spelt using the old French orthography as “Tiron”, while the modern place name is “Thiron” (dép. Eure-et-Loir, ch. I. du cant.). The commune has been united with that of Gardais. The most accessible account of the abbey is Denis Guillemin, *Thiron, abbaye médiévale* (Montrouge: Amis du Perche, 1999).

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for aristocratic women³ and Vitalis of Mortain's foundation at Savigny⁴ was absorbed by the Cistercians, the followers of Bernard retained an independent monastic tradition that survived beyond the Middle Ages.⁵

The history of the monks of Tiron presents, then, a unique opportunity to look at the emergence of the so-called "new orders" of the twelfth century through the lens of one of those new orders, and one which has hitherto received little attention. Moreover this can be achieved with the benefit of recent advances in the understanding of institutional memory and hagiography. Instead of mining saints' lives for incidental information and deploring the recycling of stories from one life to another, historians have learned to take a different approach to hagiographical writing, which forms an important source for monastic history. They now seek to place saints' lives in their liturgical and cultural context and to listen to what the lives tell us about the society that produced them. Many of the lives are indeed formulaic and reuse material from older lives, but their purpose was not disinterested biography. Within monastic communities they were intended to remind members of the virtues of their saints, whether they were the founders or those whose relics the community possessed and cared for. By the eleventh century centres of excellence in the writing of saints' lives had emerged and religious communities often commissioned lives of their founders from those centres.⁶ Marbod, bishop of Rennes (d. 1123), was commissioned, for example, to write a life of Abbot Robert of Chaise-Dieu, and in the twelfth century Baudry of Bourgueil wrote a life of Robert of Arbrissel at the request of Abbess Petronilla of Fontevraud.⁷ We now know that these lives were vehicles to promote institutional remembrance and veneration of the saint and, as such, they were used in the liturgy of the community. Often a monastic

³ Sometimes spelt Fontevrault, dép. Maine-et-Loire, cant. Saumur-sud. The literature on Robert of Arbrissel is enormous. Major French studies are J.-M. Bienvenu, *L'étonnant fondateur de Fontevraud, Robert d'Arbrissel* (Paris: Nouvelles Éditions Latines, 1981); Jacques Dalarun, *L'impossible sainteté: la vie retrouvée de Robert d'Arbrissel (v. 1045–1116), fondateur de Fontevraud* (Paris: Cerf, 1985).

⁴ Savigny-le-Vieux, dép. Manche, cant. Le Teilleul.

⁵ Claude Auvry, *Histoire de la Congrégation de Savigny*, ed. A. Laveille (Rouen: Lestringant, 1896–8); J. Buhot, "L'abbaye normande de Savigny: chef d'ordre et fille de Cîteaux", *Le Moyen Âge* 46 (1936), 1–19; 104–21; 178–90; 249–72; M. Suydam, "Origins of the Savigniac order: Savigny's role within twelfth-century monastic reform", *RB* 86 (1976), 94–108; J. J. van Moelenbroek, *Vitalis van Savigny (†1122): bronnen en vroege cultus mit editie van diplomatische teksten* (Amsterdam: Academische Pers, 1982), translated as *Vital l'ermitte: prédicateur itinérant, fondateur de l'abbaye normande de Savigny*, trans. Anne-Marie Nambot (Amsterdam: Van Gorcum, 1990).

⁶ Thomas Head, *Hagiography and the cult of saints: the diocese of Orléans, 800–1200* (Cambridge University Press, 1990), 226 on Letaldus of Micy.

⁷ Marbod of Rennes, "Vita sancti Roberti abbatis Casae Dei", PL 171, cols. 1505–32; Baudry of Bourgueil, "Vita primi B. Roberti de Arbrisselo", PL 162, cols. 1043–58.

