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**UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHAMPTON**

**FACULTY OF HUMANITIES**

**History**

**Hermits, Recluses and Anchorites:  
A Study of Eremitism in England and France c. 1050 – c. 1250**

**by**

**Jacqueline F. G. Duff, M.A.**

**Thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

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# University of Southampton

## ABSTRACT

FACULTY OF HUMANITIES

History

Doctor of Philosophy

HERMITS, RECLUSES AND ANCHORITES:  
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c. 1050 – c. 1250

by Jacqueline Frances Duff

Eremitism is a broad movement and took many different forms during the course of the middle ages. This thesis is a comparative study of the eremitic life in England and France during the period when it had, arguably, reached the height of its popularity. While eremitism in both countries shared many common characteristics, there were also differing interpretations of how this ideal should be achieved. That is most noticeable in the way eremitic communities were structured and in the activities with which they engaged. Inevitably, modern perceptions of medieval eremitism are shaped by the sources available, notably the writings of the hagiographers, all of whom had their own objectives when choosing to write the Life of a particular hermit. Modern historians, therefore, view medieval eremitic practices through the words of these hagiographers rather than through the actions of the hermits themselves.

Using extant *Vitae* and other relevant texts, this study begins with an assessment of the primary sources, and how the language they use has affected both medieval and modern perceptions of the hermit. The terminology adopted for differentiating between a hermit, recluse and anchorite, if indeed, this is necessary, is significant to this debate and is discussed in the first two chapters. The following three chapters (3-5) examine how hermits lived, the support structures they created and how these differed in England and France. While hermits established their own

networks, they were still reliant on sponsorship from both the Church and society, which helped them to lead lives in accordance with their high ideals. The final three chapters (6-8) offer an analysis of the broad range of activities which hermits undertook, both spiritual and temporal, and explores how they interacted with the Church and society through these activities. It was due to such interaction that they were seen as channels for divine power and regarded by contemporaries as ‘living saints’.

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I dedicate this thesis to my late parents, for my father who shared my passion for history and for my mother who so wished to live long enough to see its completion. Finally, I wish to express my gratitude to Trevor, for having faith in me and willingly taking on the role of head chef and entertaining the grandchildren. Without him I would never have achieved my ambition.



## ABBREVIATIONS

<i>AASS</i>	<i>Acta Sanctorum</i> , ed. J. Bolland, 67 vols (Antwerp and Brussels, 1643- )
<i>BEC</i>	<i>Bibliothèque de l'École des Chartes</i>
<i>CCCM</i>	<i>Corpus Christianorum, Continuatio medievalis</i> (Turnhout, 1966- )
<i>CCSL</i>	<i>Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina</i> (Turnhout, 1953- )
<i>EETS</i>	Early English Text Society
<i>MGH SS</i>	<i>Monumenta Germaniae historica: Scriptores</i> (Hanover, 1862- )
<i>OMT</i>	Oxford Medieval Texts (London and Edinburgh, 1949- )
<i>PL</i>	<i>Patrologia Latina</i> , ed. J. P. Migne, 221 vols (Paris, 1844-64)
<i>RB</i>	<i>Revue Bénédictine</i>
<i>RS</i>	Rolls Series (London, 1858-96)
<i>SCH</i>	Studies in Church History
<i>VCH</i>	<i>Victoria County History</i> (London, 1900- )



## Preface

*I questioned the boy under the pine trees,  
'My master went to gather herbs,  
He is still somewhere on the mountainside  
So deep in the clouds I know not where.'*

Jia Dao, 'On Looking in Vain for  
the Hermit'<sup>1</sup>

Eremitism is a generic term covering a multiplicity of ways in which people in the Middle Ages led periods of their lives removed from the secular world in order to experience spirituality by dedicating themselves to the service of God. They did this in many ways: some achieved their goal through the more conventional means of the cloister while others preferred the independence and greater isolation of a private cell. Even among the latter, so many variations in the mode of living and the level of isolation can be found that it becomes difficult to write about them all as one combined group. Some were strictly enclosed and vowed never to enter the wider world again. Then there were those who did go beyond the walls of their cells to cultivate gardens and tend animals or to attend a nearby church. There were also small groups of three or four sharing common facilities, while at the other extreme were the large eremitic communities, often under the authority of a *magister*, encompassing a number of scattered cells of two or three hermits. Finally, there were those who wandered freely, either moving from one hermitage to another or, as in the case of the hermit-preachers, roaming the countryside on preaching missions.

At different times during the middle ages, eremitism became institutionalised, with new monastic orders declaring their dedication to a similar asceticism, each claiming to be more austere than the next, beginning with the Cistercians and then in quick succession those monastic houses emerging from the forests of north-west France and the Limousin, too numerous to list here, but including Savigny, Prémontré and Grandmont.

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<sup>1</sup> Isabel Colegate, *A Pelican in the Wilderness: Hermits, Solitaries and Recluses* (London: Harper Collins, 2002), p. 3.

It was the Carthusians, however, who skilfully succeeded in combining the *eremus* with the cloister. These orders were all eremitic in origin, whereas other religious groups were eremitic in inspiration. The Canons Regular, for example, claimed to lead a cloistered eremitic life while combining it with their pastoral role in society and, from the thirteenth century onwards, the mendicant orders, through their pursuit of the *vita apostolica* and extreme poverty, shared many of the characteristics of those hermit-preachers of a century earlier.

Eremitism, therefore, took on many guises, and while each is significant as a contribution to the evolution of this form of religious life, it is too vast to treat as one subject. This thesis, therefore, is limited to one aspect, that of the lives of hermits who were active at a time when, it could be argued, eremitism reached the peak of its popularity – the late eleventh century to the early thirteenth century. While the title of this study embraces the three popular terms used in this subject - hermits, recluses and anchorites - Chapter 2 considers the current debates on how these words were used by contemporary writers as well as the confusion in modern historical works over which terms should apply to individual ascetics. As contemporaries used the three words interchangeably, even within one document referring to one person, this study has taken the word 'hermit' to cover all those leading an eremitic life except when referring to a text or modern study where the author has shown a reason for applying a particular term.

Furthermore, this study concentrates more on those independent ascetics who were free to leave their hermitages should they choose, and modern scholarship tends to label these as hermits. A final qualifying point concerns the issue of gender, as the same three terms were also used for both male and female ascetics. Modern authors, however, tend to see the hermit as predominantly male and the anchorite as mostly female. This is a false distinction, as many males were referred to as anchorites but very few women were styled hermits. The most likely explanation for this is that the authorities were less inclined to allow females the option of leading an open, independent form of eremitism and much pressure was put on women to live within an enclosure. To avoid breaking the flow of text with his/her or

she/he when both genders are being discussed, I have kept to the masculine terminology.

Scholars of the early eremitic life claim that it began in the deserts of Egypt, Syria and Palestine during the third to sixth centuries as a result of persecution of Christians by polytheistic and pagan societies, but the concept of a solitary life of austerity and contemplation was not new to this period. Diogenes of Sinope (c. 404-323 BCE), a Greek philosopher, took the ideas of the Cynics to their extreme in his rejection of wealth and power in favour of a simple life free from material possessions. Nor was eremitism limited to Europe. The Chinese philosophies of Taoism, Confucianism and Buddhism all accept the notion of solitude as an ideal and tales of hermits abound in their legends, while in Hindu tradition, the fourth stage of life means giving away your possessions to become a *Sannyasi*, a holy man, or hermit. Eremitsim is, however, normally associated with the solitary life of Western Christian tradition, and while it is impossible to know when the first person decided to leave home and establish a hermitage, hermits did exist in the West from the fourth century onwards.

While eremitic activity can be identified in different places throughout the middle ages, its popularity did experience peaks and troughs. It flourished in France during the sixth to eighth centuries and then seems to have declined, to rise again in the late eleventh century, after which it reached a peak, waning again in continental Europe from the mid-thirteenth century, but continuing to flourish in England until the Reformation. Many explanations can be offered for this rise and fall, but the most likely cause of decline in eighth-century France was as a result of the Viking settlements and incursions along navigable rivers, followed by the subsequent internal conflicts of the *milites* during the tenth and eleventh centuries. Its rise again in the late eleventh century coincided with a number of other religious and social transformations, some of which will be examined in this study. The rise of the mendicant orders and 'lay religious groups' such as the

Beguines,<sup>2</sup> no doubt contributed to the decline of traditional forms of eremitism, but it continued through the new monastic orders which had originated from the earlier eremitic communities. Of course, it should not be overlooked that the appearance of peaks and troughs in eremitic activity could be influenced by the availability of surviving written records. For example, the apparent decline after the eighth century could simply reflect the paucity of records, either because nobody chose to write about hermits in this period, or the records have not survived. The eleventh and twelfth centuries are particularly rich in *Vitae*, chronicle entries and letters concerning those practising some form of the eremitic life, which helped to determine the extent of the period covered here.

Apart from the rise and decline of eremitism over time, there were also geographical regions where its practice was more prevalent than in others. Italy, France and England were areas of greater eremitic activity during the central middle ages, while the little evidence there is for hermits within the Empire and the Iberian Peninsula hints at a random scattering of individuals and certainly no large eremitic communities. Owing to the differences in the characteristics of eremitism in England and France, these two countries seemed to offer themselves for a suitable comparative study. After the Norman Conquest they shared close political ties, which continued under the Angevin kings until the consolidation of French royal authority over much of France in the early thirteenth century. Throughout this thesis I have referred to England and France as two separate entities but, of course, the links between the two were closer than this suggests. Defining France in this period is complex as French royal power was limited, particularly during the reign of Henry II, when the English crown held French territory from the English Channel through to the Pyrenees. The boundaries of areas directly under French royal control were therefore limited, leaving much of France in the hands of semi-autonomous *seigneurs*. I have not found that the geo-politics had any impact on the development of eremitism, as clusters

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<sup>2</sup> Brenda Bolton, *The Medieval Reformation* (London: Edward Arnold, 1983), p. 87. The *Humiliati* were another example of lay religious who sought alternative ways of expressing their piety and are also discussed by Dr. Bolton, pp. 63-66.

of hermits appear in both English- and French-controlled areas, therefore, to avoid complexity it is the modern political boundaries which are referred to in discussions of France. After the Norman Conquest, despite the political links, many cultural differences remained and some historians have used the latter to explain the social function of the hermit in England.

The aim of this thesis is to re-examine some of the historical debates on the rise of eremitism during the eleventh and twelfth centuries, such as the relationship of hermits with both the Church and lay society, to compare the development of asceticism in England and France and to dispel some myths regarding the power of the hermit. Hagiography and the language of eremitism have an important role in the development of these traditions but it is possible to differentiate the historical hermit from the stereotypical, saintly image found in the writings of clerical authors. Unlike Jia Dao, quoted above, we do not always look in vain for the hermit.



## SECTION I

### The Sources and Language of Eremitism

#### Chapter 1

##### Introduction and Sources

###### Introduction

The perception of a hermit in the twenty-first century is of a solitary individual deliberately isolating him or herself from society, an individual who is determined to interact as little as possible with the everyday world. In the western world today anyone choosing to live in such a way invites accusations of being unsociable or odd, while the concept of a completely enclosed life is likely to invoke even stronger reactions. These practices contradict modern values and *mores* by which everyone is expected to participate in society, to contribute to the common good and share in community life. (Even now those who still choose to join a religious order usually find themselves interacting with the wider society on a regular basis.)

In the middle ages, however, the desire to withdraw from the world was not considered an unusual aspiration.<sup>3</sup> Life on a remote island or somewhere devoid of human habitation, offering limited contact with others, was regarded as one of the highest ideals possible, and hermits enjoyed a status and respect which they would not be granted today. A secular society makes little provision for those who wish to abandon it for a life which shuns materialism and worldly obligations. The medieval era, on the other hand, is noted for the centrality of its religious faith, which placed great emphasis on the idea that in order to draw closer to God it was necessary to

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<sup>3</sup> See Giles Constable, *The Reformation of the Twelfth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 21-2, Rotha Mary Clay, *The Hermits and Anchorites of England* (London: Methuen, 1913), p. xvi, and Ann K. Warren, *Anchorites and their Patrons in Medieval England* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), p. 2.

attain perfection<sup>4</sup>— a cleanliness and purity of body and soul which could only be achieved through rejection of all things earthly. Those believed to have achieved this were therefore held in high regard and, with one or two exceptions, hermits were readily accepted at all levels of society in a world where faith pervaded every aspect of life.

The pursuit of perfection was not limited to hermits alone. At a time when many sought a life of simplicity or austerity, members of the various monastic orders, the secular church hierarchy and the laity could also choose to lead such lives. Even those classified as heretics were frequently able to demonstrate greater abstinence than those within the ecclesiastical establishment.<sup>5</sup> Church and society having created a model for the perfect life, individual hermits then sought to attain their ideals and ambitions in very different ways. Some desired the metaphorical ‘desert’ of the woods and forests where they were exposed to the elements and harshness of nature, others preferred incarceration within a small cell which might be placed within town or city walls, yet others remained very active and involved with the local communities near which they lived, while many remained solitary and contemplative. Regardless of the method chosen, the ultimate goal was the same: the attainment of perfection and personal salvation through service to God.

Although they shared this ultimate goal, to place all hermits within such neat and opposing classifications of solitary versus communal or contemplative versus active is to over-simplify a much more complex situation and poses all kinds of relevant questions. To what extent can a hermit or an anchorite be both solitary and active within society? Was this apparent conflict recognised in the middle ages? How far is modern scholarship responsible for the imposition of these classifications on the eremitic community? Any attempt to answer these questions necessitates

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<sup>4</sup> Geoffrey Grossus, *Vita B Bernardi Tironiensis*, PL 172: 1411, ‘... ad magnae perfectionis culmen...’.

<sup>5</sup> For example, the *perfecti* of the Cathars were particularly noted for their abstinence; see Malcolm D. Lambert, *Medieval Heresy: Popular Movements from the Gregorian Reform to the Reformation* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), p. 107.

discussion on how a hermit is defined, and because of the differing lifestyles undertaken by members of the hermit community historians have attached special terms to those who followed particular ways of life (e.g. hermit, recluse, anchorite). Yet the definition that anchorites were enclosed while hermits were allowed the freedom to leave their cells<sup>6</sup> is not borne out by contemporary works, and even secondary sources remain unclear as to correct terminology. The medieval world of the hermit was much more complicated, and the sources indicate that these differing lifestyles cannot be strictly categorised into solitary/contemplative and communal/active, never to cross defined boundaries.

This study takes as its central theme the debate concerning the definitions of hermit, recluse and anchorite as used by both contemporary and modern authors. An assessment of the language used in association with eremitism reveals that the role of the hermit in medieval society is less ambiguous than previously thought and the oxymoron of an 'active hermit' is more easily explained. Examination of the primary sources shows that the terms 'hermit', 'recluse' and 'anchorite' were interchangeable, suggesting that among medieval authors, at least, recognition of any difference had less relevance than it does today. It is conceivable that modern scholarship has attempted to impose definitions on these terms which are too rigid to deal adequately with the diversity of practices in the eremitic life. This study examines the extent to which distinctions can be made between the terms employed in the vocabulary of eremitism and how useful they are in describing different visions of the same ideal.

In order to define the exact meaning of the vocabulary used it is necessary to understand the aims and intentions of medieval authors. Their purpose in writing determined the language and idiom employed. The objective of the hagiographer would be quite different from that of the satirist, for example, as would that of the chronicler from the administrative record-keeper, and in all cases words could be given subtle shifts in nuance, depending on the

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<sup>6</sup> Clay, *Hermits and Anchorites*, p. xvi.

justification for writing. The use of the words for hermits, recluses and anchorites needs to be viewed within the broader context of the language of asceticism and sanctity, and with the aims of the author in mind. This idealised language was used to create the desired effect of a stereotype for the purpose of *exempla* with writers referring to the desire to seek *solitudo*, to withdraw into the *eremus*, to participate in the *vita apostolica*, to show willingness to reject *divitiae* and to adopt *paupertas*. A similar case can be made for the use of metaphorical and metonymic<sup>7</sup> expression in the same context. This vocabulary and the objective behind its use has its origins in the hagiographical genre, and while hagiography is the obvious starting point for a discussion on source material, relying on this alone to understand the role of the hermit in society would result in a rather narrow perspective. Hermits, recluses and anchorites appear in many different social and religious contexts and consequently are found in a variety of sources such as letters, chronicles, rules, satires, official records and poetry. To offer an analysis of all aspects of the life and role of the hermit in medieval society, this study has used a range of literary genres, which are discussed in greater detail in the sub-section on sources which follows.

