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Published Version

Lawrence-Mathers, A. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6216-624X> (1995) Cistercian decoration: twelfth-century legislation on illumination and its interpretation in England. *Reading Medieval Studies*, XX. pp. 31-52. ISSN 0950-3129 Available at <https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/84623/>

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Cistercian Decoration: Twelfth-Century Legislation on Illumination and its Interpretation in England

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The study of Cistercian manuscripts is still a relatively new field. A series of detailed examinations of the manuscripts of individual monasteries or regions has now been produced, but one central issue remains problematic, and that is the question of the Cistercian 'legislation' on books and their decoration, and the extent to which it was put into practice.¹ Related to this is the question of whether the relevant Statutes represented ideas which were widely held within the Order, or whether they should be seen as the result of the influence wielded by one dominant personality, St Bernard of Clairvaux. This paper will attempt to address both these questions, through an analysis of the surviving twelfth-century manuscripts from the Cistercian houses of northern England.

These manuscripts are particularly helpful for such an enquiry, since the houses to which they belonged formed a close network, which was itself a part of the affiliation of Clairvaux. They may have been still more closely linked in the 1140s, when Henry Murdac, abbot of Fountains, was given the position of senior abbot of the group, acting for St Bernard.² Moreover, while the survival rate of Cistercian manuscripts from northern England is rather low, as it is from all of England, a group of ten monasteries, dominated by Rievaulx, Fountains and Byland, are represented by a total of some 70 manuscripts datable to the middle or second half of the twelfth century. This is a total small enough to be examined in some detail, but large enough to form a basis for conclusions. The examination of the surviving manuscripts from this network of monasteries therefore makes it possible to discover the extent to which they followed the relevant legislation and, more interestingly, how they interpreted it.

The monasteries concerned are: Byland, founded in 1126 as a daughter of Savigny, but incorporated into the Cistercian order 1147-50, from which 17 twelfth-century manuscripts or fragments survive;

Fountains, founded in 1132 and accepted as a daughter of Clairvaux by 1133, with 15 manuscripts or fragments; Rievaulx, also founded in 1132, direct from Clairvaux, with 15; Holm Cultram, of the family of Rievaulx, with 6; Roche, of the family of Fountains, with 5; Kirkstall and Sawley with 3 each, both of the family of Fountains; Jervaulx, a daughter of Byland, with 2; Newminster, of the family of Fountains, also with 2; and Meaux, also of the family of Fountains, with 1.³ Only from Byland, Fountains and Rievaulx are there sufficient numbers of manuscripts for questions of uniformity of practice, and recurring scribes, to be raised with any point.⁴ The evidence does suggest strongly that each of these had an organised scriptorium, producing books of relatively uniform size and construction. What is particularly interesting is that the surviving Byland books, which all date from after that house had become Cistercian, show considerable similarities in their painting, ruling patterns, and page-sizes to the books of Rievaulx. It is unfortunate that the appearance of the earliest Byland books, before the merger, cannot be known; but this evidence would seem to suggest that Rievaulx provided some guidance for the scriptorium after 1147. Of the houses with fewer surviving books, Roche seems very likely to have had an organised scriptorium, since its manuscripts show recurring distinctive features. From the others, the evidence is not clear. At the opposite extreme, the three books which belonged to Sawley are very different from the rest of these Cistercian manuscripts, and were almost certainly acquired from elsewhere, the most likely source being Durham.⁵

However, if a small house like Roche had a scriptorium, there is at least a strong likelihood that the majority of these Cistercian houses would have scriptoria; and this is very much in accordance with the expectations embodied in the statutes promulgated by the General Chapter. These statutes are notoriously difficult to date, but Christopher Holdsworth has published a fundamental analysis of the probable dates of the material relevant to this article, while Christopher Norton, in the same volume, has provided a very useful edition, set out in tabular form.⁶ One striking feature of these statutes is the importance accorded to books, and the conditions under which they are to be made and used. Perhaps particularly interesting here is a statute datable to c.1119-51, and headed 'De Scriptoriis'. This suggests that monasteries of the Order are expected to have places where writing is carried out, which will not necessarily be the cloister, and

that the writing will be done by monks, in silence.⁷ Moreover, a later statute, datable to 1154, seeks to restrict scribes to their own monasteries, forbidding them to work, or to stay, outside. This would suggest that scribes, even if recruited as professionals, were expected to be members of individual monasteries.

There is another feature of the Northern English manuscripts which adds further to this picture of Cistercian monks working to produce their own books, and that is the appearance of their parchment. This is not uniform, but a high proportion of these manuscripts show use of parchment which is darker in colour and rougher in texture than that used for comparable types of book in non-Cistercian monasteries at this time. What is also interesting is that, in several instances, the sheets of parchment seem to have been used to the very edge, so that some folios have rough and irregular outer edges. This is never explicitly required by the statutes; but it is clearly very much in accordance with the ideals of monastic poverty and the emphasis on physical labour so strongly expressed in the *Exordium Parvum*, since it suggests that these monasteries made and used their own parchment, presumably from the skins of their own sheep.⁸

If such ideals are expressed by the parchment used for these books, it is appropriate to look next at their decoration. Here, two features are immediately striking: the almost complete absence of human figures, animals, dragons and grotesque creatures from these books, at a time when they were very popular elsewhere: and the uniformity of the stylised foliage motifs found in manuscripts from almost all the northern English Cistercian monasteries.⁹ Holm Cultram had an early copy of Philip de Thaon's text of the Bestiary, dedicated to Henry I's queen, which has preparatory sketches for roundels of zodiac signs, never completed, and spaces for miniatures in the main text, which were never filled in.¹⁰ It also has a sketch for an initial formed from the twisted body of a dragon, which again was never completed. Those initials which were completed are flatly painted in red and blue, with very minimal stylised foliage decoration. It is impossible to say whether this was a product of a scriptorium located at Holm Cultram, but its text would certainly be of interest to English Cistercians, and the evidence that plans to supply miniatures and an illuminated initial were abruptly halted is interesting.¹¹