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community might have several lives of the same saint, which covered different facets of the saint's life.⁸ In his remarkable study of the two lives of Robert of Arbrissel, Jacques Dalarun points out that the first life showed the conflict and tension of Robert's unconventional life, while the second dealt with the circumstances of his death and the implications of his place of burial.⁹ Other equally complex purposes have been detected, including the defence of communities against lay interference or episcopal intervention, and indeed in the case of the early lives of Abbot Hugh of Cluny, the defence of an entire approach to monasticism.¹⁰

Our current picture of the origins of the Tironensian network and its place in monastic history is entirely based on just such a life, that of its founder, Abbot Bernard. At more than 25,000 words the *Vita beati Bernardi Tironensis* (BHL 1251) is one of the longest of the surviving examples of medieval hagiographical writing.¹¹ It is both an account of the founder's life and a narrative of the foundation of the community. As such it charts Bernard's progress from Bernard of Ponthieu to Bernard of Tiron, and from it are derived the biographical sketches of Ménard, Mabillon and the *Histoire littéraire de la France*, as well as modern treatments, such as those of David Knowles and Henrietta Leyser.¹² It has not only determined our picture of the Tironensians, but also significantly influenced the historiography of the hermit movement in western France. It is the source for the memorable description of the forests of western France as a second Egypt, overflowing with hermits, and its imagery of the forest life with an assembly of hermits has prevailed in modern discussions of eremitic experiment in twelfth-century France.

⁸ For a detailed discussion, Thomas J. Heffernan, "The liturgy and the literature of saints' lives", *The liturgy of the medieval church*, ed. Thomas J. Heffernan and E. Ann Matter (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2001), 73–105.

⁹ Dalarun, *L'impossible sainteté*, 150.

¹⁰ *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: Société de l'histoire de France, 1858); Baudouin de Gaiffier d'Hestroy, "L'hagiographe et son public au XIe siècle", *Miscellanea historica in honorem Leonis van der Essen* (Brussels: Éditions universitaires, 1944), 135–66; Amy Remensnyder, *Remembering kings past: monastic foundation legends in medieval southern France* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), 218ff.; Frank Barlow, "The canonization and the early lives of Hugh, abbot of Cluny", *AB* 98 (1980), 296–334.

¹¹ The most accessible text of the *Vita Bernardi* is to be found in PL 172, cols. 1367–446. The full Latin text is printed with a French translation in Beck, *Bernard*. An English translation is also available, but without a parallel text, Cline, *Bernard*.

¹² Hugues Ménard, *Martyrologium sanctorum ordinis divi Benedicti* (Paris: apud Ioannem Germont & Ioannem Billaine, 1629), 534; Jean Mabillon, *Annales ordinis S. Benedicti occidentalium monachorum patriarchae* (Paris: Dionysius Thierry, 1740), vol. V, 237. David Knowles, *The monastic order in England: a history of its development from the times of*

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Although modern translations into English and French are available, there has been no modern critical treatment of the *Vita*.¹³ The most penetrating examination was that undertaken at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries by the German scholar Johannes Wilhelm von Walter (1876–1940), who, working within the positivist tradition, raised important questions about its reliability.¹⁴ The most distinguished hagiologist among his contemporaries, Albert Poncelet, described von Walter's work as "Plein de remarques utiles et souvent neuves",¹⁵ but von Walter was chiefly interested in Bernard's preaching and as a result he concentrated on the first half of the *Vita*. His study of the wandering preachers has been extraordinarily influential and appears in the bibliographies of most work on the monastic experiments of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, but his doubts about the *Vita Bernardi* were not followed up. Von Walter went on to a distinguished career as a historian of the Reformation, and others who considered the *Vita* were reluctant to address the implications of his work. Dom Jacques de Bascher, a monk at Fontgombaud, a Benedictine house in the modern congregation of French monasteries headed by Solesmes, studied the *Vita* for information on the early history of his own house.¹⁶ The Dutch academic Jaap van Moolenbroek came to the *Vita* seeking information about the career of Vitalis of Mortain.¹⁷ While both writers made important observations, the *Vita* has never received detailed consideration for its own sake, and commentators have been content to accept the life on its own terms – as a near-eyewitness account of events in the forests of western France at the opening of the twelfth century.

Only in recent years has the *Vita* been approached as a piece of writing with a particular purpose of its own. Where previous examinations had looked at content, attempting to untangle the labyrinthine chronology

St Dunstan to the fourth Lateran council 940–1216, 2nd edn (Cambridge University Press, 1963), 200–2; Henrietta Leyser, *Hermits and the new monasticism: a study of religious communities in western Europe 1000–1150* (London: Macmillan, 1984).

¹³ Cline, *Bernard*; Beck, *Bernard*.