A further question of equal importance and one which has some bearing on the terminological debate is whether diversity in the practice of eremitism had any geographical basis. Did hermits in continental Europe differ in their lifestyles from those in England? Did this have any influence on how a hermit was defined and perceived by contemporaries? To produce a full and comprehensive answer to these questions would require a more wide-ranging study of eremitism covering all western Christendom but, owing to the constraints of academic research, it has been necessary to restrict this investigation both in time and location. In order to establish whether any differences and/or similarities in eremitic ways of life were linked to specific locations a comparative approach has been adopted, using case studies in both England and France from circa 1050 to circa 1250.

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<sup>7</sup> For example, the use of *crown* for *monarch*.

Evidence suggests that these areas experienced an unparalleled increase in the numbers of individuals seeking to practise a version of the eremitic life, and this desire for asceticism appears to have reached its apogee during these centuries.<sup>8</sup> That a revival of interest in this kind of life should occur at the same time and in the same locations is itself of interest and provides the opportunity to place the rise of eremitism within a broader social and religious perspective. Inevitably, such selectivity discounts the careers of those hermits found elsewhere in medieval western Christendom, particularly the flourishing eremitic groups of northern Italy. The early eleventh-century foundations of Fonte Avellana circa 1012, Camaldoli circa 1023 and Vallombrosa circa 1038 all grew out of small eremitic communities.<sup>9</sup> However, where the Italian experience offers anything of relevance to the evolution of eremitism in England and France, this has been brought into the discussion.

The selection of England and France as regions for comparison was also made because of the rich and accessible source material from these countries for this period, enabling a realistic and practical evaluation of the eremitic life in these areas. While the evidence does support a resurgence<sup>10</sup> in the numbers of hermits, recluses and anchorites at this time, this peak coincided with a growth in hagiographical writing and in literary production generally which could create a distortion of the statistical evidence. Was this revival of eremitism merely a reflection of a growing literary output

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<sup>8</sup> The statistical work carried out by Warren, *Anchorites*, p. 20 and Appendix I supports this for England.

<sup>9</sup> Peter Damian, *Vita beati Romualdi*, ed. by Giovanni Tabacco, *Fonti per la storia d'Italia*, 94 (Rome: Istituto storico italiano per il Medio Evo, 1957). On the Life of Romuald see Colin Phipps, 'Romuald—Model Hermit: Eremitical Theory in Saint Peter Damian's *Vita Beati Romualdi*, chapters 16-27', in *Monks, Hermits and the Ascetic Tradition*, ed. by William J. Shiels, SCH 22 (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985), pp. 65-77. For the revival of Italian eremitism see Jean-Marie Sansterre, 'Le monachisme bénédictin d'Italie et les bénédictins Italiens en France face au renouveau de l'érémitisme à la fin du Xe et au XIe siècle', in *Ermites de France et d'Italie* (XIe-XVe siècle) ed. by André Vauchez (Rome, 2003), pp. 29-46.

<sup>10</sup> There was a less significant peak in eremitic practice during the sixth and seventh centuries, at least in north-west Europe, hence the suggestion of a resurgence during the eleventh to early thirteenth-centuries. See Thomas Head *Hagiography and the Cult of Saints in the Diocese of Orléans, 800-1200* (Cambridge, 1990) and Jean Heuclin, *Aux origines monastiques de la Gaule du Nord: Ermites et reclus du Ve au XIe siècles* (Lille: Presses Universitaires de Lille, 1988) for references to hermits of the earlier period.

which happened to include more references to hermits, or even a growing interest in hermits themselves which had not existed in earlier decades? It is conceivable that the apparent popularity of the eremitic life is attributable more to the interests of medieval authors, improved record-keeping and the preservation of carefully selected written evidence than to any major increase in numbers of hermits.

From the records available it is easy to make erroneous assumptions about medieval hermits from the inherent prejudices of hagiographical authors. To develop a clearer understanding of contemporary perceptions of them, however, requires consideration of the role and function of the hermit in the wider political, social, religious and economic framework of the middle ages. The modern perception associates it with seclusion, contemplation and withdrawal from the world, but a re-assessment of the evidence shows many hermits to be rather active members of society, engaging positively with those around them. This was equally true of those styled 'recluse' or 'anchorite', although their activities might take differing forms. Rejection of the material world was not seen as a contradiction to an 'active' life, as this was also the objective of many who were not perceived as hermits. Examination of the active hermit needs to take into consideration the medieval debate regarding the status of the active versus the contemplative life<sup>11</sup> and the extent to which activity in its various forms was deemed acceptable, particularly in a period of increasing ecclesiastical regulation.

For the purpose of this study eremitic activity has been divided into social, religious and acts that relate to miracles, visions and prophecies, and it is clear that there were differences in emphasis in England and France concerning the importance and level of public engagement in all three types of activity. Further study also reveals another major difference between the two countries: English solitaries of this period tended to conform more closely to our traditional perception of hermits, living alone and

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<sup>11</sup> Giles Constable's *Three Studies in Medieval Religious and Social Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) and *The Reformation*, both contain excellent discussions on the contemporary debates about the active versus contemplative lives.

permanently based in a cell or cave, while French hermits were often more communal, living in groups but also moving freely from one place to another. In England, some sought a physical wilderness in remote rural areas, while others chose to occupy cells near churches or abbeys: Bartholomew retreated to the island of Farne, for example, while Sigar of Northaw was sufficiently close to St Albans Abbey to attend the service each night.<sup>12</sup> There was generally no attempt to move on unless directed by 'divine intervention' or, as in the case of Robert of Knaresborough, forced to find alternative accommodation which would, nevertheless, be close to the original settlement.<sup>13</sup> The scene is quite different in France, where hermits often became itinerant preachers or founders and administrators of new monastic orders, the most well-known being Robert of Arbrissel, Bernard of Tiron and Vitalis of Savigny. Many did seek the physical wilderness in the forests and woodlands but did so in groups reminiscent of the Egyptian Thebaid. For others, retreats into the *eremum* were temporary, usually taking the form of contemplative breaks in otherwise extremely active lives.<sup>14</sup> The objective of French hermits, it seems, was to reach out to society rather than wait for the people to come to them, as in England. This apparent disparity in objectives appears to have had differing effects on hermits' living structures and consequently upon the range and extent of activities they undertook.

This geographical divergence in the way hermits lived requires explanation and forms another significant aspect of this study. Hermit networks can be identified in both countries but appear to be more formal and closely controlled in England than in France. The communal nature of French hermit structures created 'clusters' in particular localities, mostly appearing in regions coincidentally with periods of social, political and/or economic instability or geographically situated on political boundaries, which gives

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<sup>12</sup> Geoffrey of Durham, *Vita Bartholomei Farnensis*, in *Symeonis monachi opera omnia*, ed. by Thomas Arnold, RS 75, 2 vols (London: Longman, 1882-5) I, 295-325, and *The Life of Christina of Markate: A Twelfth Century Recluse*, ed. and trans. by Charles H. Talbot, OMT (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959).

<sup>13</sup> *The Metrical Life of Saint Robert of Knaresborough*, ed. by Joyce Bazire, EETS, o.s. 228 (London: Oxford University Press, 1953).

<sup>14</sup> For one example see Walter, *Vita Sancti Anastasii*, PL 149: 428-9.

some credibility to the theory, developed elsewhere, that hermits, recluses and anchorites lived at the margins of society in a state of liminality.<sup>15</sup> While the arguments for the emergence of hermit networks in areas of insecurity are strong, the case for the marginal hermit is less easily defended in the case of the active hermit and the relationships he maintained within local communities. Marginality is perhaps associated more with traditional hermit symbolism than with the historical reality. The growth of eremitism and the increased status of the hermit occurred in an era when Western Europe was experiencing enormous fluctuation and change: the reform of the Church, the growth of heresy, the expansion of learning, the opening of new trade routes and the rise of popular piety manifested in the crusades and escalation in pilgrimage. Each of these would ultimately spread out to have an impact on all regions, however small or remote. Economic pressures such as population growth, intensification of agriculture and urban development ran parallel to the aforementioned wider trends, introducing change at the level of the parish and hamlet. Underlying these changes were pockets of political instability which, at intervals, created vacuums in long-established lordship and patronage systems. Is it possible that the popularity of asceticism could be linked to any or, indeed, all of these social and economic forces? Was there a connection between the rise of eremitism and the anxiety created by this political, religious and social volatility? Hermit networks, their connections with Church and community and the geographical locations of those networks suggest that hermits had a significant role at a time of great social transformation.

Perceptions of the hermit, whether contemporary or modern, have been influenced by the language of eremitism and the symbolic associations employed to create an intended effect. Medieval literature abounds with references to the symbolic ‘desert’ or ‘wilderness’, to the imagery associated with solitude, making a personal journey or being in exile, being ‘dead to the world’ or ‘a soldier of Christ’ or a living *vir Dei* or *ancilla*

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<sup>15</sup> See Christopher Holdsworth, ‘Hermits and the Power of the Frontier’, *Reading Medieval Studies* 16 (1990), pp. 55-76, which in turn is based on the work of Victor W. Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1969), pp. 80-118.

*Christi* (as opposed to the dead saint). Symbolism was a tool employed to create the stereotype, the *exempla*, to teach the faithful how they too could hope to attain salvation. The aim of this study is to uncover the real hermit, to look behind the symbolism and language in order to understand the role and function of the hermit, recluse and anchorite in medieval France and England. That means looking afresh at the lives of hermits, how they occupied their time, how and where they lived, with whom they communicated, the relationships they had with each other and with those around them and how they were received by their contemporaries, which was not always a positive experience.<sup>16</sup> It will challenge some of the long-held views about hermits in general. The sources reveal that there were many different types of hermits and that the eremitic life could take many different forms. Scores of people from varying backgrounds aspired successfully to lead a life of asceticism and poverty, but they were not all called hermits, recluses or anchorites. It was for individuals to choose which path to perfection, and thus to salvation, they wished to follow and this created the wide diversity in eremitic practice which can be found in the works of medieval authors.

### **The Sources**

Written works about hermits are similar to, and strongly reliant upon, hagiography. Examination of this literary genre is therefore a good starting point for learning about the lives of hermits, recluses and anchorites. There are, however, shortcomings in this approach. Hagiographical texts have limitations and generate a series of problems: limitations in that very few hermits were fortunate enough to have their lives recorded, and problematic in that hagiography, by definition,<sup>17</sup> is concerned primarily with the written records of saints. These need not be restricted to the *Vitae* alone but can include other records including miracle collections, inquests into candidature for canonisation or accounts of the discovery or translation of

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<sup>16</sup> The poet Pagan Bolotin, *De falsis heremitis qui vagando discurrunt*, ed. by Jean Leclercq, in 'Le poème de Payen Bolotin contre les faux ermites', *RB* 68 (1958), pp. 52-86, gives a very negative perception of hermits.

<sup>17</sup> From the Greek roots *hagios* meaning holy and *graphē*, meaning writing, therefore 'holy writing'.

relics.<sup>18</sup> Very few hermits were canonised, which means that the vast majority cannot be found by studying the hagiographical literature alone. Indeed, to do so would produce a rather distorted view of the role and function of the hermit in medieval society. For the period under discussion there are just seven extant lives for English hermits and fourteen for French, which accounts for only a small percentage of the total number of hermits known to have lived at this time.<sup>19</sup> Clay found evidence for 750 cells in England and refers to 650 of these by name, and this is probably a very conservative figure.<sup>20</sup> There are also a further two lives which are not usually included in the *Vitae*, although both follow hagiographical *formulae* to some extent. One is the brief account of the Baker of Dale in the *Chronicon de Narratio Fundationis* which was written ostensibly to recount the foundation of Dale Abbey in Derbyshire, circa 1153, and the second is the *Tractatus de conversione Pontii de Laracio et exordia Salvaniensis monasterii vera narratio*, dating from 1161-71, an account of the conversion of Pons of Léras, his eremitic life and the foundation of the Cistercian Abbey of Sylvanès in 1132.<sup>21</sup> It is clear that these do not provide a representative body of knowledge, although this small number of *Vitae* is still invaluable for the student of eremitism.

Why were there so few written lives of hermits for these centuries, given that eremitic activity appears to have reached a peak at this time alongside the rapid growth in the production of literary works generally and hagiography in particular?<sup>22</sup> It is perhaps easier to answer this by turning the question around and asking why certain individuals were selected by authors. The aims of hagiographers were many and complex, but principally their choices were made because their subjects had either been

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<sup>18</sup> Thomas Head, ed., *Medieval Hagiography: An Anthology* (New York and London: Routledge, 2001), p. xiv.

<sup>19</sup> See Appendix I.

<sup>20</sup> Clay, *Hermits and Anchorites*, p. xviii.

<sup>21</sup> Thomas de Musca, 'Chronicle of the Narratio Fundationis', in *Desiderata Curiosa*, ed. by Francis Peck (London, 1735), 2, Book 15, pp. 1-10; Hugh Francigena, 'The Tract on the Conversion of Pons de Léras and the true account of the beginning of the monastery at Silvanès', trans. by Beverly M. Kienzle, in Head, *Medieval Hagiography*, pp. 495-513.

<sup>22</sup> Holdsworth, 'Hermits', pp. 58 and 71, suggests that hagiographical writing on hermits peaked between 1115 and 1170.

martyred or were excellent living examples of righteousness and devotion to God. The majority of hermits lived quietly and unobtrusively and were probably known only to their local communities.<sup>23</sup> Their lives were uneventful, with no major achievement credited to them other than their asceticism and purity. This made them unlikely subjects for a *Vita*. Hagiographers, rather like modern newspaper reporters, were more interested in the celebrities of their day. Of the few hermits whose lives were recorded, most could demonstrate deeds or talents beyond the customary austerities. Some had experienced miraculous conversions or demonstrated repentance from past wickedness, such as Christian of Aumône or William Firmat,<sup>24</sup> others were founders of successful and popular new religious orders, the most well-known example being Robert of Arbrissel, founder of Fontevraud,<sup>25</sup> or had become holders of high office, such as Anastasius, who was appointed as papal legate for Pope Gregory VII in 1073.<sup>26</sup> Then there were those who performed miracles, experienced meaningful visions or predicted future events, which drew them to the attention of monarchs or ecclesiastical dignitaries, as did Godric of Finchale and Christina of Markyate.<sup>27</sup> These were the favoured subjects of *Vitae* because they provided models of Christian virtue which could be adapted for didactic purposes with their morality tales based on ideals of repentance, humility, chastity and obedience.

Over recent decades Patrick Geary, Thomas Head and others<sup>28</sup> have revealed the diversity of purpose in the production of hagiographical texts. Sometimes authors were specific about their objectives but often it is left to

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<sup>23</sup> Jean Leclercq called them 'silent hermits', 'L'érémisme en occident jusqu'à l'an mil', in *L'Eremismo in Occidente nei secoli XI e XII*, Miscellanea del centro di studi medioevali 4 (Milan: Vita e Pensiero, 1965), p. 28.

<sup>24</sup> Jean Leclercq, 'La vie de Christian de l'Aumône', *Analecta Bollandiana*, 52 (1934), 5-20; Stephen of Fougères, *Vita S Guillelmi Firmati*, *AASS, April III*, pp. 334-341.

<sup>25</sup> Other celebrated examples are Bernard of Tiron and Vitalis of Savigny but there were others who established individual abbeys or priories.