A very few completed images of animals do occur amongst these manuscripts, however. One manuscript from Rievaulx, a copy of Ennodius, has a major initial consisting of an 8-line-high, gold initial

U, containing a fully-painted image of an ass playing the harp, and a small blue lion.¹² Also from Rievaulx is a copy of the *Sermons* of Peter Chrysologus, whose major initial is a 14-line-high letter H, whose decoration includes a white lion's head and a red bird.¹³ Finally, amongst the manuscripts from Byland is a Glossed Psalter (now York, Cathedral Library, MS. XVI. 1.7), which has two rather roughly executed initials containing combats between dragons and small human figures. These are the only human figures, animals or dragons which appear in this large group of manuscripts. The use of precious metals, or of a wide range of colours in one initial, is equally rare. There is no silver in these manuscripts, and the only three to use gold are the two with animal images from Rievaulx, already described above, and the Glossed Psalter from Byland. Apart from these, there is one manuscript from Fountains which uses a wide range of colours to model the stylised foliage decorating its major initial. The book is a copy of Simeon's *Historia Dunelmensis Ecclesiae* and may be of Durham origin.¹⁴ Its major initial uses red, yellow, black, blue, grey and purple, as well as complex patterns of dots and fine lines in contrast colours, and is unique in this group in doing so. The great majority of the books use only red, light-blue and dark-green, applied flatly, though often very precisely. A minority add touches of orange and washes of yellow. Indeed, this restricted range of colours is used so plainly that several books limit their initials to just one colour per letter, even where the stylised foliage decoration forms complex patterns; others include the use of one contrast colour on major initials; while others are freer, including the use of all three basic colours on both major and minor initials.

Besides these limitations of subject matter and colour-range, there is also a clear restriction even of the range of stylised foliage motifs used to decorate the more complex initials. Since the abbots of several of these monasteries are documented as having purchased manuscripts or received them as gifts, and since there is considerable evidence of the borrowing of manuscripts from Durham, where more elaborate decoration was customary, this conservatism presumably represents a deliberate choice.¹⁵ What is even more striking, however, is the uniformity found in the more elaborate initials from no less than 8 of the 10 monasteries from which manuscripts survive. Indeed, since those from which no examples of this initial-type survive are Jervaulx and Meaux, represented by three manuscripts between them, there must be a strong probability that this type of initial occurred in

at least some of their books also. What is distinctive about these initials is their complex and technically skilled use of a very small set of decorative motifs, painted in the colours already described. These motifs are: scallop and cable patterns left in relief in the thick portions of letters; a simple three-lobed floret; and a motif recognised by Mynors in Durham manuscripts, and called by him the split-petal.¹⁶ It is the latter which is the dominant characteristic of these initials, occurring with a variety of elaborations, such as flanking leaves, stalks and hair-like projections.

In several manuscripts from Rievaulx and Holm Cultram these initials are executed in monochrome, but in all the others, and one Rievaulx book, at least some of the foliage is executed in a contrast colour; while in manuscripts from Fountains, Kirkstall and Roche, three colours are generally used for each major initial.

The repeated, use of such a small set of motifs raises the question of their source. Here, no answer is possible for the floret, since such motifs were very widespread, as were scallop-patterns. In the case of the cable pattern, however, which is rather less common, some speculation may be possible. The motif occurs frequently in the initials of the Clairvaux Bible, datable to the 1130s. Both Rievaulx and Fountains were linked directly to Clairvaux, and were presumably provided with copies of the basic Cistercian liturgical texts, or at least exemplars from which to produce their own, by Clairvaux.¹⁷ It is therefore possible that the cable-pattern was taken up from Clairvaux initials, although no attempt was made to copy these initials entirely. However, the split-petal motif does not occur in early Clairvaux manuscripts, and its source was different. Mynors found it in Durham books from the third quarter of the twelfth century, where it occurs in complex forms.¹⁸ It also occurs, however, in two Durham manuscripts dated by Ker to the early twelfth century, where it is found in small and simple forms, and amongst the few surviving manuscripts from St Mary's, York, datable by their script and style to c.1120-40.¹⁹ Since the founders of Fountains broke away from St Mary's, York, in late 1132, and the Rievaulx community were in contact with Durham, it seems certain that the split-petal motif was adapted by the Cistercians from these sources. What is striking is the adoption of the same type of initial at Byland, something which corroborates the earlier suggestion that Byland was influenced by existing Cistercian houses after its absorption into the Cistercian order. One final point should be made and that is that these

initials were apparently restricted to the Northern English houses. Surviving manuscripts from southern houses, such as Thame, or western ones, such as Buildwas, whilst equally plain, do not show these distinctive initials.

Before leaving the question of the decoration of this group of Cistercian manuscripts, it is necessary to look at their rubrication. Elements such as titles, capitula and chapter titles were frequently executed in decorative capitals and varied colours, with a gradation of size and decoration which helped the reader to locate textual divisions. However, in these Cistercian books, all this is reduced to a minimum. There are no title pages, very few contents lists even in manuscripts containing a variety of short works, and even the common practice of executing the first line of text, after the opening initial, in capitals is rare in these books. Instead, titles and other headings are generally reduced to one or two lines of plain red minuscule, often smaller than the main text script. Capitals, where present, are often in plain ink, lacking the usual coloured letters, spacing and decorative touches.

The striking simplicity of all the decorative elements in these manuscripts must be the result of deliberate choice; and the similarities between the manuscripts suggest a broad agreement on the part of all these monasteries as to the ways in which books should ideally be decorated. What remains is to establish the origins of these ideas. The obvious parallel is with a statute datable to c.1145-51. This is headed 'De litteris vel vitreis' and the relevant words are: 'Littere unius coloris fiant, et non depicte'.²⁰ What is puzzling is that this is the first recorded reference to the internal decoration of books in the Cistercian legislative material, and yet its laconic brevity suggests that it represents ideas already well-known. There is no mention at all of miniatures, suggesting that they were out of the question. There is also no explanation as to whether 'letters' referred to initials, rubrication or both. However, if the phrase 'non depicte' is taken to mean that the letters should not contain any pictures, then it would seem that initials were meant. This view is strengthened by the first codification of the Cistercian legislation, issued in 1202, which emends the wording as follows: 'Littere autem de cetero absque omni fiant imagine, et sine auro, et sine argento'.²¹ This would seem to emphasise the ban on all pictures or images, but to abandon the 'one colour only' restriction, simply rejecting the use of gold or silver.