¹⁴ Johannes von Walter, *Die ersten Wanderprediger Frankreichs: Studien zur Geschichte des Mönchtums* (Leipzig, 1903/6). All references, except where stated, are to the French translation by J. Cahour, which was revised by von Walter, "Bernard de Thiron", *Bulletin de la Commission historique et archéologique de la Mayenne* (2nd series) 24 (1908), 385–410; 25 (1909), 17–44.

¹⁵ A. Poncelet, "Johannes von Walter. *Die ersten Wanderprediger Frankreichs. Studien zur Geschichte des Mönchtums*", *AB* 26 (1907), 359–60.

¹⁶ Jacques de Bascher, "La '*Vita*' de saint Bernard d'Abbeville", *RM* 59 (1979), 411–50, and "Robert d'Arbrissel, Bernard de Tiron, Vital de Savigny, Raoul de la Futaie et l'expansion érémitique de Fontgombault", *Province du Maine* 85 (1983), 121–38, p. 125.

¹⁷ Moolenbroek, *Vitalis*.

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of the work, Jean-Hervé Foulon considered the context in which it was produced and he suggested that the life was written at a period when the abbey of Tiron was beginning to fall away from the commitment to poverty which had been one of its founding principles.¹⁸ M. Foulon's approach reflects the transformation that occurred in the study of hagiography in the second half of the twentieth century and begins to locate the *Vita* in the circumstances of its production. When the discussion moves away from content and chronology and the *Vita Bernardi* is properly contextualised, it becomes clear that it is part of the history of Tiron, as well as a source for that history.

If, moreover, the *Vita Bernardi* is moved, at least temporarily, to one side, it becomes apparent that there are many other sources for the history of Tiron, both for the biography of the founder, Bernard, and for the subsequent dissemination of his ideas within the network of Tiron's daughter houses. The *Vita* is not the sole Tiron narrative at all; it is merely the best known. So great has been its appeal, however, that these other sources have always been regarded as subsidiary and auxiliary, and, rather than complementing and illuminating the picture presented by the *Vita*, they have hitherto always been used to try to validate it. With the benefit of a more nuanced understanding of hagiographical writing, it is now possible to look at the *Vita Bernardi* as an artefact, designed for a specific audience, which we will do in later chapters, and the *Vita* will be seen as one source among many. Associated with it are other texts, which are likely productions of the Tiron scriptorium, including an intercessory piece, probably intended to be used as part of the liturgy to celebrate the saint at Tiron, and a sermon, which took some of its material verbatim from the *Vita*.¹⁹ None of these works has yet been examined for their contribution to the history of Tiron and the development of what might be described as the Tiron narrative. Most importantly there is also the *Brevis descriptio*, a short life of Bernard, recently discovered by Jacques Dalarun. It is particularly valuable because is not an abbreviated version of the *Vita Bernardi* but presents a new narrative.²⁰ While it contains many elements that are familiar from the *Vita* as we currently have it, other themes from the *Vita* are entirely missing.

¹⁸ Jean-Hervé Foulon, "Les ermites dans l'ouest de la France: les sources, bilan et perspectives", *Ermites de France et d'Italie (XIIIe–XVe siècle)*, ed. A. Vauchez (École française de Rome, 2003), 81–113, p. 106.

¹⁹ Heffernan, "The liturgy and the literature of saints' lives", 104–5; see also the account of "hagiographie homilétique" in Gaiffier, "L'hagiographe et son public au XIe siècle", 47.

²⁰ BNF MS Latin 584, described in *Catalogue général des manuscrits latins [de la] Bibliothèque nationale*, vol. I (nos. 1–1438), publié sous la direction de P. Lauer (Paris: Bibliothèque

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These omissions are important, since they occur in precisely the areas of the *Vita Bernardi* which have been so influential in scholarly debate about the hermit monks of western France. There is, therefore, not only the neglected material, but new material which can throw light on the history of Tiron.

Finally, more attention needs to be given to the archival legacy of the community at Tiron, for it, too, is a witness to the evolving self-image of the Tironensian community. While the literary legacy describes hermits and preachers, the Tiron archive and, in particular, the cartulary or record book, compiled in the middle of the twelfth century, describe a more settled coenobitic community.²¹ This documentary material enables us to continue the history of Tiron from the heroic days depicted in the *Vita* into the second and third generations.²² It has never before been read in conjunction with the *Vita* to provide a coherent narrative for the first century at Tiron, and analysis of its contents reveals a community which handled wealth much more readily and successfully than might be expected for the successors of the Bernard who is portrayed in the *Vita*. That community was closely aligned with the local elite and more akin in its intercessory activity to the traditional Benedictine house of the eleventh century than the informal hermit assemblies portrayed in the *Vita*.