<sup>26</sup> *Vita Anastasii*, *PL* 149: 429.

<sup>27</sup> Reginald of Durham, *Libellus de vita et miraculis S Godrici heremita de Finchale*, ed. by J. Stephenson, *Surtees Society* 20, (London: J B Nichols and Son, 1847) and Talbot, *Christina*.

<sup>28</sup> Patrick Geary, 'Saints, Scholars and Society: The Elusive Goal' in *Living with the Dead in the Middle Ages* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1994), pp. 9-29.

the judgment of the reader. *Vitae* along with their accompanying miracle collections became increasingly essential for the canonisation process.<sup>29</sup> Both might also be written with the deliberate intention of providing evidence in support of monastic or other religious foundations or in defence of disputed rights. They also provided an opportunity to preserve the memory of the author's chosen subject, as when Bishop Baudry of Dol claimed that he wrote the life of Robert of Arbrissel in order that 'his reputation may serve as an example for future generations and his teachings may profit Christian scholarship'.<sup>30</sup> The unknown author of the life of Stephen of Obazine similarly claimed that he agreed to the task so that Stephen's life should not be hidden and that his holiness would profit others.<sup>31</sup> Whatever the purpose, all hagiography was produced to glorify its subjects and to give prominence to the personal relationships they shared with God. Hagiography, therefore, is inherently biased and hagiographers all had their own agendas. Patrick Geary has even gone so far as to claim that the primary aspect of hagiography 'is, in part, consciously propaganda' and that it represents the 'images of society's ideal types'.<sup>32</sup>

Given the ulterior motives behind the production of hagiographical sources, questions regarding credibility have to be addressed. To what extent were hagiographers seekers after the truth, and if they were what did they understand by 'the truth'? Hagiography is not the same as biography, and as authors had specific aims when writing they subjectively decided what was worthy of inclusion or omission. For them the truth was determined by evidence of sanctity and devotion to God, and signs of His approval of certain deeds. Therefore virtues were promoted while negative aspects were transformed into struggles against evil or explained as temptations, which inevitably were always overcome, thereby establishing these individuals as

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<sup>29</sup> André Vauchez, *Sainthood in the later Middle Ages*, trans. by Jean Birrell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 34.

<sup>30</sup> Baudry of Dol, *Vita B Roberti de Arbrissello*, AASS February 3, p. 604, '...quatensus seculis futuris exemplorum illius odor redoleat, et scholae Christianae doctrina eius proficiat.'

<sup>31</sup> *Vita Stephani Obazinensis*, ed. and trans. by Michel Aubrun (Clermont-Ferrand: Institut d'Études du Massif Central, 1970), p. 40.

<sup>32</sup> Geary, *Saints*, pp. 12 and 22.

the favoured of God. Hagiographers freely used the literary models of the Bible and the lives of the Desert Fathers in their attempts to show holy men and women as imitators of Christ. Neither were they averse to taking an earlier popular *Vita* and transposing the name of their own subject into the text, as Abbot Geoffrey of Burton did when composing his twelfth-century life of the fifth-century solitary, Modwenna.<sup>33</sup> Whole passages were intentionally copied verbatim, regardless of whether it was an accurate account of their own subject, in order to produce ‘a generalised type of sanctity’<sup>34</sup> rather than depict specific aspects of saintliness associated with one person. Three of the miracles attributed to Bartholomew of Farne mirrored those of Cuthbert, Benedict and Godric, which reveals the extent to which earlier accounts could shape the telling of a story. It is also an example of the extent to which hagiography could influence the memory of events.<sup>35</sup> Miracles which were credited to a particular individual would be received as an acknowledged truth.

Hagiography therefore has its limitations as factual evidence for the lives of hermits. It is a case of carefully extracting the biography from the hagiography and assessing each work on its own merits. There is still much of value that can be learned from these works, such as when and where individuals or groups of hermits lived, how they lived and the type of austerities favoured. Most lives used for this study were written at or soon after the deaths of the hermits concerned and authors were still able to recall events or consult witnesses who had known them well. A good example is Reginald, the hagiographer of Godric of Finchale, who tells how he approached Godric about recording events in his life ‘for the edification of future generations’ and how he was fiercely rebuked by the hermit for raising the subject. Eventually, the latter gave way and Reginald recounts how Godric was ‘pleased to disclose to me the unknown side of his life.’ Reginald was himself a first-hand witness of certain incidents and he was

<sup>33</sup> Geoffrey of Burton, *Life and Miracles of St Modwenna*, ed. and trans. by Robert Bartlett, OMT (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

<sup>34</sup> Thomas F. X. Noble and Thomas Head, eds., *Soldiers of Christ: Saints and Saints' Lives from Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1995), p. xviii.

<sup>35</sup> See Head, *Hagiography*, p. 51, for a fuller discussion of collective memory.

also able to approach other witnesses who knew Godric, such as monks from Durham Abbey and visitors from that city and further afield. Another example of a first-hand witness is Andrew, a disciple of Robert of Arbrissel. Andrew wrote the second of two *Vitae* recording the life of Robert, in which he concentrated on the last months of his master's life. The account is extremely detailed, particularly with regard to conversations concerning Robert's wishes for his imminent death and burial.<sup>36</sup> Even where hagiographical techniques were more heavily employed, as in the Life of Bernard of Tiron, which according to Beck is a combination of different accounts,<sup>37</sup> the document is still valuable for the detailed portrayal of the hermit's life in the *eremus* prior to institutionalisation. Hagiographies, despite their limitations, are still a valuable primary source and perhaps can be a significant historical record in their own right. They are the representation of the ideas, thoughts and attitudes of their time and contemporaries regarded them as the incontrovertible truth<sup>38</sup> whether or not they contained historical fact. They provide a substantial contribution to the study of eremitism itself.

Unlike some hagiographers, chroniclers often stated that they desired to record the truth for posterity but this would have been the truth as they understood it. As with hagiography, this medium was also heavily influenced by the Church authorities. There were chroniclers who were secular clerics, such as Ralph de Diceto and Roger Howden, but the majority came from monastic houses and the records they kept were the official records of those particular monasteries.<sup>39</sup> These authors had every good intention of recording events as accurately as possible but all too frequently they had to rely on second-hand accounts and again, as with hagiographers, were not averse to taking on trust existing narratives to

<sup>36</sup> Andrew, *Vita Altera B Roberti de Arbrisello auctore monacho Fontis Ebraudi*, PL 162: 1058-78.

<sup>37</sup> Bernard Beck, *Saint Bernard de Tiron, l'ermite, le moine et le monde* (Cormelles-le-Royal: La Mandragore, 1998), pp. 14-17.

<sup>38</sup> Jacques Dalarun, *Robert of Arbrissel: sex, sin and salvation in the middle ages*, trans. by Bruce L. Venarde (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2006), pp. 85-8, provides a very eloquent case for written sources as perceived truths.

<sup>39</sup> Michael T. Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record: England, 1066-1307* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1996), pp. 100-101.

weave into their own. This was often unavoidable when dealing with events which had occurred in former decades but it meant that any past inaccuracies or prejudices were carried forward into the later collective memory. Even a trusted chronicler like Orderic Vitalis seems to have relied heavily on earlier writings such as those of Eadmer and William of Malmesbury,<sup>40</sup> and he confessed to abridging the Life of the hermit St Guthlac by Bishop Felix for incorporation into his own modest work.<sup>41</sup> While the objective was to achieve an accurate record, chronicles were not histories, as Gervase of Canterbury dutifully explained. For him the task of the chronicler was to 'reckon by true computation the years of the Lord and the events listed under them' but he goes on to add, 'along with other events, portents and miracles.'<sup>42</sup> As Chris Given-Wilson has shown, this places a different interpretation on the search for truth, since portents and miracles were signs from God which, in Gervase's view, it was the chronicler's duty to record and interpret.<sup>43</sup>

Hermits were frequently seen as the intermediaries or direct recipients of God's communication with mankind, and are mentioned frequently in chronicles, but their appearances are usually brief. As an example, Orderic Vitalis refers to an unnamed hermit known for his gift of prophecy, which prompted Queen Matilda to send him gifts in return for his prediction of the future for her family and the Duchy of Normandy.<sup>44</sup> It is these brief accounts, however, which collectively assist in developing a picture of the way the hermit was perceived in society. Even the celebrated Robert of Arbrissel, Bernard of Tiron and Vitalis of Savigny were only given brief mentions but these occur in no less than seven different chronicles, each applauding their holiness and commending them for establishing new

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<sup>40</sup> Antonia Gransden, *Historical Writing in England I, c.550 – c.1307* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974), pp. 157-9.

<sup>41</sup> Orderic Vitalis, *The Ecclesiastical History of Orderic Vitalis*, ed. and trans. by Marjorie Chibnall (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969-80), Book 4, p. 338, 'Huc usque Felicis episcopi scripta de venerabili Guthlaco breviter secutus sum et huic opusculo inservi....'.

<sup>42</sup> Gervase of Canterbury, *The Historical Works of Gervase of Canterbury*, RS 1 (London: Longman Press, 1879), pp. 87-88.

<sup>43</sup> Chris Given-Wilson, *Chronicles: The Writing of History in Medieval England* (London: Hambledon and London, 2004), p. 20.

<sup>44</sup> Orderic Vitalis, *Ecclesiastical History*, Book V, pp. 105-9.

monastic orders. The one exception to this brevity is the account of Peter the Hermit and the role he played in the first crusade of 1096. His exploits are mentioned by a few chroniclers, but the greatest detail is found in Albert of Aachen's *Historia Ierosolimitana*.<sup>45</sup> Albert provides a thorough account of Peter's role both in preaching the crusade, his journey to the Holy Land and his subsequent campaign, but the credibility of this version has been questioned, and whilst other chroniclers also acknowledge Peter as the instigator of this crusade, making him a virtual cult figure soon after his death, much of his part in the crusade has now been relegated to legend. Nevertheless, it is the contemporary perception of Peter and his deeds which provides an insight into the role played by these holy men. Not only did individuals, from royalty to rural peasants, have faith in these servants of God but chroniclers also recognised their significance by references to them in the process of recording events. Chronicles did not share the didactic purposes found in hagiographical writing but they still communicated God's will and the significant part played by hermits in its dissemination.

As servants of God and mediators of His will it was essential that hermits, recluses and anchorites were seen to be leading moral and pious lives. It is surprising therefore that so few religious rules were written specifically for hermits during this period of increasing interest in and popularity of the eremitic life.<sup>46</sup> Apart from those models inherited from the Egyptian and Syrian desert hermits of the fourth to sixth centuries, the only near-contemporary rules were those of the ninth-century priest Grimlaic and the Italian Peter Damian in the early eleventh century.<sup>47</sup> The English and French hermits of the later eleventh and twelfth centuries were for the most part unregulated although many, especially those in England, usually

<sup>45</sup> Albert of Aachen, *Historia Ierosolimitana*, ed. and trans. by Susan Edgington, OMT (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007). For discussions on the role of Peter during the first crusade see Ernest O. Blacke and Colin Morris, 'A Hermit Goes to War: Peter and the Origins of the First Crusade,' in Shiels, *Monks, Hermits and the Ascetic Tradition*, pp. 79-107.

<sup>46</sup> One reason for this, however, is the marginal status such rules had in canon law and after the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 new rules were not permitted.

<sup>47</sup> See Grimlaic, *Regula solitariorum*, *PL* 103: 574-663 and Peter Damian, *De ordine eremitarum*, *PL* 145: 327-36. Warren, *Anchorites*, Appendix 2, pp. 294-298, offers a list of rules, although some of these are actually letters to specific people while others are much later than the period under discussion here.

continued to live by the rule of their former orders, or, if newly attached to a monastic house, would adopt that rule with the permission of the abbot. Bartholomew of Farne and Godric were closely associated with the monks at Durham and therefore adapted their lives to the Benedictine Rule. In France, with pressure growing for large groups to leave their wildernesses in favour of the cloister, a number of hermit leaders wrote their own rules, thus establishing new orders as at Fontevraud and Grandmont, but this practice ceased in 1215 when the thirteenth canon of the Fourth Lateran Council 'expressly forbade the formation of new religious groups or orders'.<sup>48</sup>

In the early thirteenth century a guide for anchoresses appeared, known as the *Ancrene Wisse*. Its authorship has been the subject of much debate with many attempts to identify the author and the institution to which he was affiliated. Derek Brewer, working in the 1950s, recognised parallels in *Ancrene Wisse* with the regulations of Augustinian canons, particularly those of the independent houses of Premonstratensians and Victorines, and suggested a possible connection with the Victorine house of Wigmore Abbey. Two decades later, Eric Dobson pursued this line of enquiry further, but saw more obvious parallels with the regulations of the Premonstratensian canons than with those of the Victorines. When the Dominican Friars were established in 1216, they adopted the regulations of the Premonstratensians (with some alterations) in order to comply with the thirteenth canon of the Fourth Lateran Council referred to above. This led to the possibility that the author of *Ancrene Wisse* could have been a Premonstratensian canon or a Dominican. Dobson, however, ruled out these options on geographical and chronological grounds and continued to favour the Victorine connection based on the similarities of practices the author described in *Ancrene Wisse* with those of his own house.<sup>49</sup> Subsequent research reveals a more positive influence from the Premonstratensian and/or Dominican legislative tradition based on comparisons of the structure of *Ancrene Wisse* with the revised Premonstratensian regulations,

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<sup>48</sup> Bolton, *Medieval Reformation*, pp. 76-7.

<sup>49</sup> Bella Millett, 'The Origins of *Ancrene Wisse*: New Answers, New Questions', *Medium Aevum* 61 (1992), pp. 207-208.

similarities which Dobson had recognised. While the author describes practices in his own house which appear to be closer to Premonstratensian regulations than those of the Dominicans, ‘on balance’ the evidence appears to ‘connect him with the Dominicans’.<sup>50</sup>

The composition of the *Ancrene Wisse* also relied on a number of earlier works including Aelred of Rievaulx’s *De institutione inclusarum*.<sup>51</sup> While *Ancrene Wisse* is traditionally regarded as a rule, Aelred’s work has been described as a letter, written in response to a request from his sister for guidance on how to live a solitary life, which eventually also received a much wider audience. Given this distinction, how do we define a rule and do either of the above fall into that category?<sup>52</sup> The word rule comes from the Latin verb *regere*, meaning to guide or to direct.<sup>53</sup> Derived from this is the noun *regula*, which was used from the fourth century in the titles of works which regulated the lives of coenobites and solitaries alike. Rules such as *Ancrene Wisse* and *De institutione inclusarum*, if indeed they are rules, were written as guidance and not, as with monastic rules, as a requirement. There was no compulsion to adhere to the guidance offered in these anchoritic rules and there is no evidence as to whether they were strictly followed or not. Both of these guides were written to offer advice on how best to order one’s life and perform contemplative duties and therefore, as sources for the study of eremitism, are invaluable. They provide details of daily routines, spiritual duties, sins, confession and penance, the extent of contact with the outside world and how recluses and anchorites were to be supported. They also reveal how others involved in the religious life regarded the eremitic ideal in the service of God. One other work of guidance takes the form of a letter, in similar fashion to that

<sup>50</sup> *Ancrene Wisse: Guide for Anchoresses. A Translation based on Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 402*, trans. by Bella Millett (Exeter: Exeter University Press, 2009), p. xii, and Millett, ‘The Origins of *Ancrene Wisse*’, p. 216. See also *Ancrene Wisse: A Corrected Edition of the Text in Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 402*, 2 vols., ed. by Bella Millett, EETS 325 and 326 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

<sup>51</sup> Aelred of Rievaulx, *De institutione inclusarum*, trans. John Ayto and Alexandra Barratt, EETS (London: Oxford University Press, 1984).

<sup>52</sup> Bella Millett, ‘The Genre of *Ancrene Wisse*’, in *A Companion to Ancrene Wisse*, ed. by Yoko Wada (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2003), pp. 29-44.