If the northern English manuscripts are compared with these regulations, some interesting conclusions emerge. First, with the

exceptions noted, most of which were probably not of Cistercian origin, the English books obey the 'no images' rule. Moreover, since gold was not specifically excluded until 1202, the use of gold in the two twelfth-century manuscripts belonging to Rievaulx is perhaps less surprising than it might at first seem. However, there are two surprises. The first is that the majority of the initials, plain as they are, make use of more than one colour in apparent contradiction to the earlier regulation, though not to the later. The second is that the reduction of the rubrication goes much further than anything required by either regulation. In the first case, it may well be that this resistance to the apparent meaning of the c.1145-51 regulation was widespread, resulting in its modification by 1202. In the second case, the parallel seems to be, not with the regulation on the decoration of manuscripts, but with a powerful Cistercian view, which rejected conscious scholarship as a fit occupation for a monk. This is already implicit in an early regulation, datable c.1119-51, which forbade any Cistercian to compose a new book without the consent of the General Chapter.

It was also forcibly expressed by St Bernard of Clairvaux in a number of his letters, where he refers to studying in the Schools as 'pursuing a career in the world' and contrasts this with his life as 'a rustic and a monk' whose business is 'not teaching but lamenting'.²² These ideas were especially expressed in his letters to Ailred of Rievaulx and to Henry Murdac, later abbot of Fountains.²³ That these ideas were shared in England is demonstrated by several writers. Walter Daniel, Ailred's follower and biographer, and himself a man of some education, wrote: 'Our master Christ did not teach grammar, rhetoric, or dialectic in his school, he taught humility, charity and righteousness.'²⁴ A little later, Gilbert of Hoyland wrote: 'Reading ought to serve our prayer, prepare our mood [for contemplation], not encroach on our time and weaken our character.'²⁵ The implication of all this is that the minimisation of the rubrication was considered suitable for books which were to be read and meditated upon during the *Lectio Divina*, rather than studied and written about. Such an interpretation is further supported by a statute which made it possible for a monk to substitute prayer in the church for reading in the cloister.²⁶

If this argument is correct, it would suggest that considerable care went into the interpretation and application of the statutes in twelfth-century Northumbria, and that it extended even to points of detail in

the decoration of books. However, this does not in itself explain why the regulation on letters was first passed by the General Chapter. The problem is two-fold. First, the only previous statute on books, dealing with their clasps and the custom of draping them with palls, may date to as early as c.1119; this would leave a rather long gap before the General Chapter turned its attention to internal decoration. Secondly, and perhaps more surprisingly, manuscripts made for Cîteaux itself continued to be richly decorated with historiated initials and full-page miniatures into the 1130s. In this light, the statute of c.1145-51 on letters appears as a rather abrupt change.

The traditional answer to this problem has been to see a clash of ideas between St Bernard of Clairvaux and Stephen Harding, abbot of Cîteaux 1109-34, with the former's ideas gaining ascendancy after Stephen Harding's death. Two recent proponents of this view are Jonathan Alexander and Conrad Rudolph. Alexander writes:

St Bernard ... must surely have seen [the illuminated Cîteaux manuscripts]. He was later to write a blistering attack on the fantasy world of Romanesque art, criticising the carved capitals in the Cloister ... A Cistercian statute enforcing simplicity in initials ... may thus owe its origin to his strictures.²⁷

More forcefully, Rudolph argues:

The historical evidence suggests that extreme artistic asceticism was not of interest to first generation Cistercians, and the art historically important Statutes ... were only instituted as part of an artistic overturn on the part of the second generation led by Bernard.²⁸

The treatise to which both writers refer, as do all those who see St Bernard as concerned to denounce excesses in all monastic art, is the *Apologia to Abbot William*, written most probably in 1125. This is divided into two major sections, of which the second is a brilliantly rhetorical satire on monastic excesses. After a general introductory section, a range of topics is picked out for detailed comment, of which the last is excess in buildings and their decoration.²⁹ However, to see this as implying criticism of the manuscripts of Cîteaux, as Rudolph does, raises serious problems.³⁰ At the simplistic level, it is problematic since the treatise makes no mention of manuscripts and

their decoration. More problematically, such an argument also pays little attention to the context within which the *Apologia* was published. St Bernard's letter 84b³¹ makes it clear that William, abbot of St Thierry, who had been a friend of St Bernard's since 1118-19, had written asking him to intervene in the controversy between the Cistercians and the Cluniacs. St Bernard agreed to do this, following the broad outline suggested by William of St Thierry. Now, besides William's lost letter, there is other evidence that the Cistercians were accused of making unjustified attacks upon the Cluniacs during the 1120s. This is in the form of an open letter or treatise written by Peter the Venerable, abbot of Cluny 1122-56, which responds to another set of Cistercian criticisms.³² It would seem that the Cistercians in particular, and monastic reformers such as William in general, stood accused of slander and hypocrisy; and that a part of St Bernard's brief was to defend them in a treatise intended for very wide circulation.³³ That St Bernard would choose such a time to launch a covert attack upon his own father abbot is a very surprising proposition. It is therefore necessary to look again at the evidence.