These enquiries on the nature and reliability of the sources take up the first three chapters and lay the groundwork for the narrative of the early history of Tiron that follows in the second half of the book. Sometimes there will be a *déjà-vu* quality to that second half as the observations that emerge from the detailed work on the sources are fitted into the narrative, which will cover Bernard's career, before going on to consider the history of first century at Tiron. It is largely to the *Vita Bernardi* that we owe the image of the forests of western France, teeming with holy men, who had chosen to live a more austere life beyond the confines of urban and rural settlements. It is an image that has had an enduring appeal for historians, who have been beguiled by the woodland setting and the energetic restatement of the most radical elements of the Christian message, "go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come and follow me" (Matt. 19:21).²³ These conscious attempts to recover the simplicity of early Christianity and in particular its inclusiveness are attractive to the modern mind, but it is important to look across all the sources for the history of Tiron, as well

ationale, 1939), 206. An edition is in preparation, Jacques Dalarun, "La *Vie* abrégée de Bernard de Tiron" (forthcoming).

²¹ ADEL H 1371–H 1979.

²² See the author's first attempt to do this, "The first hundred years at Tiron: institutionalizing the reform of the forest hermits", *ANS* 31 (2009), 104–17.

²³ All biblical references are to the Authorised Version unless otherwise stated.

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as at the self-image propagated through the *Vita Bernardi*. The narrative of Tironensian history in the twelfth century has never been attempted before and has much value for the study of emergence of the monastic orders and the institutions that underpinned them. Taken together the sources suggest that the Tironensians themselves struggled to identify what made their approach unique and, while individuals who entered the community might practise poverty and ascetism, the community as a whole soon amassed resources. Efforts were made to articulate how the founder's ethic helped the community to deal with its worldly wealth and they culminated in the production of the *Vita Bernardi*. The self-image of hermit preachers in the wilderness portrayed in the *Vita* has been deeply influential in the historiography of twelfth-century reform and it will be challenged in what follows.

1 Developing the Tiron narrative

To the historian of the monastic community at Tiron, the *Vita Bernardi* (BHL 1251) announces itself as the primary source. It is the “authorised biography” of the founder, Bernard, the version written at Tiron, when memories were fresh, by one who had known Bernard, and had questioned him about his experiences. It could hardly have a finer provenance and its apparent immediacy has led to its uncritical acceptance as the accurate account of the early years of the monastery of Tiron. It is, however, by no means the only source for the establishment of Tiron and the life of its founder, and as the *Vita* is considered alongside those other sources, so it becomes clear that it stands, in fact, at the end of a long process of development, and the process can be traced by reference to the other sources. The developing narrative begins with observations about Bernard that were made in his own lifetime and continues throughout the twelfth century. The *Vita Bernardi* is not in fact the immediate, near first-hand account that it appears to be, but the product of a subtle evolution of ideas about Bernard and what his foundation stood for. In what follows we will begin by examining why the *Vita* appears to be so authoritative and then we will review other sources for the early years at Tiron, showing how the Bernard narrative evolved until it reached its fullest expression in the *Vita Bernardi*.

The authority of the *Vita Bernardi*

The authority assigned by those who have written about Tiron to the *Vita Bernardi* rests on two considerations: the proximity of its author to its subject and the fact that in length and detail of its treatment there is little to stand beside it. It is an extended treatment of the life of the founder of Tiron and the abbey’s early years, covering seventy-eight of Migne’s tightly printed *Patrologia Latina* columns. Although the 142 paragraphs of the *Patrologia* edition were imposed by the seventeenth-century editor, Godefroy Henskens, they have been the basis for all subsequent scholarly work and continue to provide a convenient frame of reference. They are

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cited throughout this discussion in the form H1 [Henskens paragraph 1]. Briefly the contents are as follows.