<sup>53</sup> Cassell’s Latin/English Dictionary (London, 1975).

of Aelred for his sister, and that is the *Liber Confortatorius* of Goscelin of Saint Bertin, which he wrote around 1080 for Eve, a former nun of Wilton. This is a very personal work, in which Goscelin expresses his sorrow at Eve's departure and offers his support and guidance for the ascetic life she has chosen.<sup>54</sup>

The majority of hermits, recluses and anchorites are reminiscent of silent screen actors, seen but not heard. They speak only through the mediated voices of hagiographers, chroniclers and other *literati* among the ranks of ecclesiastical luminaries. These authors explained the truth as they understood it, that events were dictated by divine will and that the holy men and women whom they chose to write about were instruments of that divine will and were therefore carefully selected examples of how to attain the desired relationship with God. The range of sources for this subject is varied and informative, but it must be remembered that the authors involved also had their own personal objectives when writing about chosen individuals. The language and techniques employed in their texts not only created the medieval perception of hermits, their place in society and their relationships with the world around them at the time but has had an influence on modern perceptions of hermits and the eremitic life.

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<sup>54</sup> Goscelin of St Bertin, *The Book of Encouragement and Consolation (Liber Confortatorius)* ed. and trans. by Monika Otter (Cambridge: Boydell, 2004).



## Chapter 2

### The Language and Perceptions of Eremitism

*'For a hermitage is a garden of heavenly delights; just as one might in a garden find the scents of different kinds of herbs, or the fragrance of luscious flowers, so in a hermitage the scent of virtues fills the air with fragrance.'*<sup>55</sup>

In this passage Peter Damian presents an idyllic image of the eremitic life, equating the hermitage and its virtues to a heavenly paradise. He was not alone in this metaphorical perception of the eremitic environment. Gregory of Tours in his *Vitae Patrum* used the same metaphor, while Bruno of La Grande Chartreuse wrote in very positive terms about the 'natural beauty' of his environment.<sup>56</sup> All three authors skilfully used this linguistic device to present a particular image of the hermit's life, a vision which suggested a world of peace, a spiritual place free from mortal cares. The language employed conveys an idyll which was without doubt, far from the physical reality for the vast majority of hermits, most of whom, the sources advise, endured extreme hardship. The *eremitica austeritas* was, in fact, meant to be the most strict and severe of all forms of the religious vocation.<sup>57</sup> Damian and others who wrote so idealistically about eremitic life were not solely intending to promote the benefits of the hermitage. They were attempting to explain the inner, emotional experience of attaining that closeness to God which allegorically mirrored a 'garden of heavenly delights', against which the harshness of the physical environment paled into insignificance. This contrast between idealism and reality flows through eremitic writing and exemplifies how selective use of language can inform us about medieval perceptions of hermits, recluses and anchorites while also creating or influencing the perceptions of modern scholarship.

<sup>55</sup> Peter Damian, *Ad Leonem Eremitam*, PL 145: 231-252 (col. 246), 'Eremum namque est paradisus deliciarum, ubi tamquam redolentium species pigmentorum, vel rutilantes flores aromatum, sic fragrantia spirant odoramenta virtutum.'

<sup>56</sup> Bruno of Chartreuse, *Lettres des premiers Chartreux*, ed. par un Chartreux, Sources Chrétiennes 88 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1962) I, p. 70.

<sup>57</sup> Jean Leclercq, "Eremus" et "eremite": Pour l'histoire du vocabulaire de la vie solitaire', *Collectanea ordinis Cisterciensium Reformatorum* 25 (1963), 27.

Any study of this nature requires evaluation of the meanings and subtle nuances of specific words and expressions employed by medieval authors. It is the vocabulary and how it was used which defines the subject, analysis of which can be approached in two ways. Firstly, how did medieval authors use specific words regarding eremitism and what did they understand by them? Secondly, how does modern scholarship define the same words and apply this vocabulary in recent research? Applicable to both questions is whether the medieval language of eremitism had any significant effect on contemporary perceptions of hermits or their role in that society and, similarly, whether it has had any influence on the insights into eremitism in more recent research. The subject becomes more complex when attempts are made to define familiar terms such as hermit, recluse and anchorite (*eremita, reclusus* and *anchoreta*).<sup>58</sup> What did the medieval hagiographer or chronicler have in mind when applying these words to an individual? Did he recognise any difference between a hermit and a recluse, and was a recluse in any way different from an anchorite? There is no way of knowing for certain but, by examining when the different terminology was employed, the context in which it was used and in which texts it appeared, it is possible to draw some conclusions about the way medieval hermits were perceived by their contemporaries.

Most modern historians offer a mandatory definition of hermits, recluses and anchorites and these show that there is, more or less, common agreement in the classification of these ascetics: hermits were at liberty to leave their hermitages while anchorites were enclosed and rarely left the confines of their cells. The majority also acknowledge that 'recluse' was merely another word for an anchorite and that both terms were used interchangeably in the sources. Looking in broad terms at eremitism in the middle ages, this appears to be a reasonably accurate summation but a closer examination of specific aspects of individual careers, the formation of ascetic groups, and diversity within the eremitic life over time and geographical locations, reveals inconsistencies. Such a predilection for

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<sup>58</sup> This includes all variants: e.g. *heremita, inclusa* and *anachoreta*.

placing individual ascetics within set classifications is comparable to fitting a strait-jacket to those individuals, making no allowance for changes in direction. In fact, hermits were markedly flexible, seamlessly moving from one ascetic path to another. Attempts to place individuals within certain categories therefore become unsystematic. Comparison of modern and medieval usage of the same terms also reveals contradictions. Medieval authors were more concerned with the promotion of the sanctity of their subjects and therefore show a preference for epithets such as 'man of God' (*vir Dei*) or 'holy man' (*vir sanctus*) rather than a preoccupation with divisions into specified categories. This indicates that there is some divergence between medieval and modern perceptions of the hermit and suggests that the desire to group ascetics into hermits, recluses and/or anchorites is a modern construct. In order to evaluate the contradiction between the medieval and modern application of vocabulary associated with eremitism, it is useful to assess the evolution of various definitions and classifications of modern scholars and to establish whether any divergence emerges in the studies of England and France.

English eremitism as a subject of medieval religious history was sadly neglected until the twentieth century. Tom Licence has shown how modern perceptions of hermits, recluses and anchorites were formed by the legacy of Edward Gibbon who viewed anchorites as 'contemptible products of degenerate, irrational fanaticism', and how ecclesiastical historians of the Victorian era were more preoccupied with the study of 'grander subjects' such as the papacy, the episcopate, or monastic institutions'.<sup>59</sup> Warren, in her study on anchorites, similarly lamented this early 'disinterest in the study of the reclusive life', claiming that it 'fostered and even encouraged antiquarian perceptions' of anchorites as 'deviants'.<sup>60</sup> In France, by comparison, interest in the eremitic life continued beyond the medieval period, as witnessed by Pavillon's life of Robert of Arbrissel, published in

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<sup>59</sup> Tom Licence, *Hermits and Recluses in English Society, 950-1200* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 2-3, citing Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ed. by John B. Bury (London: Methuen and Co., 1909), 4, pp. 78-9.

<sup>60</sup> Warren, *Anchorites*, p. 1.

1666,<sup>61</sup> and the detailed provincial studies by Dom Lobineau (1666-1727) of the history of Brittany and the lives of the Breton saints.<sup>62</sup> Following the upheavals of the French Revolution, the nineteenth century witnessed a resurgence of French interest in local archives, resulting in numerous publications of provincial history. Jules Michelet (1798-1874) incorporated references to eremitism in his extensive volumes of French history, with a rather idealised portrayal of the hermit in the middle ages.<sup>63</sup> The editing and publishing of cartularies and the foundation documents of various monasteries and chapels kept knowledge of local saints, hermits and eremitic activity to the fore, no doubt because the majority of authors or sponsors of these works were themselves members of the Church. It is too simplistic to say that English eremitism lay largely forgotten as a result of the Protestant Reformation, but the on going interest in French eremitism was definitely steeped in Catholic tradition until the twentieth century.

It is not until the twentieth century that the debate concerning differentiation between hermit and anchorite began. Rotha Mary Clay's book, the first comprehensive study undertaken of English eremitism, identified 'two distinct classes of solitaries': the anchorite, who, she claimed, was 'enclosed within four walls', and the hermit 'who went out of his cell and mingled with his fellow-men'.<sup>64</sup> It is in a much later chapter that Clay then identified recluses as being synonymous with anchorites, and this was presumably why they did not form a third class of solitary in her view. The anchorite was *inclusus*, not merely withdrawn from the world but 'shut up in a strait prison'.<sup>65</sup> A further seven decades elapsed before Ann Warren produced her study of English anchorites and, like Clay, saw a clear distinction between hermits and anchorites: 'hermits were free to move about whereas

<sup>61</sup> B. Pavillon, *Vie de bienheureux Robert d'Arbrissel, patriarche des Solitaires de la France et instituteur de l'Ordre de Fontevraud* (Paris-Saumur, 1666). Pavillon, in publishing this work, was responding to the request of Jeanne-Baptiste, Abbess of Fontevraud, who at the time was seeking canonisation for Robert of Arbrissel.

<sup>62</sup> Dom Gui A. Lobineau, *Histoire de Bretagne* (Paris, 1707), and *Les Vies des Saints de Bretagne et des personnes d'une éminente piété qui ont vécu dans cette province*, 6 vols, ed. by Abbé Tresvaux (Paris, 1836-39).

<sup>63</sup> Jules Michelet, *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. by Paul Viallaneix (Paris-Flammarion, 1971-82). Volume 4 covers his discourse on hermits, particularly Robert of Arbrissel.

<sup>64</sup> Clay, *Hermits and Anchorites*, p. xvi.

<sup>65</sup> Clay, *Hermits and Anchorites*, p. 73.

anchorites took vows of permanent stability'.<sup>66</sup> The anchorite was also *inclusus/inclusa* or *reclusus/recluse*, 'liturgically and psychologically dead to the world.' Warren did go one stage further and acknowledged that the meanings attributed to each word had changed over time. In the early Christian era hermit and anchorite were interchangeable terms, but during the middle ages (Warren is no more specific than that) the word '*anchorite*' became more restricted in use' and was applied only to those who were 'enclosed and stable with limited access to the outside world'. Until recently these remained the only two comprehensive studies of English eremitism,<sup>67</sup> with Warren endorsing Clay's classification of solitaries. A new study, however, published during the writing of this thesis, seems set to supersede both Clay and Warren and provides a different interpretation of these terms which, if classification of ascetics is deemed essential, is more meaningful. Tom Licence presents a case for using the term anchorite as an umbrella word for both hermits and recluses. If, he argues, the noun 'anchorite' means 'one who is withdrawn' while 'hermit' translates as 'a person who dwells in the desert' and 'recluse' derives from the Latin *claudio* meaning to close or shut up, then the term 'anchorite' has the broadest meaning. He concludes from this that anchorites could, therefore, be hermits or recluses.<sup>68</sup> Based on the original patristic Greek and Latin derivations, this method of classification does have its attractions and is an advance on that given by Clay and Warren, but it still does not take into account what medieval authors themselves understood by the terms, nor the fact that their use and meaning underwent many changes from the early Christian era to the close of the middle ages.

Interest in English eremitism has increased tentatively throughout the twentieth century to become a more mainstream area of study in recent years. New editions of *Vitae* as well as numerous journal articles on

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<sup>66</sup> Warren, *Anchorites*, p. 8.

<sup>67</sup> In the decades between Clay and Warren there have been numerous articles on specific hermits, for example Henry Mayr-Harting, 'Functions of a Twelfth-Century Recluse', *History* 60 (1975), 337-352 and Victoria Tudor, 'St Godric of Finchale and St Bartholomew of Farne', in *Benedict's Disciples*, ed. by David H. Farmer (Leominster: Fowler Wright, 1980), pp. 195-211.

<sup>68</sup> Licence, *Hermits and Recluses*, p. 11.

individual hermits and anchorites have appeared, and the majority of these have adopted what has become over time the accepted understanding of the terms. Maurice Bell, editor of the Life of Wulfric, agreed that the hermit was not enclosed, was free to go about and support himself and might even have no fixed abode. It is clear that he was heavily influenced by Clay in this, as he went on to explain that they (hermits) occupied themselves with duties which the government of the day would normally perform, such as mending roads or acting as lighthouse keepers.<sup>69</sup> Only a few, he claimed, 'passed lonely lives on rocky islands'. Anchorites, on the other hand, were secluded for life within four walls and were supported from outside.<sup>70</sup> Recluses were not mentioned. More recently, Dr. E. Jones has maintained the traditional perception of hermits living open, unstructured lives compared with anchorites who were 'isolated from the world in their walled-up cells' and wholly dependent on society.<sup>71</sup> One explanation for persevering with these varying perceptions is that eremitism in England complied with this pattern. It was formally structured with either individuals or small groups adopting an ascetic form of living under the aegis of a local ecclesiastic or religious institution, creating a picture of stability and uniformity.<sup>72</sup>

In France the eremitic landscape was very much the opposite. Diversity was its key characteristic; it was marked by an abundance of informal groups, large and small, loosely structured and unregulated, centred around individuals whose fame drew crowds of followers of both sexes, spilling into the woods and forests - a phenomenon not witnessed in England.<sup>73</sup> Each group experimented with its own brand of asceticism, some willing to accept conformity, others pursuing innovation, as at Fontaine-Gérhard in the forest of Mayenne, where the hermits fiercely rejected the imposition of a

<sup>69</sup> Clay, *Hermits and Anchorites*, Chapters 4 and 5. The examples she cites suggest that these 'social' duties were a later development, being mainly in the fourteenth century.

<sup>70</sup> John, Abbot of Ford, *Wulfric of Haselbury*, ed. by Maurice Bell, Somerset Record Society 47 (Frome and London, 1933), p. 1.

<sup>71</sup> Eddie Jones, 'The Hermits and Anchorites of Oxfordshire', *Oxoniana* 63 (1998), 53 and 56.

<sup>72</sup> Some examples which feature in this study are Wulfric of Haselbury, Godric of Finchale and Christina of Markyate.

<sup>73</sup> See Chapter 3: Hermit Structures for a broader discussion of these differences.

rule.<sup>74</sup> The traditional definitions of hermit, recluse and anchorite therefore become difficult to implement when confronted with such diversity.

Another major contribution to the debate on terminology came from historians writing about eremitic activity on the continent of Europe. The underlying theme at the Milan conference on eremitism in 1962 highlighted the many problems presented by eremitic groups and the extent to which the term hermit was useful. Étienne Delaruelle questioned how far, at a time of wide-ranging forms of religious lifestyle and while it was easy to distinguish the hermit from the cenobite or the parish priest, the hermit in the purest sense had ever existed.<sup>75</sup> Jean Becquet acknowledged the ambiguity of vocabulary, citing the difficulty in establishing whether a hermit became a monk when his eremitic community was subjected to the rule of St Benedict.<sup>76</sup> The conference, however, did not address the threefold classification of hermit, recluse and anchorite. It was the Benedictine, Dom Jean Leclercq, who contributed most to the subject of the language of eremitism. His approach was to examine the diversity within eremitic activity and particularly to stress the fact that there were many different types of hermit.<sup>77</sup> He saw no necessity to distinguish them from anchorites. Both, he claimed, were solitaries with the same aspirations and any distinction between the two 'is rare and artifical'.<sup>78</sup>

Leclercq identified three types of hermit: the hermit-monk, the itinerant hermit or *peregrinantes* and those congregations of hermits who lived in groups reminiscent of the desert *laurae* of fourth- and fifth-century Egypt. In the first group, the hermit-monks, he included those who were or had been monks, abbots and bishops who had chosen to renounce their ecclesiastical positions for a life of solitude. The chosen way of life for this group has noticeable similarities with many ascetics in England who lived in

<sup>74</sup> Gui M. Oury, 'Les survivants des ermites du Bas-Maine: les groupements de Fontaine-Gérard', *Revue Mabillon*, 61 (1971), 362-4.