The first undisputed fact is that Stephen Harding was one of the founding group of Cîteaux. Chapter XV of the *Exordium Parvum*, written most probably during Stephen Harding's lifetime, records the decisions of this group, and the basis on which they were taken.³⁴ Their stated aim was to 'follow faithfully' the 'integrity of the Rule', and they sought to establish this by using as evidence the Rule and the Life of St Benedict, supplemented by the 'statutes' of the 'holy Fathers, who were the mouthpiece of the Holy Spirit'. They turned their attention to both 'liturgical observance and daily living'. Abbot Alberic himself wrote to the learned abbot of Pothières, about the reform of the chant.³⁵ Again, it was during Alberic's abbacy that Stephen Harding began to produce his authoritative edition of the Bible, gathering together a set of different texts from which to work, and consulting with French Jews on their edition of Hebrew texts. His 'Monitum', inserted into the second volume of the Cîteaux Bible, is dated 1109, and makes a very strong appeal to future Cistercians not to alter or add to the text thus carefully established.³⁶ Chapter XVII of the *Exordium Parvum* goes on to describe how these policies were continued in the first years of Stephen Harding's own abbacy, up to c.1119, the year in which the Pope examined and approved the 'constitution and chapters' presented to him.³⁷ The central principle is now described as being 'to ensure that God's house, in which they

desired to serve him devoutly day and night, was empty of anything redolent of pomp or superfluity, or tending to corrupt the poverty - guardian of the virtues - which they had unconstrainedly embraced'.³⁸ If the *Exordium Parvum* is accurate in dating the detailed decisions which embodied this principle to 1109-c.1119, then it is difficult to hold to the view that St Bernard, following his arrival as a novice at Cîteaux c.1113, set about an 'artistic overturn' by the 'second generation'.³⁹

There are scraps of further evidence on the views and actions of Stephen Harding himself. First, it is clear that he took on leadership of the Cistercian project to establish a definitive form of the liturgy. It was he who, in accordance with his reading of the Rule, obtained copies of the 'Ambrosian hymns' sung at Milan, and incorporated them into the new Cistercian hymnal; and, as with the Bible, he included an explanatory note by himself in this volume also.⁴⁰ This was very much in accordance with the method used to prepare the early Cistercian antiphony. No copies of this are known to survive, but St Bernard, in his 'Prologus' to the reformed antiphony of c.1147, described how 'those who began the Cistercian Order' sent scribes to Metz, to 'transcribe and bring back the Metz Antiphony', believing this to be 'the most authentic version'.⁴¹ Indeed, this authenticity was so powerful that, despite the problems they encountered, the Cistercians persevered with the antiphony until c.1142. Secondly, there is evidence that Stephen Harding behaved in accordance with the decisions recorded in *Exordium Parvum*, in matters of his own accoutrements. Sadly, William of Malmesbury's portrait of Stephen Harding as leading the movement to 'love pure minds rather than glittering vestments' is suspect; the whole account is biased against Robert of Molesme and towards Stephen Harding, and this passage in particular contains verbal reminiscences of St Bernard's *Apologia*.⁴² What is separately recorded, though, is that Stephen Harding used a simple, wooden staff rather than the richly-sculpted metal and ivory croziers used by bishops and other abbots.⁴³

However, there can be no doubt that Stephen Harding was a patron of beautifully illuminated manuscripts. His Bible is in four volumes, of which those completed by 1109 are decorated in a fairly standard style, related to that of the Psalter of Robert of Molesme (now Dijon B.M. Ms. 30), a manuscript which the early Cistercians may have known.⁴⁴ However, the last two volumes have miniatures and historiated initials in a different and very distinctive style. Moreover, the

iconography of several of the images, such as those of the Hebrews in the fiery furnace and of St John the Evangelist, is both unusual and sophisticated.⁴⁵ The style is unusual in Burgundy, but is closely related to a group of manuscripts apparently made for individuals connected with Hereford and Shaftesbury, and for the monastery of Winchcombe. It therefore seems likely that Stephen Harding, himself from England and for a time a monk of Sherborne, used the services of an English-trained artist in the decoration of the Cîteaux Bible. The same style, and probably the same hand, is found in a copy of St Gregory's *Moralia in Job* (now Dijon, B.M., Mss. 168-70), made for Cîteaux in 1111.⁴⁶ This contains a famous set of initials in which the letters are formed by human figures, several of them Cistercian monks engaged in physical work. Only these books contain work by this very distinctive painter; but perhaps even more surprising is another group of Cîteaux manuscripts, datable to before 1134, whose illuminations show stylistic links to works associated with the Court of Burgundy and the abbey of Cluny.⁴⁷ These are: The Cîteaux Legendary (Dijon, Mss. 638-41), St Augustine's *Commentary on the Psalms* (Dijon Ms. 147), St Jerome's *Commentary on Isaiah* (Dijon Ms. 129), and St Jerome's *Commentary on the Minor Prophets* (Dijon Ms. 132). Altogether, some seventeen early Cîteaux manuscripts are strikingly decorated, and there is at least one more of them which is directly associated with Stephen Harding. This is a copy of St Jerome's *Commentary on Jeremiah*, (Dijon Ms. 130), which was made for Stephen Harding at St-Vaast, Arras, in 1125-26. The initials of this manuscript are of a standard type, but it also has a presentation miniature showing Stephen Harding with the abbot of St-Vaast, as well as an association of prayers between the two abbeys. Kneeling at the feet of the abbot, in the miniature, is the monk-scribe, Osbert, whose beautiful script, we are told, caused Stephen Harding to ask him to copy the text.⁴⁸

The difficulty, then, is to reconcile this group of illuminated manuscripts with the views on 'liturgical observance and daily living' outlined above. The first point is that all the illuminated books associated with Stephen Harding, or datable to his abbacy, contain texts of the types required by the Rule's specifications for the *Opus Dei* and the *Lectio Divina*. There is therefore a link between them and the work undertaken to establish fundamental texts for the Cistercian liturgy. Moreover, the striking compositions and unusual iconographies found in several of the books suggest a deliberate incorporation of instruc-

tion into the images. The commissioning of the manuscript from the scribe of St-Vaast seems to have been, not a piece of artistic connoisseurship, but an action designed to celebrate a valued bond of spiritual friendship with the monastery from which two of the earliest Cistercians had come.⁴⁹ Finally, there is evidence that the early Cistercians distinguished clearly between external and internal decoration of books. A 'statute' dated by Holdsworth to c.1109-19, and headed 'de firmaculis librorum' deals with books kept in churches, and rules that they should not be given gold, silver or gilt clasps or covers, nor should they be draped with cloth.⁵⁰ This is clearly in line with the regulations and decisions described in *Exordium Parvum* XVII; but nowhere is there any mention of initials.