The *Vita* begins with a prologue containing the dedication to Bishop Geoffrey of Chartres and a rationale for writing the work [H1–5]. Bernard's life before the foundation of Tiron follows [H6–62]. Little is said of Bernard's youth, beyond his birthplace and passing reference to his education. After entering the community of Saint-Cyprien of Poitiers as a young man he excelled in his monastic career, rising to be prior of the abbey of Saint-Savin-sur-Gartempe and eventually abbot of Saint-Cyprien. The focus of this part of the work is Bernard's monastic formation, with an emphasis on his enthusiasm for lengthy periods in the wilderness, preaching and the relief of poverty. Over 10 per cent of the *Vita* [from H49 to H60] is devoted to the circumstances leading up to Bernard's departure from Saint-Cyprien, which stands at a critical point in the development of the *Vita's* narrative, bringing to a conclusion the first period of his monastic life in Poitou and relocating him in northern France in readiness for a second period at Tiron. The second half of the *Vita* [H63–126] is devoted to the foundation of Tiron, the gathering of the community there and the support received from noble patrons, which led to the development of a network of houses on both sides of the English Channel. Bernard's death is covered in considerable detail [H105–26] and the work ends with anecdotes of Bernard's life [H127–42], arriving at a rather, to modern eyes, abrupt conclusion with an account of Bernard's treatment of a hungry servant.

The text of the *Vita* implies, as we will see, that it has sprung fully formed from the mind of its author, composed on the basis of his personal knowledge and that of those who had known the founder, some of them eyewitnesses to the events described. It asserts that it is the most immediate of first-hand accounts, the most primary of primary sources. If it was indeed written at the abbey of Tiron within a generation of Bernard's death in 1116, as the internal evidence implies, then this is a near first-hand picture of the hermit life, and indeed it has always been read in that way. The authorial voice declares itself to be that of Geoffrey, the least (*infimus*) of all the monks and gives no further direct information about itself. The adjective *grossus*, "the fat", has come to be associated with Geoffrey's name. Although the description is not attached to the author in text of the *Vita*, it may reflect the opening of a *livret*, containing the life, which was seen at Tiron in the seventeenth century by René Courtin.¹ It is also often confidently asserted that

¹ René Courtin, *Histoire du Perche, publiée d'après le manuscrit original*, ed. O. de Romanet and H. Tournouer (Mortagne, 1893, repr. Marseille: Lafitte, 1980), 155–6: *scripta per Gaufrédum grossum monachum*.

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Geoffrey was the chancellor of the abbey at Tiron and again this is not a contemporary description. It was the suggestion of Lucien Merlet, the archivist of the département of the Eure-et-Loir, who worked on the Tiron archive in the nineteenth century. He linked the scribe of an act in the Tiron cartulary, *Goffredus cancellarius cognomine Grossinus*, with the author of the life.² The identification has been readily accepted by subsequent commentators, although there are clear difficulties. First, the use of the title *cancellarius* is rare among monastic scribes. It is most commonly used of scribes at counts' law courts and from the mid twelfth century in cathedral chapters, and the act in question was indeed made before the lord Ralph of Beaugency.³ Second, the act is the only act in the entire cartulary in which a scribe named Geoffrey appears. If Geoffrey, the least of the monks, indeed held a secretarial function in the house then we might expect to see him as the draftsman of more acts.

While the factual information given by the author about himself is, then, negligible, an authorial persona does emerge very clearly from the writing. The reader is given to understand that the writer has had the opportunity to observe Bernard at close quarters as a member of the community that Bernard founded:

From that day to this we have retained in our house the custom he instituted of providing hospitality to all in the guest house and supplying the necessities of meals and beds to those who need it. [H92]

Not only has the writer had the privilege of living and working in Bernard's community, he has also been able to hear Bernard's account of the events narrated in the *Vita*:

And so he lived for a long time in this place, lacking bread and without a hearth or a companion. He refused, however, to tell us when we asked him by what nourishment he sustained his life while he wanted for these things. [H27]

Indeed the author has even participated in some of the events recounted in the later stages of the *Vita* narrative:

And in fact, just as Bernard had foretold, not much later the following happened to the priest, as we ourselves saw. [H94]

The author makes it clear, however, that he does not possess first-hand experience of every event he narrates, yet where this is the case he often knows a man who does have that experience:

² T1.99 (LXXIX).

³ J. F. Niermeyer, *Mediae latinitatis lexicon minus* (Leiden: Brill, 1976), 125.