<sup>75</sup> Etienne Delaruelle, 'Les ermites et les spiritualités populaires', in *L'eremitismo*, pp. 212-3.

<sup>76</sup> Jean Becquet, 'L'érémisme clérical et laïc dans l'ouest de la France', in *L'eremitismo*, p. 185.

<sup>77</sup> Jean Leclercq, 'L'érémisme en occident jusqu'à l'an mil', in *L'eremitismo*, pp. 29-36.

<sup>78</sup> Leclercq, "Eremus" et eremita", p. 25.

various states of reclusion either close to a church or abbey, or in a grange or priory. Leclercq called them *quasi-ermites* because they remained in or under the direction of the *coenobium*.<sup>79</sup> André Vauchez and others use the term ‘monk-hermit’ to describe orders like the Carthusians, who, Leclercq has acknowledged, bridged the gap between eremitism and cenobitism.<sup>80</sup> The second group, the *peregrinantes*, identified by Leclercq was not evident in England. In France a hermit roaming freely from one settlement to another was a common sight, with William Firmat and Christian of Aumône being classic examples.<sup>81</sup> In England, while hermits could, technically, leave their hermitages (the hermit Roger, protector of Christina of Markyate, left his cell to visit other hermits) they did not habitually wander from place to place.<sup>82</sup> Leclercq’s third group was also absent from England, being a phenomenon only associated with France and, for a brief period, Northern Italy. Members of this group formed congregations, which also became known as *laurae*, and evolved when a hermit became known and attracted disciples who were primarily lay people eager to join him in his search for salvation. The hermit wishing to pursue a more austere vocation would have to leave his followers behind and find his solitude in a new ‘desert’. Under these circumstances, the pattern often repeated itself and new *laurae* continued to form, with most ultimately becoming the foundations of new monastic orders.

The eremitic foundations of many of these new orders established in France over a brief period of fifty years (circa 1070 – circa 1130) prompted Henrietta Leyser to propose the addition of one more group to the existing categories of hermits. Her thesis is set against a background of religious revival and reform in which eremitism played a crucial role. The ‘new’ hermits, in contrast to traditional ones, were very active contributors to the transformation of religious life. They were ‘militant and aggressive’,

<sup>79</sup> Leclercq, ‘L’érémisme’, pp. 32-3.

<sup>80</sup> André Vauchez, *La spiritualité du Moyen Âge occidental VIIIe-XIIIe*, (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1975), p. 85.

<sup>81</sup> *Vita Firmati*, pp. 334-341; Leclercq, ‘La vie de Christian’, pp. 5-20.

<sup>82</sup> It was the fourteenth century before the first ‘wandering-hermit’ can be identified in the person of Richard Rolle. For his writings see *English Writings of Richard Rolle, Hermit of Hampole*, ed. by Hope E. Allen (Sutton: Sutton Publishing reprint, 1988).

attacking established forms of monasticism which, Leyser claimed, provoked a ‘crisis of cenobitism’.<sup>83</sup> It was, therefore, a matter of paradox that these ‘new’ hermits formed communities and became monks or canons.<sup>84</sup> In her eyes traditional hermits were solitaries: those of France and Italy like Abbot Richard of St Vannes who, tired of his administrative duties, left the abbey to end his days in seclusion;<sup>85</sup> or the recluses and anchorites found in the caves and cells of England. However, she accepted that, while ‘new’ hermits shared a love of solitude with their more traditional brothers and sisters, they also ‘expected and welcomed companions’. Solitude for them did not mean that they were entirely alone but merely that they lived ‘apart from secular society’ and the materialism of everyday life,<sup>86</sup> although as will be seen this was rarely the reality. Leyser’s ‘new’ hermits were frequently engaged in disputes over lands and rights, while even the enclosed anchorite still had to rely on the patronage of church and community for subsistence.<sup>87</sup>

The last two decades have seen a welcome acceptance among historians of the important role of eremitism in the medieval Church, greatly helped by the publication of papers given at a conference in Rome in 2003. This volume, edited by André Vauchez, is primarily concerned with hermits in France and Italy from the eleventh to fifteenth centuries.<sup>88</sup> While this conference made a valuable contribution to the study of eremitism it added little to the debate about language and terminology. Anne-Marie Helvétius, however, writing about eremitism before the eleventh century, did acknowledge the problems of defining a hermit, realising that it was difficult to designate someone as a hermit when other terms such as ‘monk’, ‘anchorite’ and ‘recluse’ were all useful variables depending on the context. Helvétius does introduce the new labels of ‘internal’ and ‘external’ hermits.

<sup>83</sup> Henrietta Leyser, *Hermits and the New Monasticism: A Study of Religious Communities in Western Europe, 1000-1150* (London: Macmillan, 1984), p. 15.

<sup>84</sup> Leyser, *Hermits*, p. 16.

<sup>85</sup> Leyser, *Hermits*, p. 19.

<sup>86</sup> Leyser, *Hermits*, p. 19.

<sup>87</sup> See Chapters 4 and 5 for a more detailed discussion.

<sup>88</sup> André Vauchez, *Ermites de France et d'Italie (XIe-XVe siècle)* (Rome: École Française de Rome, 2003).

Both these groups submitted themselves to a religious authority and both were recluses (*reclausi/reclausae*) but the former were to be found ‘living alone in the middle of others’, within an urban or monastic context.<sup>89</sup> It is interesting to note that Helvétius cites as an example of this form of reclusion an account given by Gregory of Tours of the enclosure ceremony - the solemn procession and short service ending with the recluse being sealed inside the cell - which was never a common feature of eremitism in England until the thirteenth century. External hermits on the other hand opted for a liberated way of life away from the framework of city or monastery. They in turn could be divided into two groups: those living in isolation in the forests and those called *peregrinantes*, detached from family and patrimony. These external hermits, according to Helvétius, were the ‘true incarnation of the ancient ideal, the Fathers of the desert’.<sup>90</sup> Her classification is remarkably similar to that of Leclercq cited above, although he applied it to hermits of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, saying that it was not until this period that the word hermit could be applied with any precision.<sup>91</sup>

From this wide range of categories of hermits it is possible to see why so many different perceptions of the eremitic life exist and how ambiguities arise. The English examples support the traditional perception of the contemplative solitary in a hermitage or cell attached to, or not far from, a church or abbey, while the growth in diversity of eremitic practice in France supports the concept of an active, ‘social and sociable’ hermit.<sup>92</sup> These differing views of English and French eremitism do not overlook the sociability of the English hermit or recluse as demonstrated by Henry Mayr-Harting in his study of Wulfric of Haselbury,<sup>93</sup> neither does it mean that enclosed solitaries did not exist in France, but it does serve to illustrate a real difference in the general trends of eremitic practice in both countries.

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<sup>89</sup> Anne-Marie Helvétius, ‘Ermites ou moines: solitude et cénobitisme du Ve au Xe siècle (principalement en Gaule du Nord)’, in Vauchez, *Ermites*, pp. 8-10.

<sup>90</sup> Helvétius, pp. 10-11.

<sup>91</sup> It should be remembered that he was speaking in the context of the monk as a solitary. It was not until the eleventh century that a clear distinction could be made between the communal solitary (the monk) and the single solitary (the hermit or recluse).

<sup>92</sup> Leclercq, ‘L’érémitisme’, p. 38.

<sup>93</sup> Mayr-Harting, ‘Functions of a Twelfth-Century Recluse’, 337-352.

Recognition of this disparity has led to a move away from the original view of the hermit or anchorite as being on the periphery of religious life to one which acknowledges the major role of the hermit in the Church and society. Crucially, this wide variation in practice does strengthen the premise that eremitism is a loose ensemble of specific cases,<sup>94</sup> and that each solitary should be seen as an individual who chose the eremitic life due to his or her own separate set of circumstances.

The use of these labels by historians reflects the changing assessments of hermits over the centuries, but how accurate are they? Do the various divisions and titles previously discussed represent the reality of eremitic life in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, or is this labelling a modern construct, a sociological need for placing everything into neat groupings? Comparison of the modern terminology applied to hermits with that used in medieval texts reveals inconsistencies of understanding between how hermits of all kinds were regarded by their contemporaries and ours. As outlined in the discussion on sources, medieval authors had their own agendas and these were quite different from those of modern historians. Where factual accuracy is paramount today, it was very low on the list of priorities for the hagiographer. Likewise, chroniclers set down the truth as they saw it through the perspective of their own reasons for making their records; letters and treatises might be prejudiced by the beliefs and values of their authors. These sources, however, provide a valuable insight into the attitudes and ideologies of their time – they become the history.

The language of eremitism was the language of the Church and, in particular, of hagiography, and examination of the *Vitae* shows that the vocabulary used in connection with hermits, recluses and anchorites is quite different from that appearing in modern studies. It was more usual for hagiographers to use terms such as *vir Dei* or *sanctus Dei* when referring to these individuals. In the Life of William Firmat the words *vir Dei* is used

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<sup>94</sup> Jean Sainsaulieu, 'Ermites, II. En Occident', in *Dictionnaire d'histoire et de géographie ecclésiastiques*, 15, ed. by Alfred Baudrillart (Paris: Letouzey et Ané, 1963), 766.

eight times and *sanctus vir* five times with *eremita* occurring just once.<sup>95</sup> The hagiographer, Walter, used the above terms throughout his Life of Anastasius, as well as *confessor Dei*,<sup>96</sup> and this familiar pattern of usage can be seen in the anonymous Life of Stephen of Obazine.<sup>97</sup> *Vir venerabilis* was Reginald of Durham's preferred term for the English hermit, Bartholomew of Farne, with an occasional *vir Dei*.<sup>98</sup> Bartholomew was styled monk and anchorite in the heading of the Life, *Incipit liber Vitae Bartolomei, monachi et Farnensis anachoritae*, which may be an editorial addition, while Henry of Coquet, although called *heremita* in the first line of his *Vita*, was then referred to as *vir Dei* five times, *servus Dei* once and other times was downgraded to just *vir*.<sup>99</sup> Godric of Finchale was called both man of God and hermit in the title of his Life, while Wulfric was called a recluse.<sup>100</sup> The terms 'hermit', 'recluse' and 'anchorite' were not absent from these Lives but were mainly used when referring to solitaries whom the holy men met in the course of their journeys or at their chosen settlements. Stephen of Obazine met the *ermite Bertrannus nomine*, who had taken upon himself the 'instruction of souls'.<sup>101</sup> Notably Geoffrey Grossus was one hagiographer who broke the pattern and used a wider range of terms to refer to Bernard of Tiron as *vir sanctus*, *vir Dei* and *famulum Dei* or alternatively *anchoreta* and *miles Christi*.<sup>102</sup>

From this summary of hagiographical terms, which is far from exhaustive, it is clear that this terminology is not that reflected in the vocabulary and classifications of modern studies. This is partly owing to medieval literary style but is also governed by the aims and motivations of those writing about the lives of saintly men and women. It must be remembered that the hagiographical genre embraced the whole body of saints, not just hermits,

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<sup>95</sup> *Vita Firmati*, pp. 334-341. For an illustrative example, references to William Firmat as *vir Dei* can be found on page 336.

<sup>96</sup> *Vita Anastasii*, PL 149: 427-432.

<sup>97</sup> *Vita Stephani*, p. 68, for *vir sanctus* and p. 72, for *vir Dei*.

<sup>98</sup> *Vita Bartholomei*, p. 295.

<sup>99</sup> *De Sancto Henrico heremita*, in *Nova Legenda Anglie*, ed. by Carl Horstmann (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1901), 2, pp. 22-26.

<sup>100</sup> *Vita Godrici*, p. 17; *Vita Wulfrici*, p. 7.

<sup>101</sup> *Vita Stephani*, p. 48.

<sup>102</sup> *Vita Bernardi*, PL 172: 1390 for an example of *vir Dei*.

and authors of eremitic lives were simply following the scholarly trends of their time. Hagiography was also steeped in tradition, using the Lives of the Desert Fathers as models as well as the early Western patristic texts such as Sulpicius Severus' Life of St Martin of Tours, Bede's Life of St Cuthbert and the Lives of Saints recorded by Gregory of Tours. Those medieval authors who were commissioned to record a life for posterity would frequently adopt the same terminology as existing examples of *Vitae* and hagiographical *topoi*, as modern scholarship calls them, which had stood the test of time. Thomas Head has also shown in his study of hagiographical works in the Orléanais that these texts could be used for purposes of propaganda, as in the case of the re-worked Life of Julian, the first bishop of Le Mans, to support a claim over the monastery of St Calais, and how forgery was not considered to be immoral.<sup>103</sup>

All hagiography, whether it concerned hermits or others, was produced to glorify its subjects, and in the case of the religious give prominence to the close personal relationships which these individuals had with God. Terms such as *vir Dei* or *sanctus Dei* held far more resonance than did 'hermit', 'recluse' or 'anchorite', and writers often had higher goals in sight when recording these lives. As *Vitae* were frequently used in the canonisation process, it was essential to enhance the saintly reputations of those concerned by recording actions or miracles, visions and prophecies, anything which could be interpreted as God's word being directed through His chosen servant.<sup>104</sup> Therefore, all *Vitae* sought to promote the virtues of the chosen individual and gave pre-eminence to his or her skills in mediating divine power. Since the Lives of saints were also used as *exempla* for instruction in how to lead virtuous and pious lives, the language and vocabulary used had to reflect this. Geoffrey Grossus told how many attained perfection thanks to the teaching and example of Bernard of Tiron.<sup>105</sup> One of Grossus' favourite images was that of the holy man as a

<sup>103</sup> Head, *Hagiography*, pp. 224-3.

<sup>104</sup> See Chapter 8 for further discussion on the hermit and miracles, visions and prophecies.

<sup>105</sup> *Vita Bernardi*, PL 172: 1411, '....plures ad magnae perfectionis culmen, servi Dei exemplo et institutionibus, pervenerunt'.

soldier of Christ (*miles Christi*).<sup>106</sup> At the time when Bernard was undergoing his novitiate prior to joining the abbey of Saint Cyprian as a monk, Grossus told how Bernard, in the face of the enemy (*contra hostes*) could strengthen the courage of his soldiers, in other words encourage his fellow monks to fight temptation, a quality which Abbot Reynard recognised when inviting him to join his congregation.<sup>107</sup>

Modern perceptions of the medieval hermit are clouded by the numerous literary epithets employed by hagiographers, yet the profusion of these indicates that, unlike today, the correct designations of these ascetics held less relevance for the writers than the virtues these holy men and women demonstrated. Whether they were recluses like Wulfric and Christina of Markyate, or hermits like Henry of Coquet and William Firma or, later, anchorites like Julian of Norwich, was of little consequence. What mattered was their sanctity and, while it is convenient for modern historians to attach rather rigid labels to them, this can conceal the diversity and flexibility which evolved within the eremitic life and distort the true observations of their medieval contemporaries. As Leclercq observed at the Milan conference, the real and authentic hermit rarely conforms to the scheme, or perception, of our own time.

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<sup>106</sup> *Vita Bernardi*, *PL* 172: 1399.

<sup>107</sup> *Vita Bernardi*, *PL* 172: 1375.

## SECTION 2

### Hermit Structures

#### Introduction: Formal and Informal Structures

In literature throughout the Christian era the customary image of the hermit has been that of the solitary figure living in a cave or other austere shelter, existing on a frugal diet and entertaining the occasional visitor, very much following the images of St Jerome, or even John the Baptist. These images of extreme asceticism and the hardships experienced were often placed amidst idyllically peaceful, rural settings, a view derived more from eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Romanticism than from any medieval accounts of the eremitic life.<sup>108</sup> Examination of the individual lives of hermits in the middle ages dispels this traditional view, revealing great diversity in the way they lived: their choice of habitat was often influenced by their geographical location, their relationships with those around them or the chosen path through which they entered the eremitic life. The true ‘solitary’ associated with the eremitic ideal was the exception rather than the rule, for most hermits, recluses or anchorites never lived far from habitation. Sheer necessity in the form of alms, spiritual guidance and even companionship were significant factors in the choice of location, compounded by the difficulties which could be encountered in attempting to establish a hermitage on land without first seeking permission. Both Robert of Knaresborough and Bernard of Tiron experienced problems with their well-meaning patrons over the choice of location for their early hermitages.<sup>109</sup>

It is not just the manner and location of dwelling which determined the eremitical ideal and its implementation in practical terms. There is evidence

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<sup>108</sup> This idyll has continued into modern literature, for example, in the garden hermit of Tom Stoppard’s play *Arcadia*, written in 1993 but partly set in Derbyshire in 1809. This image can be compared with that of Gregory of Tours’ description of the hermit in his garden as well as Bruno of Chartreuse’s praise for his desert wilderness as mentioned at the beginning of Chapter 2.