The statute of c.1145-51 'On Letters' is the first documented reference to a concern with the internal decoration of books. Should this concern then be attributed to the views of St Bernard? The first problem for such an argument is that the simple brevity of both the statute of c.1145-51 and the modified version of 1202 suggest that what was happening was simply the extension of the principles already outlined in *Exordium Parvum*. If these were formulated by the first Cistercians, there is no need to attribute them to St Bernard. However, there is still the question of why and when this extension took place. Particularly interesting in this respect is the statute headed 'de sculpturis et picturis et cruce lignea' and datable to c.1122-c.1135.⁵¹ This dating makes this statute roughly contemporary with the *Apologia*; and its later, expanded version explains that sculptures and pictures are likely to detract from meditation and undermine religious discipline - an explanation which parallels the views on distraction expressed by St Bernard in chapter 29 of the *Apologia*. However, there is no decisive evidence in either of them as to which influenced the other.

Again, therefore, it is necessary to look elsewhere for clues. The first step is to establish whether the views expressed by St Bernard in his *Apologia* were of major importance for him. Section 16 of the *Apologia* lists the areas of 'excess' which are to be dealt with as: food, drink, clothing, bedding, retinues, and the construction of buildings. The revised version of the treatise has subject headings, and those accepted by Leclercq are: 'On meals; On drink; On those who stay in the infirmary without being ill; On expensive and extravagant clothing; On the negligence of superiors; On riding in state; On the place of pictures, sculpture, gold and silver in monasteries'.⁵² These

two lists may thus be taken as setting out St Bernard's main concerns in this section of the treatise.

A high proportion of St Bernard's letters are concerned to offer advice, admonition and encouragement to a large number of ecclesiastics, and it is therefore appropriate to look for further references to these topics in the letters. As might be expected, most are to be found in the famous letter to Robert, the monk of Clairvaux who had fled to Cluny. This deals with food, drink, clothing, and 'vain and curious travel'.⁵³ It also emphasises poverty and manual labour as characteristic of the Cistercian life; but there is no discussion of buildings or their decoration. A letter to Fulk, an ex-Augustinian canon, criticises rich clothing and trappings, and gold and silver vessels, as possessions for those who serve altars.⁵⁴ Indeed, the condemnation of gold and silver is a recurring topic, which is found in a letter to Pope Eugenius III,⁵⁵ and in another to the cardinal deacon, Guy Moricote.⁵⁶ Poverty and simplicity in food, drink and clothing are commended to Thurstan, archbishop of York;⁵⁷ while manual labour, together with 'the way of charity' is touched on in a letter to the monks of the Abbey in the Alps.⁵⁸ Finally, hypochondria is condemned in a letter to the brethren of St Anastasius.⁵⁹ However, references to ecclesiastical buildings and their decorations are extremely rare, and surprising in tone when they do occur. A letter to Suger, abbot of St Denis, praises his 'restoration of the beauty and observances of St Genevieve',⁶⁰ though it must be said that the beauty referred to is by no means necessarily visual beauty. More surprising is a letter to the People of Rome, condemning them for squandering 'the revenues and ornaments' of their churches. This describes how they have stripped gold and silver from 'the vessels of the altar, and the sacred images themselves' and concludes that 'the beauty of the Lord's house has been irretrievably lost'.⁶¹ This use of the traditional argument for the embellishment of churches is not what might be expected from a writer with a fixed aversion to such things.

Two other early and widely-distributed treatises by St Bernard are *The Twelve Steps of Humility and Pride*, and *On Loving God*. In the first of these, major importance is given to the pitfalls of 'curiositas', the first step of pride, a stage in which the sinner's 'mind has nothing to occupy it' because 'his eyes constantly wander'.⁶² This is reminiscent of the *Apologia's* condemnation of distraction, but there is a crucial difference: there is no reference here to sculptures or paintings, instead the monk in this condition is described as peering about

almost aimlessly as he falls into presumption. In a treatise written so close in time to the *Apologia* this absence of any interest in visually distracting elements is, at the least, interesting. In a similar fashion, the treatise *On Loving God* puts forward a strong argument for humility, which is powerfully contrasted with the restlessness of greed. Chapter 4 puts this straightforwardly, 'You cannot chase gold and at the same time taste how sweet the Lord is!'⁶³ Yet, again, this moral theme is not linked to the 'artistic' topics dealt with in Chapters 28 and 29 of the *Apologia*.

The same applies to St Bernard's Sermons. Several times, in the *Sermons on the Song of Songs*, 'curiositas' is condemned (as in Sermon 8) or true wisdom is contrasted with the deceptive appearances of the senses (as in Sermons 28 and 31). Again, worldly wisdom, including that of 'the school of rhetoric or philosophy' is put in its place in Sermons 15 and 36.⁶⁴ Finally, a love of music is suggested in Sermon 15, while a concern for the correct manner of chanting is strongly expressed in Sermon 47. In all this, however, there is no concern with monastic buildings, churches and their decoration. Even the reflection on humility contained in St Bernard's *Annunciation Dialogue* is disappointing. This moves into a condemnation of the pride displayed by some monks, who are seen 'traversing provinces, frequenting courts', who wear 'coloured and costly clothing' and who are 'drawn back to the unprofitable tastes and desires for worldly things'.⁶⁵ The description of their greed lists the seeking after honours, the selling of 'words and salutations', the chasing after the goods of others, and 'the building of walls, rather than their own characters', but with all these reminiscences of the *Apologia*, the concerns of chapters 28 and 29 are missing. Thus, it cannot easily be argued that these two chapters deal with matters of central concern to St Bernard.

If this argument is correct, then the next question is why St Bernard should choose to write about such matters, in his defence of the Cistercians. Here, one clue may be found in the terms 'the construction of buildings' (used in chapter 16) and 'on the place of pictures, sculpture, gold and silver in monasteries' (used as a heading for chapters 28 and 29). These terms seem to echo the headings of several of the capitula dated by Holdsworth to before 1119: 'De Construendis Abbatiis', and 'Quid liceat vel non liceat nobis habere de Auro, Argento, Gemmis et Serico', as well as the later 'De Sculpturis et Picturis et Cruce Lignea'. In other words, they may appear in the *Apologia* precisely because they already appeared in the Cistercian

legislation, and it was thus necessary to defend them in 1124-25. Some support is given to this view by St. Bernard's Letter to Peter the Cardinal Deacon, papal legate in France, which describes the *Apologia* as 'concerned with the observances of the Cluniacs and ourselves, the Cistercians', which suggests that the *Apologia* described practices already common amongst the Cistercians when it was written.⁶⁶

However, if St Bernard was defending Cistercian observances, but was not himself the originator of these particular views, there is still the question of why he chose to defend the regulation on sculpture and paintings so strongly. Here it is worth considering William of St Thierry, the man who suggested the writing of the *Apologia* and who, according to Letter 84b, sent a fairly detailed brief. That William was able to influence St Bernard is demonstrated by the correspondence about Peter Abelard, against whom William wrote a treatise which St Bernard read to the monks of Clairvaux.⁶⁷ A Letter to Canon Ogier, another friend of St Bernard, demonstrates that the text of the *Apologia* was read in draft and commented upon by William, and that St Bernard intended to discuss it with him.⁶⁸ Moreover, a reading of William's work produces very interesting results.

William's treatises display a visual sensitivity, and an interest in the positive and negative aspects of images in the memory and imagination, which are quite different from St Bernard's approach. For instance, like Ailred of Rievaulx and Arnold of Bonneval, William composed a treatise on *The Body and the Soul*: but William's is distinctive for the sensitivity it demonstrates to the harmony, proportion, unity and beauty of the body, as well as for its reflection upon the Vitruvian idea that the body with limbs extended fits into a perfect circle.⁶⁹ Again, in his *Exposition of the Song of Songs*, there is evidence of this interest. The Preface contains a detailed analysis of the usefulness of 'images' and visual memories, concluding that 'man's thought, by the vehicle of this image, may be borne onward to the truth which attracts it'.⁷⁰ This concept is further developed in the ensuing discussions, with bodily and spiritual vision contrasted in First Song, Stanza 8. The problems of images are also discussed, and First Song, Stanza 10, deals vividly with the problems of managing distracting visual memories, as does the Finale to Song One.⁷¹ Moreover, this theme is taken up again in William's *Meditations*, where Meditation II contains more reflections on visualisation, visual memory and its dangers.⁷²

Besides this intellectual analysis, William was dedicated to the ideas of the monastic reform from early in his career. This is expressed in his treatise *On the Nature and Dignity of Love* where, in chapter 8, he describes the poverty and simplicity of the ideal monastic community.⁷³ Again, in his exposition of Second Song, Stanza 6, of the Song of Songs, William criticises monks who build 'veritable palaces', 'fragrant cells which are aromatic rather than eremitic', and warns that 'avarice seeps into the cloister in every guise and on every pretext'.⁷⁴ This is taken much further in his Letter to the Carthusians of Mont-Dieu, of c.1144. Here he writes: 'Banishing from our monasteries the kind of poverty which truly embellishes God's house, we have sought out the best-known craftsmen to build us aromatic cells' and urges monks to build their own dwellings, saying that 'No human skill will be a match for theirs in contriving the expression of poverty, the stark simplicity, the sober lines ...'.⁷⁵ Such beliefs were also put into practice in 1131, when William played a leading role in an unusual 'reform synod' of the Benedictine abbots in the arch-diocese of Rheims. This body decided on reforms in the liturgy, diet and embellishment of their monasteries.⁷⁶

Two other points may be made. First, those who wish to see St. Bernard's comments on monstrous sculptures in cloisters as being based on his knowledge of the cloisters of Cluny or of other Burgundian houses have always faced the problem that the surviving pieces of such sculptures are notably plain. However, Neil Stratford has observed that the only region in which such sculptures were to be found was the area of Rheims.⁷⁷ And it was precisely in this region that William, with his strong visual memory, was located as abbot of St Thierry. Second, it was William of St Thierry who found St Bernard's lack of visual sensitivity and visual memory so surprising that he drew special attention to it in his contribution to the *Vita Prima*, commenting that St Bernard observed the details of neither the novice chamber nor the church at Citeaux.⁷⁸

Whilst this can be no more than a suggestion, the proposition that William suggested a theme, and that St Bernard expressed it with characteristic rhetorical skill, helps to explain the curious nature of the 'description' of the cloister sculptures. Many of its examples, such as 'unclean apes', 'manticores' and 'striped tigers' owe at least as much to the works of St Augustine, Isidore of Seville, Priscian and the Bestiary as they do to actual sculptures.⁷⁹ Moreover, the concept of 'beautiful deformity' with which St Bernard identifies all the

sculptures, seems to be derived from a passage in St Augustine's *Sentences*, which plays upon the idea of a beautiful image of an ugly demon.⁸⁰ Finally, the long catalogue of hybrid monsters draws upon the classical commonplace of the monster as a combination of parts of different earthly creatures. This image provided St Bernard with a figure which he applied memorably to himself, when he wrote: 'May my Monstrous life ... move you to pity. I am a chimaera of our times, neither cleric nor layman.'⁸¹ Even more succinctly, he used it in his description of Arnold of Brescia as 'the man with the head of a dove and the tail of a scorpion', as well as in a letter to Abbot Suger which seems to quote from Horace's *De Arte Poetica*, and in numerous other places.⁸² In other words, St Bernard's 'description' of cloister sculptures owes at least as much to his reading as to his visual memory.

It is now possible to argue that study of Stephen Harding, St Bernard and William of St Thierry has produced significant results. First, it is not possible to put forward Stephen Harding, or the early Cistercians, as admirers of 'art'. Instead, a concern for poverty, humility and simplicity led them to the definition of what was and was not appropriate for liturgical vestments and vessels, and the furnishings of the altar, from the early years of Cîteaux. By the 1120s this principle had been applied also to sculptures and paintings; and it was at this stage that St Bernard, responding to suggestions made by William of St Thierry, issued his defence of the 'observances of the Cistercians'. By the mid-1140s, by which time William of St Thierry had been a Cistercian himself for some ten years, the same principle had come to be applied to illumination of manuscripts, and this was enshrined in the ruling 'On Letters'. St Bernard's *Apologia* was doubtless influential, but there is no evidence that he set himself to put a stop to all 'artistic excess'.