<sup>109</sup> *Metrical Life*, pp. 52-3 and *Vita Bernardi*, PL 172: 1405-1406. For complete references and a full discussion of the relationships of these hermits with their patrons see Chapter 5.

in the source material that these, in turn, had a bearing on the degree and type of relationship which a hermit had with the Church, the secular authorities and the local community. A hermit inhabiting a cell attached to a monastery or church, for example, was more likely to be following a rule or to fall within the jurisdiction of the local bishop than one who had established himself independently. The circumstances surrounding the inception of a hermitage, however, were more complicated than these examples might suggest, rendering it virtually impossible to recognise clear patterns of location and practice in where and how hermits chose to live. Despite wide variations, and in order to arrive at a more systematic assessment of how hermits organised themselves in England and France, for the purpose of this study they have been divided into two groups: formal and informal structures. Formal structures were those which were more typically communal and were therefore regulated, while informal structures inclined more towards loose networks of individuals or small groups, which were largely unregulated in the sense that they did not acknowledge an officially recognised rule. Geoffrey of Chalard, for example, when invited to meet with Abbot Hugh of Cluny, refused because he knew the Abbot would try to persuade him to become a monk,<sup>110</sup> while the followers of Vitalis lived according to their own informal arrangements before adopting a formal structure with the establishment of Savigny. Three criteria have been used in the assessment of these structures: the interaction of hermits with each other, their connections with the Church community and their relationship with secular society, each forming the central theme of the next three chapters.

Categorising hermit structures into formal and informal is not without its difficulties, particularly where these two eremitic forms overlap. In France most of the monastic orders which evolved in the eleventh and twelfth centuries began as informal networks of hermits. As these developed and increased in size, the pressures to organise into regulated groups were huge, resulting in a myriad of new orders - Fontevraudians, Savigniacs,

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<sup>110</sup> *Vie de Geoffroy du Chalard*, in *Saints Ermites en Limousin au XIIe Siècle*, ed. by Michel Aubrun (Turnhout: Brepols, 2009), p. 61.

Premonstratensians, Tironians, Carthusians and Grandmontines - a consequence which Génicot described as 'the slide into cenobitism'.<sup>111</sup> Thus the informal group or network could very swiftly evolve into a more formalised structure, and the advantages in this for ecclesiastical authorities are clear. By comparison, the pressures placed on English hermits to institutionalise were more subtle. Informal structures were able to survive with little apparent interference from the authorities, although there is evidence that in some instances, through a process of gradual manipulation, abbeys or bishops could slowly win the allegiance and thus the control of a local hermit. Both Godric of Finchale and Bartholomew of Farne were targeted by this strategy.<sup>112</sup> A further example of the subtle transformation from informal to formal can be seen in the role of patrons. Hermitages, once established, frequently came into the gift of ecclesiastical or lay lords, usually the owner of the land on which the cell was sited. The benefactor might exercise some control over the individual or group dwelling, thereby making demands on the incumbent's time in return for protection and alms. Alternatively, hermitages could evolve into priories and in this way be swept into the regulated and stable world of the institutionalised Church. Individual hermits, therefore, despite their original personal goals and intentions, could find their chosen eremitic paths transformed according to their interaction with each other, the Church authorities and the wider society.

A few hermits were able to maintain a degree of independence - which, at times, tested the patience of religious authorities - but which was usually condoned once an individual had proved to be steadfast in the Christian faith and of sound morality. Robert of Arbrissel, severely rebuked by Bishop Marbod of Rennes for his nonconformity, was later allowed the liberty to traverse the countryside, preaching as he went. Although content to accept the formality of a communal life for his followers, he was less

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<sup>111</sup> See Chapter 4 for further discussion on this.

<sup>112</sup> Dominic Alexander, 'Hermits, hagiography and popular culture: a comparative study of Durham Cathedral Priory's hermits in the twelfth century' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of London, 2000), p. 19; Tudor, 'St Godric', pp. 204-5.

inclined to adopt it for himself. Eremitic leaders such as Bernard of Tiron and Vitalis of Savigny similarly pursued careers beyond the governance and administration of their monastic foundations. Pluralist lives such as these further demonstrate the complexity of distinguishing between formal and informal structures and suggests a degree of flexibility of movement from one form to the other. Some hermit leaders were keen to embrace formality. Stephen of Obazine and Pons de Léras eagerly campaigned for their own nascent houses to join religious orders which were already well established, welcomed the concept of regulation and remained content with the enclosed life.<sup>113</sup> All these examples represent different interpretations of eremitism which were able to exist side by side, yet still integrate with each other. While the sources corroborate this diversity of practice, they rarely emphasise the traditional image of the hermit as presented at the beginning of the chapter – the independent solitary, a remote figure having little or no communication with anyone. That remained the ideal; the reality comprised men and women who aspired to an austere, non-materialistic world of pious living dedicated to the service of God and being encompassed by a wider society which created a niche for them within accepted recognised conventions.

The division into formal and informal structures, although a convenient tool for this discussion, can oversimplify a much more intricate picture. During the eleventh and twelfth centuries it was still possible to exercise a degree of choice regarding religious observance, although this became increasingly monitored and controlled as the twelfth century progressed. A proliferation of heretical groups, wandering preachers and devout lay persons created unease among religious authorities who responded with measures to curb innovation. A wide variety of individuals and groups came under scrutiny and were finally condemned as heretical during the period under examination here. The challenge posed to the authorities by the Cathar and Waldensian heresies has been well documented and debated, as also have

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<sup>113</sup> *Vita Stephani*, p. 48; Beverly M. Kienzle, 'The Tract on the Conversion of Pons of Léras and the True Account of the Beginning of the Monastery of Silvanès', *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 30 (1995), 239.

the careers of individual wandering preachers such as Henry of Le Mans and Peter of Bruis, whose activities caused grave concern to the renowned spiritual leaders Bernard of Clairvaux and Peter the Venerable.<sup>114</sup> Of equal concern were movements generated by the growth of popular piety among the laity, giving rise, during the latter part of this period, to the Beguines, Beghards and the Movement of the Free Spirit. Often evolving from the lower levels of society and outside ecclesiastical control, these too were censured.<sup>115</sup> Hence the pressure for individuals or small eremitic groups to formalise their practices and either join an existing order or found a new one, as in France, or place themselves under the supervision of their local bishop or abbey, as in England. In that way, many informal groups were forced to become, or to accept the supervision of, formal institutions. This trend suggests that most hermits in some way lived according to a rule, or at least came to do so at some stage in their lives. It was their choice of rule, how that selection was made and interpreted, which helps to determine within which type of eremitic structure individuals or groups lived.

The range of rules mirrored the diverse interpretations of the eremitic life and reflected the two broadly defined structures outlined above. Some hermit communities opting for the formality of the coenobitic enclosure, whether voluntarily or reluctantly, wished to adopt an existing rule proven by its acceptance and durability; others took a pre-existing rule and adapted it to meet their own specific requirements. In either case, the choice of rule was often problematic. Since the objective was always to seek the strictest and most austere mode of living, or at least this is the message disseminated by the hagiographers, existing rules were often rejected as being too lenient or worldly. Conversely, ascetic communities which nursed a desire to affiliate with one of the larger orders might find their request declined. Established religious houses, notably the Cluniacs and the Cistercians, harboured suspicions of extreme asceticism, fearing it would prove

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<sup>114</sup> Robert I. Moore, *The Origins of European Dissent* (London: Allen Lane, 1977) and Lambert, *Medieval Heresy*, both offer comprehensive general surveys of these and other heresies of the period.

<sup>115</sup> Marguerite Porete, a Beguine and mystic, was burned at the stake in Paris in 1310 for her heresy.

unsettling for the incumbent monks and incompatible with their increasingly liturgical regimes. Whether by choice or through circumstance, hermit leaders were invariably compelled to devise their own rules and customs in order to bring organisation and structure to their growing numbers of followers. This responsibility was frequently devolved to a colleague or even taken on by a disciple after the death of the founder, as in the case of Robert of Arbrissel, who left the management of Fontevraud in the hands of Petronilla of Chemillé, who had devised the rule on Robert's behalf. Many legislators used a modified form of the Benedictine Rule as a basis for their organisation, as at Fontevraud, Tiron, Chaise-Dieu and Étival-en-Charnie in France and as adopted by the small eremitic groups at Jarrow, Wearmouth, Whitby and Christina and her sisters at Markyate in England. With its resilience proven by its longevity coupled with its adaptability in meeting different local conditions, the Rule of Benedict served as a sound blueprint for traditionalists and reformers alike. Of equal appeal were the customs of the Augustinian canons, whose ideals of poverty and the *vita apostolica* closely resembled those of the hermits. Hérival, Gâstines, Neufmoustier in France and Nostell and Llanthony in England and Wales are a few examples of small eremitic groups which chose this path.<sup>116</sup> For a few, however, no contemporary rule could be found that was deemed suitable for their strict regimes and they decided to establish their own customs. La Grande Chartreuse was one example which successfully combined the solitude of the eremitic life with the formality of the communal structure, while the Grandmontines rejected all other rules as 'offshoots and not the root of the religious life', which should be the Gospel alone.<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> For an overview of the adoption of different rules see Henrietta Leyser, *Hermits*, chapter 9. On the Augustinian canons see Charles Dereine, *Les chanoines réguliers au diocèse de Liège avant saint Norbert*, Académie royale de Belgique: Classe des lettres et des sciences morale et politiques, Mémoires in-8°, sér 2, 47.1 (Brussels, 1952); L. Milis, 'Ermites et chanoines réguliers au XIIe siècle', *Cahiers de civilisation médiévale* 22 (1979), 39-80. For England see John C. Dickinson, *The Origins of the Austin Canons and their introduction into England*, (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1950) and Jane Herbert, 'The transformation of hermitages into Augustinian Priories in twelfth-century England', in Shiels, *Monks, Hermits and the Ascetic Tradition*, pp. 131-145.

<sup>117</sup> 'Regula Venerabilis viri Stephani Murensis', in *Scriptores Ordinis Grandimontensis* ed. by Jean Becquet, *CCCM* 8 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1968), p. 66.

As eremitic groups in France succumbed to the process of institutionalisation and formalism, this process was not so widely replicated in England.<sup>118</sup> Although still concerned for asceticism and austerity, English hermits were able to establish themselves alongside or even within existing conventional religious circles. The search for suitable forms of regulation appears to have been less problematic, and English hermits did not find themselves with the burdensome task of either seeking the adoption of an existing rule or of writing their own. Vast numbers of followers determined to forsake all worldly goods to live with the holy men did not materialise in the woods and by-ways of England and so the need for regulations and customs characteristic of larger religious communities did not arise. English hermits did have visitors and, we are told, they came in large numbers, but the reasons and intentions of these visits were dissimilar from the needs of those who gathered in the forests of France. In England, therefore, hermits were able to continue living in loose networks or within informal structures. That does not mean there was a complete absence of regulation. For those whose cells were attached to a monastery or situated on its estate, it was likely that they would live according to that monastery's rule, particularly in keeping the liturgical hours. Those who had transferred from the coenobitic to the eremitic life would continue to follow an adapted version of the rule of their order. There were others who lived in cells attached to a parish church, the cells having either windows or communicating doors which allowed hermits to hear the services, as in the case of Wulfric of Haselbury. Wulfric is an example of a free and independent hermit, yet he still enjoyed close relationships with those monastic institutions which were nearby: the Cluniac abbey of Montacute as well as the Cistercian Ford Abbey.

Given that there was pressure from the ecclesiastical authorities on hermits to lead stable lives under some form of regulation, whether within a community or as an adjunct to one, it is surprising that, in order to ensure stability, more rules were not written specifically for the individual solitary

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<sup>118</sup> The one exception being the Gilbertines.

or small group of companions. Only the ninth-century *Regula solitariorum* composed by Grimlaic of Metz<sup>119</sup> is known to have been extant at the beginning of the period under discussion, but there is no way of knowing whether any hermits of the eleventh to thirteenth centuries lived by this rule, or indeed if any had access to it. The primitive rules of the Desert Fathers were well known at this time – hagiographers frequently refer to them - but this does not mean that individual hermits had consciously chosen to live as one of them or had access to and read their respective rules.<sup>120</sup> Most of the rules emanating from the Thebaid were written to promote the coenobitic path rather than the solitary one. There is no way of eliciting the lifestyle of any hermit unless fortuitously the author of a *Vita*, letter or other document actually tells us.<sup>121</sup>

It was not until the twelfth century that new rules began to appear offering practical guidance to hermits and recluses on how they should conduct themselves in their daily lives, praising the merits of their chosen course but also warning of the dangers they could encounter. The number of these rules is remarkably small; only three are known and two of these were written for specific people (both small communities of women) rather than for followers of the eremitic life generally. There is also the letter which Goscelin of Saint Bertin composed circa 1080 offering spiritual guidance to the recluse Eve, but this is not generally regarded as a rule. It was a personal document and not intended for wider circulation. The *Regula reclusorum*, more popularly known as the Dublin Rule, does seem to have aimed at a wider audience but for male communities only.<sup>122</sup> Aelred of

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<sup>119</sup> Grimlaic, *Regula solitariorum*, *PL* 103: 577-664.

<sup>120</sup> Geoffrey Grossus referred to the lives of many of the Fathers, for example Paul of Thebes and Saint Anthony, in his *Vita Bernardi*, *PL* 172: 1368. This was more likely the adoption of hagiographical *topoi* and is not evidence that Bernard had read these texts himself or that he was consciously trying to emulate the lives of these Fathers.

<sup>121</sup> The one exception is both geographically and in time outside the scope of this study. Romuald, Peter Damian tells us, was ‘nourished by reading the *vitae* of the desert fathers’, evidence that he was aware of them and their way of life but not proof that he purposefully emulated them. Romuald was of aristocratic background, from the Onesti dukes of Ravenna, and with his earlier monastic training had probably been introduced to these works for his own enlightenment and edification, but it is unlikely that this was common among the majority of hermits, who would have been illiterate.

<sup>122</sup> *Regula reclusorum Angliae et quaestiones tres de vita solitaria*, saec. XIII-XIV, ed. by Livarius Olinger, *Antonianum* 9 (1934), 37-84 and 243-265, and *Regulae tres reclusorum et*

Rievaulx produced a work of guidance, between 1160 and 1162, for his sister and her companions entitled *De institutione inclusarum*, which takes the form of a letter and, while intended as a private communication, could have been used by others in later periods given the reputation and renown of its author. While there is no evidence to link Aelred's work precisely with any other solitary or group of solitaries, it was used extensively by the author of the *Ancrene Wisse*. The date of original composition for this work is not known. It could have been as early as sometime after 1215 but current research suggests it is more likely to have been written in the later 1220s.<sup>123</sup> This guide for anchoresses, like Aelred's letter, was similarly composed for a specific group of women, thought to be three in number, but which grew to twenty according to a later addition in Corpus 402.<sup>124</sup> As the numbers of women increased and circumstances changed, modifications were made first by its original author and subsequently by others and it also reached out to 'a wider audience of religious'.<sup>125</sup>

There is evidence to suggest that this work did acquire wider popular appeal and appeared in 'various incarnations'<sup>126</sup> throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and was translated into French very soon after the original version was composed.<sup>127</sup> It seems that regulation was a much more significant requirement for women wishing to lead the eremitic life, as the informal structures, which might be acceptable for male hermits, would bring condemnation on females. The early years following Christina of Markyate's flight from her parental home are testimony to this, as are the

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*eremitarum Angliae, saec. XIII-XIV*, ed. by Livarius Oliger, *Antonianum* 3 (1928), 150-190 and 299-320.

<sup>123</sup> Millett, *Ancrene Wisse: Guide for Anchoresses*, p. xi, and 'The Origins of *Ancrene Wisse*', p. 206.

<sup>124</sup> Millett, *Ancrene Wisse: Guide for Anchoresses*, pp. xiv-xv.

<sup>125</sup> Millett, *Ancrene Wisse: Guide for Anchoresses*, pp. xlvi.

<sup>126</sup> Anne Savage and Nicholas Watson, *Anchoritic Spirituality: Ancrene Wisse and Associated Works* (New York: Paulist Press, 1991), p. 15.

<sup>127</sup> Dobson, *Origins*, pp. 299-311. For a discussion of the rules and their merits as primary sources, see Chapter 1. It is perhaps also significant that these three originated from Ireland and England. There does not appear to have been any attempt to compose such a rule on the continent. Of course, it is impossible to know whether there were any other rules which have not survived over time.

recriminations thrown at Robert of Arbrissel for encouraging young women to follow him into the ‘wilderness’ of the forest of Craon.<sup>128</sup>

Given the increase in the numbers of both sexes opting for the eremitic life during the eleventh and twelfth centuries, it might be expected to find more evidence of formal guidance being offered; but instead few rules were written, and these were usually initially produced by those concerned for the spiritual welfare of relatives or close friends and were probably not widely read by the larger eremitic community the exception being the *Ancrene Wisse*, where there is evidence of wider access, and which is part of a larger collection of anchoritic writings. Anne Savage suggests that at least twelve copies existed within the first twenty years of its original composition but they were all in the hands of anchoresses within the close network around Wigmore which implies that, initially, its appeal was local.<sup>129</sup> It is possible that the other rules mentioned here were also read or at least known by other hermits but the sources do not provide any evidence of this. Despite the lack of written rules for guidance, most hermits had access to support systems, whether for physical necessities or spiritual direction, through association with each other and connections with members of their local churches and abbeys. This in many ways negated the need for written direction while, as the authors of the *Vitae* frequently point out, the lives of the Apostles and desert fathers provided hermits with unparalleled examples as spiritual mentors.

Interpretations of the eremitic life could, then, take many different forms and, in the early years at least hermits enjoyed a certain amount of freedom in how they chose to structure themselves and live their lives. With success and the growing popularity of eremitism, controls and limitations were gradually introduced, whether voluntarily adopted as a natural progression in the development of a small community or imposed externally by those who felt threatened by new forces beyond their influence. For those seeking

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<sup>128</sup> Marbod of Rennes was particularly scathing about Robert’s association with women, see *Epistolae*, PL 171: 1480-6.

<sup>129</sup> Savage, *Anchoritic Spirituality*, p. 14.

the eremitic ideal it became increasingly difficult to make free choices or live independently. Even if a solitary could successfully free him or herself from all temporal ties, it was less likely that he or she could avoid the attentions of local ecclesiastical powers. It would appear also that far from living in isolation, most hermits were not averse to taking advantage of support networks which they customarily offered to each other.



## Chapter 3

### Hermit Networks

Self-sufficiency was intrinsic to the eremitic life, and essential if hermits were to survive the harsh conditions and strict regimes to which they willingly subjected themselves. Hagiographers delighted in informing their readers of the many deprivations endured by their subjects. The depiction of the autonomous, resilient individual, rejecting all earthly pleasures in order to dedicate his, or her, life to God, was perpetuated through such imagery. Yet, the same authors also provide an alternative interpretation of the eremitic life, which reveals that hermits were rarely alone, and never without support systems. This support could take many forms and was bestowed in countless ways by benefactors, by neighbouring settlements providing casual alms, by nearby ecclesiastical institutions concerning themselves with the spiritual as well as physical welfare of the hermit, or by fellow hermits.<sup>130</sup> Even if individuals began their eremitic lives with high ideals of devotion to God, they soon became aware of the necessity to service basic needs and to take measures to avoid sliding into temptation and falling prey to the desires of the flesh.<sup>131</sup> Hermits were extremely alert to these dangers<sup>132</sup> and found ways of encouraging each other at times of vulnerability. Companionship was not an alien concept to those who chose the life of the solitary. They were able to reconcile the metaphorical isolation of the wilderness with the practical necessity of living in sizeable groups or with only one or two companions. Although groups might be widely dispersed, or colleagues might live in separate cells, the evidence suggests that in reality hermits were never far from aid or support should it be needed.<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> All of these will be discussed in the following chapters.

<sup>131</sup> *Vita Firmati*, p. 335.

<sup>132</sup> *Vita Firmati*, p. 335 provides an example showing how the hermit, William Firmat, was tempted by the monkey-devil sitting on a chest of money.

<sup>133</sup> Derwas J. Chitty, *The Desert a City: An introduction to the study of Egyptian and Palestinian monasticism under the Christian Empire* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1966, reprinted 1999), chapter II, draws a parallel with the desert hermits of Egypt, Palestine and Syria from the mid-third to sixth centuries.

Hermit networks can be identified in both England and France from the early eleventh century onwards,<sup>134</sup> though it is unlikely that the extant source material represents the sum total of hermit networks which existed. There may have been many more than those acknowledged and written about by the chroniclers and hagiographers of the day; it is impossible to know. They varied in size and structure, but the numbers of hermits linked to any particular group cannot be measured with precision. Authors were traditionally vague when assessing the numbers of those residing in individual eremitic units, employing terms such as 'multitudes' or 'vast crowds' to indicate the popularity of the ascetic life of the forest.<sup>135</sup> It is also impossible to know whether there were hermit groups other than those which were acknowledged by the chroniclers and hagiographers of the day. It is less likely that the extant source material represents the sum total of hermit networks which did exist than that it represents those which authors chose to write about and whose *Vitae* have survived into modern times.

Eremitic activity undoubtedly increased during the eleventh and twelfth centuries in both France and England, although any evaluation of that growth is likely to be distorted by the escalation in the creation of hagiographical writings during the same period. It was this period in particular which saw an increase in the production of *Vitae* for saints who had lived centuries earlier.<sup>136</sup> The growth of interest in local cults and in pilgrimages to the shrines of past saints encouraged hagiographers to record the lives and legends of these holy men and women and creates the impression of a wider attraction for the saints of the past. Even so, it is still possible to detect a growth of hermit communities from the increase in references to them in the texts, and to some extent from the dates of the foundations which they established. It is from these foundations, whether a

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<sup>134</sup> Networks of the kind described here may well have existed in both countries prior to the eleventh century but the evidence for this is scant.

<sup>135</sup> *Vita Bernardi*, PL 172: 1380, '...florebant multitudine eremitarum...'; *Vita Stephani*, p. 58, 'Cum autem locis ille et advenientium et ibi commandentium multidune repleretur...'; Orderic Vitalis, *Ecclesiastical History*, Book VIII, tells of a '...multitudine fidelium...'.

<sup>136</sup> For example, Avitus and others whose Lives were not written down until the eleventh or twelfth centuries.

humble hermitage or a small monastery, that geographical patterns of eremitic activity as well as preferences for location become apparent. Despite inherent problems in correctly identifying a site and accurately locating its position, plotting hermitages, or hermit activity, on a map does reveal one of the major differences between French and English networks. In France, the pattern of hermit activity shows a tendency towards clustering where solitaries and/or small groups were situated close together in the same locality, while in England, hermit cells appear to be more arbitrarily scattered, with individual solitaries distributed widely and more evenly throughout the country. A further characteristic discernible in some parts of France is the clustering of hermitages in the hinterlands of larger urban settlements, something which is not seen in England until the later thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.<sup>137</sup> One explanation for this difference may be the formal as opposed to the informal structures discussed in the introduction to section three above. For example, in France, where hermits tended to attract large followings of disciples into the forests, such as the north-west forests of Craon and Fougères in Brittany and Mayenne and Charnie in Maine, it led to the establishment of a number of cells in close proximity in order that they might more easily be managed and catered for by members of their own community.<sup>138</sup> This, in turn, created the familiar pattern of larger, close-knit, informal communities comparable to the Egyptian Thebaid and Palestinian cells of the fourth and fifth centuries.<sup>139</sup> In England, by contrast, no such permanent gathering of followers accumulated around the solitary's cell, and, although hermits were visited frequently, they never became the hub of a large community but continued to live alone.

Networks existed in England based on connections among solitaries - or in some cases two or three people living together - whose means of communication was frequently via a third party, sometimes a lay servant, or by messages transmitted through passing travellers. Dr. Jones, in his

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<sup>137</sup> Warren, *Anchorites*, p. 38, shows a peak of urban eremitism in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

<sup>138</sup> The Lives of Bernard of Tiron and Vitalis of Savigny both confirm this pattern and are discussed in more detail below.

<sup>139</sup> Chitty, pp. 29-31, and Marilyn Dunn, *The emergence of monasticism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), pp. 13-15.

ongoing revision of Clay's gazetteer of English hermitages, has identified a number of hermitages/anchorholds alongside rivers and Roman roads in the counties of Hertfordshire, Bedfordshire and Huntingdonshire and explains the logistics of this by the availability of communication routes enabling hermits to interact with each other and the wider society. Markyate and other sites associated with Christina and her eremitic companions were located within this geographical region, which arguably suggests the existence of a hermit support network.<sup>140</sup> Indeed, Christina's story shows clear evidence of a network of hermits working together to protect her.<sup>141</sup> Her Life offers other hints of interaction among hermits, as when Edwin, returning to Huntingdon from Canterbury, stopped at a number of anchorages on his way.<sup>142</sup> Many English hermitages were found close to highways or sited at strategic junctions such as gate-houses or crossroads. Loretta of Hackington lived close to the highway linking Canterbury with London and was well placed to receive and pass on messages. The wider implications of these strategic sites will be considered in a later chapter, but the fact that so many cells were located within easy access to public highways suggests that their incumbents recognised their significance as a means of communication with each other as well as wider society.

A map showing sites of eremitic activity in England reveals a random scattering of cells throughout the country,<sup>143</sup> extending from the remote regions of the Farne Islands to the wild terrain of the Yorkshire dales and south to the rolling hills of Somerset. Clay places hermitages and anchorite enclosures in all kinds of environments from forests and hillsides, islands and fens to highways and bridges, but, as in France, the vast majority were within relatively easy access of some form of habitation, a village, an abbey or a parish church, which ensured ease in servicing spiritual and physical needs. Cells in England were either attached to church buildings or placed within their grounds, locations which were both accessible to the public and

<sup>140</sup> Eddie Jones, 'Christina of Markyate and the Hermits and Anchorites of England', in *Christina of Markyate: A twelfth-century holy woman* ed. by Samuel Fanous and Henrietta Leyser, (London: Routledge, 2005), p. 231.

<sup>141</sup> Talbot, *Christina*, pp. 80-6.

<sup>142</sup> Talbot, *Christina*, pp. 84-6.

<sup>143</sup> See Map I, Appendix II.

central to village life. As already mentioned, Wulfric of Haselbury's cell adjoined the local parish church with an interconnecting door to allow access. Wulfric was a true solitary in that he lived alone, but he did not deny himself the companionship of others. He often communicated through third parties, employing young local boys for this purpose. On one occasion Wulfric sent his boy, *pueruum suum*, to summon the woman Matilda to him. Having questioned her on her origins and past life, he then told her that she would spend fifteen years as an anchorite at Wareham after which she would die,<sup>144</sup> all of which came to pass. John of Ford's Life of Wulfric records incidents which reveal Wulfric's concern and support for six other *anachoretae/inclusae* living in Somerset and Dorset.<sup>145</sup> With one exception, Odolina of Crewkerne, they were not within the immediate vicinity of Haselbury, but John of Ford, in choosing to emphasise Wulfric's powers of prophecy and foresight, at the same time portrays Wulfric as a concerned 'brother', taking upon himself the responsibility for the physical and spiritual welfare of other *reclusae (suae sorores)* in his area.

Although beyond the scope of this study, it is worth noting that over time and certainly by the end of the thirteenth century, eremitism in England became an increasingly urban phenomenon, with anchorages and hermit cells established within the walls of towns and cities or on the outskirts. Clay examines many examples of eremitic living in urban areas from the thirteenth century onwards, especially in London, where all the gates of the city wall served as cells, and cites a long list of other towns and cities throughout the county which could boast at least two hermits in the late thirteenth century.<sup>146</sup> Warren's study of anchorites in England confirms this trend, while Jones's smaller study of anchorites in Oxfordshire, which similarly reflects an attraction to towns, also draws largely on examples from this later period.<sup>147</sup> The Book of Margery Kempe refers to at least eight hermits or anchorites living within the city of Norwich in the early

<sup>144</sup> *Vita Wulfrici*, pp. 81-2.

<sup>145</sup> *Vita Wulfrici*, p. 81, '... de Matilda inclusa...'; '... inclusa de Waram, *Cristina nomine...*'; 'Johannes anachoreta de Winterburnia...'; p. 83, '... Geretrudis...'; p. 90, '... Odolina, *professioni anachoretiae...*'; p. 111, '... inclusa de Niwentona, *Aldida nomine...*'.

<sup>146</sup> Clay, *Hermits and Anchorites*, pp. 66-72.

<sup>147</sup> Jones, 'Hermits and Anchorites of Oxfordshire', pp. 51-77; Warren, *Anchorites*, p. 38.

fifteenth century. This development towards an urban eremitism coincided with the peak in recorded numbers of hermits, anchorites and recluses which, in turn, led to competition for patrons and alms and could have been one reason for the move to towns and cities. Despite this trend towards the urbanisation of the ascetic life, the rural and independent nature of eremitism in England continued to prosper alongside with individuals or small groups of two or three living together just as in earlier centuries. The problematic crowds which gathered in the vast forests of north west France were totally absent.

In France, there is little evidence of a trend towards urban eremitism, largely because the informal groups of solitaries and their disciples living in rural areas were within a relatively short space of time integrated into formal monastic institutions, one of many ways in which the hermit networks in France were quite different from those in England. French hagiographers emphasised the remoteness of forests and mountainous regions as preferred locations for the construction of cells because this complied with their images of the metaphorical *eremus*. In their desire to withdraw from the world, hermits did, no doubt, wish to seek seclusion away from the temporal distractions of town and city, but in reality, as in England, it was rare for a hermit's cell to be more than a few days' distant from an urban settlement.<sup>148</sup> Where French networks were at variance with their English counterparts was in their tendency to form small clusters in the hinterland of cities and towns. This characteristic pattern becomes more obvious when sites of eremitic activity are plotted on a map.<sup>149</sup> The small conurbation of Limoges formed a nucleus around which a network of half a dozen hermitages was established, while Orléans was the focus of another area of extensive eremitic activity. To the north, Laon was the centre of another smaller gathering/cluster of hermit cells, as well as being home to the eremitic foundation of Prémontré while a considerable number of eremitic communities straddled the line of the French/Imperial border stretching

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<sup>148</sup> A characteristic very similar to the settlement patterns of third and fourth-century desert hermits of Egypt and Palestine, discussed in greater detail below.

<sup>149</sup> See Map II, Appendix II.

from Flanders in the North to the southern regions of imperial Burgundy. Flemish eremitism was extremely dynamic, and hermitages were established in the environs of Arras, Cambrai and Tournai. Following the Imperial border to the east, a small cluster of hermitages emerged close to Toul within the province of Champagne, while further south, eremitic settlements appeared around Langres and Autun, a region more renowned for the great Burgundian abbeys of Cluny and Citeaux. Yet more groups lay across the border within Imperial Burgundy, concentrated close to the cities of Besançon and, further to the south, Grenoble. All of these eremitic communities were small compared with the one centred upon the vast forested regions of north-west France. By far the largest network in France, it formed an arc of eremitic activity which curved from the Breton/Norman coast as far south as Tours and northern Poitou, a huge area incorporating the forests which stretched across the borders of Brittany, Normandy, Anjou, Maine Touraine and Poitou and which were said to be wild and desolate, providing a natural *eremus* for the pursuit of perfection.