Instead, what emerges from all this, and from the study of the English manuscripts, is a picture of a long period of development, in which a new attitude to the decoration of books became an issue only at a rather late stage. In the case of the manuscripts from Yorkshire, Northumberland and Cumbria, with which this article began, the evidence suggests that this group of monasteries agreed on a type of decoration, and even on a specific type of initial, which was felt to be appropriate, and which continued to be used into the thirteenth century. Yet the problem of arriving at unanimity on this subject is demonstrated by the fact that, even in these plain books, very few initials are

of one colour only. Indeed, the new wording of 1202 seems to suggest that what had been intended was simply an extension of the principles already expressed in chapters XV and XVII of the *Exordium Parvum*, and that within these limits, abbots were free to decide on details.

NOTES

¹ See, for instance, W.D. Jordan, 'An Introductory Description and Commentary Concerning the Identification of four twelfth-century Musico-Liturgical Manuscripts from the Cistercian Monastery of Las Huelgas, Burgos, in *Citeaux*, fasc. 1-4, 1993, pp.152-236; J.M. Sheppard, 'The Twelfth Century Library and Scriptorium at Buildwas: Assessing the Evidence' in *England in the Twelfth Century* (Harlaxton Symposium 1988), Woodbridge 1990, pp.193-204; and A. Lawrence 'English Cistercian Manuscripts of the Twelfth Century' in *Cistercian Art and Architecture in the British Isles*, ed. C. Norton and D. Park, Cambridge 1986, pp.284-298.

² See J. Burton, 'The foundation of British Cistercian houses' in Norton and Park, p.33.

³ These figures are based on the lists of surviving books in N.R. Ker, *Medieval Libraries of Great Britain* (2nd. edn.), London 1964, and the *Supplement*, ed. A.G. Watson, London 1987.

⁴ For a fuller discussion of the evidence, see Lawrence, pp.291-96.

⁵ For detailed analysis of these manuscripts, see the contributions by B. Meehan and C. Norton, in *Anglo-Norman Durham*, ed. D. Rollason et al., Woodbridge 1994.

⁶ Norton and Park, respectively pp.40-55 and pp.315-93.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.325.

⁸ For a discussion of the uniform page-sizes used, see Lawrence, pp.291, 293 and 295.

⁹ For reproductions of initials from these books, see Norton and Park, plates 181-89.

¹⁰ This is now London B.L. Cotton Nero A v.

¹¹ See X. Muratova, 'Bestiaries: an Aspect of Medieval Patronage' in *Art and Patronage in the English Romanesque* (Society of Antiquaries Occasional Paper (New Series) VIII), London 1986, pp.121 ff.

¹² B. L. Ms. Royal 8 E IV, fol. 1.

¹³ B. L. Ms. Royal 8 D XXII, fol. 2.

- 14 B. L. Ms. Cotton Faust. A V, fol. 25.
- 15 For reproductions of twelfth-century initials from Durham, see R.A.B. Mynors, *Durham Cathedral Manuscripts*, Oxford 1939. For purchases of books by Cistercian Abbots, see C.R. Cheney, 'English Cistercian Libraries: the first century' in his *Medieval Texts and Studies*, Oxford 1973, pp.328-45.
- 16 Mynors, pp.8 and 64.
- 17 Norton and Park, p.319.
- 18 Mynors, p.8.
- 19 It occurs in Trinity College, Cambridge, Ms. R. 5. 27; and a related form is found in B.L. Ms. Harley 56 (Norton and Park, plate 188).
- 20 Norton and Park, p.325.
- 21 *Ibid.*, p.345.
- 22 See the letter to Fulk, later Archdeacon of Langres, and that to Ogier, Canon of Mont-Saint-Eloi. For the texts, see *Sancti Bernardi Opera*, VII, pp.12-22 and 235-36 ed. J. Leclercq and H.M. Rochais, Rome 1974. For translations, see *The Letters of St. Bernard of Clairvaux*, trans. B.S. James, London 1953, nos. 2 and 92.
- 23 *Bernardi Opera* VII, p.266; and *Bernardi Opera*, VIII, Rome 1977, pp.486-89. See also James, nos. 107 and 177.
- 24 See Cheney, p.340.
- 25 Sermo VII in Cantica Canticorum, Patrologia Latina 184, 43.
- 26 Norton and Park, p.288.
- 27 J.J.G. Alexander, *The Decorated Letter*, London 1978, p.17.
- 28 C. Rudolph, *The 'Things of Greater Importance', Bernard of Clairvaux's 'Apologia' and the Medieval Attitude Toward Art*, Philadelphia 1990, p.198.
- 29 For the text, see *Sancti Bernardi Opera*, III, Rome 1963, pp.81-108. For translations, see Rudolph, and also that by Michael Casey O.C.S.O., in *The Works of Bernard of Clairvaux*, Vol. One, ed. J. Leclercq (Cistercian Fathers Series, 1), Spencer Massachusetts 1970, pp.33-72.
- 30 Rudolph, pp.187-91 and 136-37.
- 31 *Sancti Bernardi Opera*, VII, p.219; for a discussion of the letter, see Leclercq in *The Works of Bernard of Clairvaux*, Vol. One, pp.5 ff.
- 32 For the letter or treatise, see *The Letters of Peter the Venerable*, ed. G. Constable, Cambridge, Mass. 1967, vol. 1. pp.52-101. For Constable's dating and discussion of the text, see vol. 2. pp.270-74.

- 33 For a similar interpretation, see the Introduction to Norton and Park, pp.4-5.
- 34 For a translation, see *The Cistercian World: Monastic Writings of the Twelfth Century*, ed. and trans. P. Matarasso, Harmondsworth 1993, pp.5-9. For discussion, see Holdsworth, pp.51 ff.
- 35 See B.K. Lackner, 'The Liturgy of Early Cîteaux', in *Studies in Medieval Cistercian History* (Cistercian Studies Series, 13), Spencer Massachusetts 1971, p.6.
- 36 For translation, Matarasso, pp.11-12. For discussion, Lackner pp.6 ff.
- 37 For the papal bull, see J. Bouton and J.B. Van Damme, *Les Plus Anciens Textes de Cîteaux*, (Cîteaux-Commentarii Cistercienses, Studia et Documenta, 2), Achel 1974, p.21 and p.104.
- 38 Matarasso, pp.8-9.
- 39 Rudolph, p.187-91.
- 40 Lackner, p.7.
- 41 St. Bernard, 'Prologue to the Cistercian Antiphony' in *The Works of Bernard of Clairvaux*, Vol. One, p.161.
- 42 William of Malmesbury, *De Gestis Regum*, IV, 1. A translation of the passage is given in *William of Malmesbury's Chronicle of the Kings of England*, ed. and trans. J.A. Giles, London 1847, pp.350-51.
- 43 C.H. Talbot, 'The Cistercian attitude towards art: the literary evidence', in Norton and Park, p.57.
- 44 The *Exordium Parvum* preserves the text of the agreement by which all of Robert of Molesme's chapel, except for one breviary, was to remain at Cîteaux. See Lackner, pp. 5 ff.
- 45 For reproductions and discussions of these initials, see W. Cahn, *Romanesque Bible Illumination*, Ithaca 1982.
- 46 For reproductions of illuminations from all the manuscripts associated with Stephen Harding, see C. Oursel, *Miniatures Cisterciennes: 1109-1134*, Macon 1960.
- 47 See N. Stratford, 'A Romanesque Altar-Frontal in Beaune and Some Cîteaux Manuscripts' in *The Vanishing Past: Studies of Medieval Art, Liturgy and Metrology presented to Christopher Hohler*, ed. A. Borg and A. Martindale, (B.A.R. International Series III), London 1981, pp.223-39.
- 48 Talbot, p.57.
- 49 These were John and Hildebod of Arras. See *The Ecclesiastical History*

- of *Orderic Vitalis*, ed. and trans. M. Chibnall, vol. IV, Oxford 1973, pp.324 and 325.
- 50 Norton and Park, p.323.
- 51 *Ibid.*, p.324.
- 52 *The Works of Bernard of Clairvaux*, Vol. One, pp.52-68. I have preferred Matarasso's translation of the last heading, as closer to the original.
- 53 *Sancti Bernardi Opera*, VII, pp.1-11 James, no. 1.
- 54 See above, note 22.
- 55 *Sancti Bernardi Opera*, VIII, pp.115-19 James, no. 205.
- 56 *Ibid.*, p.326-27. James no. 416.
- 57 *Ibid.*, p. 252 James no. 175.
- 58 Vol. VII, pp.340-41 James no. 151.
- 59 Vol.VIII, pp.286-88. James no. 388.
- 60 *Ibid.*, p.329. James no. 403.
- 61 *Ibid.*, pp. 130-34. James no. 319.
- 62 See *Bernard of Clairvaux: The Twelve Steps of Humility and Pride and On Loving God* trans. H.C. Backhouse, London 1985, p.47.
- 63 Backhouse, p.93.
- 64 For translations, see *St. Bernard's Sermons on the Song of Songs* trans. S. Eales, London 1895.
- 65 'Saint Bernard of Clairvaux: Annunciation Dialogue' in *Part III: The Christian Testament Since the Bible*, ed. M. Booth, Harmondsworth 1986, p.119.
- 66 *Sancti Bernardi Opera*, VII, pp.66-69. James no. 19.
- 67 J.M. Déchanet O.S.B., *William of St. Thierry: the Man and his Work*, trans. R.Strachan, (Cistercian Studies Series, 10), Spencer Massachusetts 1972, p.57.
- 68 *Sancti Bernardi Opera*, VII, pp.232-34. James no. 91.
- 69 William of St. Thierry, *De natura corporis et animae*, in *Oeuvres choisies de Guillaume de Saint-Thierry*, ed. and trans. J.M. Déchanet, Paris 1944, pp.105-07 and 94-95.
- 70 William of St Thierry, *Exposition on the Song of Songs*, in *The Works of William of St. Thierry*, vol. 2, trans. Mathew C. Hart O.S.B. (Cistercian Fathers Series, 6), Shannon Ireland 1970, pp.21 ff.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, pp.72 ff., 111 ff.

⁷² William of St. Thierry, *Meditations*, in *William of St. Thierry*, vol. 1, Intro. J. Hourlier O.S.B., (Cistercian Fathers Series, 3).

⁷³ See Déchanet, pp.151-213. For an English translation, see Cistercian Fathers Series, 15.

⁷⁴ William of St. Thierry, vol. 2, trans. C. Hart, pp.151 ff.

⁷⁵ The translation is given in Déchanet, p.129.

⁷⁶ Déchanet, pp.121 ff.

⁷⁷ Cited by P. Tudor-Craig, 'St. Bernard and the Canterbury Capitals' in *England in the Twelfth Century* (see Note 1), p.214.

⁷⁸ *Vita Prima*, i, 4, *Patrologia Latina* 185, 238.

⁷⁹ For a discussion on the metaphorical use of 'simia' in the twelfth century, see E.R. Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. W.R. Trask, London 1979, pp.538 ff. For the Bestiary and the incorporation of material from Isidore of Seville's *Etymologia*, see X. Muratova 'Adam donne leurs noms aux animaux', in *Studi Medievali*, 3rd. Series, XVIII, II, 1977, pp.373 ff.

⁸⁰ E. de Bruyne, *Etudes d'esthétique médiévale*, Bruges 1966, 1, p.359.

⁸¹ *Sancti Bernardi Opera*, VIII, p.147. James no. 326.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p.51 and VII, pp.201-10. James nos. 251, 80. The fact that he quotes from Horace's *De Arte Poetica* confirms that Cistercians were interested in appropriate non-religious literature. This receives some corroboration from B. Munk Olsen, 'The Cistercians and Classical Culture', *CIMAGL* 47, 1984, 64-102. I am grateful to Keith Bate for the information in this footnote.