This most renowned of networks was in evidence towards the end of the eleventh century and, if its territorial area was extensive, its reputation was even greater. At the peak of its activity (c. 1090 – 1120) it attracted the attention of popes, nobles and bishops and became a focus for the sick and needy. Its fame and reputation are borne out by the numerous references found in chronicles and other works praising the accomplishments of its leading personalities.<sup>150</sup> The charisma of those who emerged as the driving force behind eremitism in north-west France and the vast numbers of disciples which gathered there to emulate them – a phenomenon not witnessed on this scale anywhere else at that time – played a definitive role in the promotion of alternative and innovative religious practices. There is no doubt that most writers felt the need to record the achievements of these individuals in reaction to the popularity and innovation of the new monastic

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<sup>150</sup> For example, William of Newburgh, *Historia rerum Anglicarum*, in *Chronicles of the Reigns of Stephen, Henry II and Richard I*, Vol.1, ed. by Richard Howlett, RS 82 (London, 1886); Orderic Vitalis, *Ecclesiastical History*, Bk 8; Robert of Torigny, *Chronicle*, in *Chronicles of the Reigns of Stephen, Henry II and Richard I*, Vol.4, ed. by R. Howlett RS 82 (London: Longman and Co, 1889).

orders which many of them established. The same sources also record the formation and activities of other, smaller groups, seemingly well recognised by their contemporaries but which did not continue to enjoy such high acclaim. Consequently, modern perceptions of eremitism in France of the late eleventh/early twelfth centuries have become overshadowed by the actions of three exceptional, but atypical, hermits – Robert of Arbrissel, Bernard of Tiron and Vitalis of Savigny - an approach which carries the danger of preventing a realistic analysis of the broader eremitic movement.<sup>151</sup>

Modern historians have taken the lead from their medieval predecessors in ensuring that the rapid expansion of eremitism in north-west France has been assessed primarily through the deeds of the above-mentioned leaders. Beginning with Pavillon's *Vie du bien-heureux Robert d'Arbrissel* in the sixteenth century and continuing through to the twentieth century with the works of von Walter, Cahours, Raison and Niderst, Bienvenue and most recently with extensive studies by Dalarun, Venarde, Van Moolenbroek and Beck, scholarship has interpreted French eremitism mostly through the careers of these three individuals.<sup>152</sup> That each was founder of a new religious order, was influential in contemporary religious and political debates, and subsequently was the subject of a lengthy and detailed *Vita*, has undoubtedly determined their place in history. Robert, Vitalis and Bernard formed a powerful hegemony, revered and accepted by those who chose to follow them; but they were not representative of the average hermit and focusing on them alone can present a rather distorted view of eremitic development and overshadow the activities and achievements of others of their kind, since their *Vitae* also reveal structures and relationships which

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<sup>151</sup> Modern research has concentrated largely on the three key characters connected with this eremitic region and their subsequent monastic foundations, Robert of Arbrissel, (Fontevraud), Bernard of Tiron and Vitalis of Savigny, which misrepresents the overall pattern of eremitic activity in France. The only exceptions are Henrietta Leyser, and the collection of papers published by La Mendola, *L'Eremitismo* in 1965.

<sup>152</sup> All three individuals have received extensive study over the last decade. For the most comprehensive of each see Beck, *Saint Bernard*, Jaap Van Moolenbroek, *Vital l'ermite, prédateur itinérant, fondateur de l'abbaye normande de Savigny*, trans. by Anne-Marie Nambot (Assen & Maastricht: Van Gorcum, 1990) and Dalarun, *Robert of Arbrissel: sex, sin and salvation*.

were far more complex and interdependent than might be suggested by the careers of these three magnetic personalities.

Thriving eremitic communities were already well established in the north-west provinces of France<sup>153</sup> long before Robert, Vitalis and Bernard established their own cells, confirming that the appeal of the ascetic life in France during the eleventh century was more than an impulsive reaction to the appearance of these particular hermits. Between 1050 and 1080 William Firmat had established three hermitages, the first at Sept-Frères near Vire, where he lived with his mother. On her death he moved to the forest of Concise, near Laval, to escape the growing numbers of visitors from Tours, and eventually on his return from his travels to the Holy Land he chose as his final settlement Mantilly in Passais.<sup>154</sup> Stephen Fougères, the hagiographer of William Firmat, records that he also lived at Dourdain near Vitré, Fontaine-Gérhard and Savigny, but there is no clear evidence that he was responsible for establishing new hermitages at these sites.<sup>155</sup> Nor does the *Vita* reveal that he built his own living quarters there, although the possibility exists, given his peripatetic nature and his numerous flights to avoid the crowds. It would also appear that far from being the first of the 'new' hermits in this region, Firmat was one of many 'firsts'.<sup>156</sup> Raison and Niderst cite the hermitages of l'Habit (established by Aubert in the forest of Glaine) and Bartholomew (in the forest of Chailland) in Lower Maine as forming, with Firmat's various cells, including that of Fontaine-Gérhard, the

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<sup>153</sup> Beck, *Saint Bernard*, p. 236, cites a number of examples.

<sup>154</sup> *Vita Firmati*, p. 336.

<sup>155</sup> Equally, there is no evidence to the contrary. If he dwelt at these places at all, then it is likely that he would have erected some form of shelter, however basic, which, as traditionally happened, would have been taken over by other ascetics in later years. Moolenbroek, *Vital l'ermite*, p. 213, is of the opinion that the canons of Mortain, who had an interest in the production of Firmat's *Vita*, may have put pressure on his hagiographer, Stephen Fougères, to link his subject with as many 'holy' sites as possible and that Firmat may not have lived at Fontaine-Gérhard at all.

<sup>156</sup> A number of historians, including Jean-Marc Bienvenu, *L'étonnant fondateur de Fontevraud, Robert d'Arbrissel* (Paris: Nouvelles Éditions Latines, 1981) pp. 28 and 38, and Dalarun, *Robert d'Arbrissel*, p. 38, have credited William Firmat as the first representative of the eremitic revival in the region. Moolenbroek, *Vital l'ermite*, p. 213, disagrees, claiming that one individual who confined himself to the borders of Brittany and Normandy could not be responsible for a 'movement' which stretched as far as the Haut-Poitou and beyond.

foremost of numerous disseminated hermitages in that area.<sup>157</sup> A neighbouring region, the Îles de Chaussey, off the coast of the Cotentin peninsula, became an attractive wilderness for the monk Drogo in 1045, a tradition continued by Anastasius and his colleague Robert, who both withdrew to the nearby isle of Tomburlaine in the bay of Mont-St-Michel during the later decades of the eleventh century.<sup>158</sup> It was during the 1080s that Peter de l'Etoile established a number of hermitages<sup>159</sup> at Fontaine-Gombaud before founding the abbey of Fontgombault in 1091,<sup>160</sup> confirming that Peter, who later became a guide and companion to Bernard of Tiron, was well established by the time Vitalis arrived there in 1096.<sup>161</sup> Geoffrey Grossus placed ‘an old inhabitant of the desert and a man of experience’ in the forests of Glaine and therefore resident long before Bernard’s arrival, corroborating evidence that solitaries had long favoured the area for their retreats for a prolonged period of time. It is clear, therefore, that Robert, Vitalis and Bernard were not the instigators of this eleventh-century eremitic revival but were participants in an already well established network.

In its primitive stages this network epitomised the unregulated, informal structure of eremitic communities, characterised by independent cells and distributed over a wide area, with hermits enjoying a certain level of autonomy in the choices they made in their living arrangements, companions and activities. Control or supervision was discernible but not imposing, present through a loose master/servant relationship. Far from being isolated solitaries, these hermits embraced companionship and concern for the well-being of the members of their community. Among the

<sup>157</sup> Louis M. Raison, and René Niderst, ‘Le mouvement érémitique dans l’ouest de la France à la fin du XIe siècle et au début de XIIe’, *Annales de Bretagne* 55 (1948), 6.

<sup>158</sup> *Vita Anastasii*, PL 149: 427; Mathieu Arnoux, ‘Un Vénitien au Mont-Saint-Michel: Anastase, moine, ermite et confesseur’, *Médiévaux* 28 (1995), pp. 55-78.

<sup>159</sup> Jacques de Bascher, ‘Villesalem: L’ermitage Fontgombaldien et les origines du prieuré fontévriste’, *Revue Mabillon* 61 (1988), 97-129, (p. 114) claims knowledge of six hermitages connected to Fontgombault.

<sup>160</sup> For the next thirty years Peter and his brother, Isembaud, continued to establish hermitages which became monasteries in this region. See Jacques de Bascher, ‘Les fondations d’Isembaud, Abbé de Preuilly-sur-Claise et de l’Etoile en Poitou’, *Revue Mabillon* 60 (1983), 331-352.

<sup>161</sup> *Vita Bernardi*, PL 172: 1380; Moolenbroek, p. 16.

principal *Vitae*, the *Vita Bernardi* is the only one which offers detailed accounts of their daily lives, with Geoffrey Grossus providing intermittent glimpses into these early, pre-coenobitic years which help to identify the characteristics of this informal structure. He describes the hermits 'living in dispersed cells'<sup>162</sup> in the 'vast solitudes of Maine and Brittany'. When Bernard was introduced by Peter de l'Etoile to Vitalis and the other ascetics residing in the area, he was allowed the freedom to choose where he wished to live, being invited to 'wander through the forests, visiting all the dwellings of the brothers' until he found one which would be most agreeable to him.<sup>163</sup> The reader is left in no doubt that the metaphorical desert was indeed large. Bernard entered into the depths of the *eremum* and came to its extreme limits before he found what he was looking for. Paradoxically, this same wilderness was also well populated with hermits. When Vitalis convened a meeting of all the *anachoretae* in order to welcome Bernard to their community, these brothers lived close enough to come together when summoned although the cells were dispersed. Again, after Bernard had fled to his retreat on the Îles de Chaussey to escape the monks of St Savin, Peter de l'Etoile addressed the same 'crowd of brothers' to recommend to them that they ask Bernard back.<sup>164</sup> The circumstances surrounding these meetings demonstrate that the wishes of all in the community were considered through open debate and that decision-making did not always rest with one person, a contrast to the procedures put in place once the coenobitic institutions were built.

From these momentary glimpses into the lives of the ordinary hermits of this particular network it can be seen that they exercised a great degree of independence: they had a free choice in deciding where to live, autonomy over the construction of their dwellings and freedom to determine the manner in which they filled their days with manual labour, husbandry, food preparation and prayer. Bernard's free choice in the matter of where he wished to live led him to a brother named Peter who was building 'a rather

<sup>162</sup> *Vita Bernardi*, PL 172: 1380, 'per diversas cellulas habitantium... '.

<sup>163</sup> *Vita Bernardi*, PL 172: 1381, 'cellulas suas certatim offerunt.... silvas peragrando, Fratrum omnium habitacula conspiciat, et quod sibi placuerit ad habitandum assumat'.

<sup>164</sup> *Vita Bernardi*, PL 172: 1381 and 1389-1390.

large house against the walls of the church of Saint Médard, the best part of which had been ruined by strong winds'.<sup>165</sup> Although the church was a ruin, there must have been some agreement for Peter to proceed with his construction, and it is likely that permission came via Vitalis as this area fell within the 'nebula of hermitages grouped under the authority of Vitalis of Savigny'.<sup>166</sup> It was customary for hermits to maintain their self-sufficiency by cultivating a small plot close to their cells for supplies of fruits, vegetables and herbs, but Grossus is at pains to point out that Peter was not a farmer or a gardener, having instead skills in carpentry and ironwork and possessing the necessary expertise to erect a sturdy cell in which to live. It is tempting to speculate that he might have served his secular community as a blacksmith or builder in his youth before opting for the eremitic life. It seems that he occupied his time in the forest plying his trade and possibly, although Grossus does not stipulate this, providing goods for the wider community as well as for his hermit companions.<sup>167</sup> Not being skilled in husbandry he took his nourishment from the woods around him, foods such as he could find to hand (berries, nuts, roots and honey), but it is equally likely that he obtained other necessities, such as grain or bread, from his eremitic neighbours or from inhabitants of the locality, either through barter or as alms.<sup>168</sup> This was customary within the eremitic milieu. William Firmat had welcomed gifts of bread and honey when he occupied his nearby hermitage at Mantilly a couple of decades earlier, while a contemporary of Bernard, Anastasius, had a preference for donations of burnt bread.<sup>169</sup>

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<sup>165</sup> *Vita Bernardi*, PL 172: 1381, 'Casam quoque haud grandem...sibi in cuiusdam ecclesiae S. Medardi parientinis confecerat: cuius partem meliorem abrupterat ventorum violenta'.

<sup>166</sup> Beck, *Saint Bernard*, p. 260.

<sup>167</sup> Although this is not stated in the *Vitae*, historians have tended to accept that these hermits did provide surplus from their respective crafts for their fellow companions and the wider community.

<sup>168</sup> *Vita Bernardi*, PL 172: 1382, tells us that Peter invited his brothers for a meal and went into the woods surrounding his cell to gather provisions and returned with the fruits from bushes and brambles, chestnuts, and all kinds of vegetables as well as honey which he found in abundance in the hollow of a tree. This, the author tells us, would have been a very rich feast but for the lack of bread, '... essetque opulentum convivium, nisi panis deesset...'.

<sup>169</sup> *Vita Firmati*, p. 337 and *Vita Anastasii*, PL 149: 430, '....subcinericum panem...'. The sharing of food was part of the relationship which the hermit developed with his local community.

In terms of structure this informal network of north-west France was not simply a scattering of independent solitaries within close proximity to each other. From the example of Bernard and Peter it is clear that partnerships were also common. Bernard stayed with Peter for three years, during which time he mastered the skills of woodturning and iron working under guidance from the older, more experienced hermit, while, in his turn, Bernard provided their meagre sustenance and entered into the service of the Lord while Peter slept. This was a reciprocal arrangement. As ‘an old inhabitant of the desert and a man of experience’,<sup>170</sup> Peter took on the role of guide and mentor to the younger novice finding his way in the wilderness, and Bernard, in his turn, was able to assist and care for his tutor. The practical advantages of this arrangement are evident. At a time when vagrants roamed the countryside, when raids and looting were common,<sup>171</sup> it made sense to have a colleague close by to assist against attack or at least to raise the alarm. Manual labour could be shared and if one companion should fall ill, the other would be at hand to offer assistance, maintain the daily routine of the cell and uphold the schedule of prayers and vigils. The partnership of Adelin and Albert, living together in harmony in the middle of the wood, reinforces this image. Albert, being the elder, spent his days in fasting and prayer while Adelin obeyed his orders, in other words looked after his master and performed those chores which the older hermit could no longer manage.<sup>172</sup> Such a structure ensured that support was available at the point of need and, more significantly, it also provided a means for the supervision of spiritual and moral welfare, as one partner was nearby to encourage the other at times of temptation, malaise or doubt.

There was also a deeper, more complex aspect to the partnerships which developed within these eremitic networks. Living in such close proximity, hermits shared experiences which induced a tacit understanding of the trials and tribulations confronting each one of them – physical hardships and perils, emotional fears and doubts as well as spiritual joys and passions – all

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<sup>170</sup> *Vita Bernardi*, PL 172:1382, ‘*Ille ut eremi antiquus cultor et usus talibus...*’.

<sup>171</sup> *Vita Bernardi*, PL 172: 1384-5, as when pirates came to the Iles de Chaussey.

<sup>172</sup> *Vita Bernardi*, PL 172: 1390-1391.

of which helped to seal powerful bonds of friendship and provide a sense of brotherhood. The intimacy of the shared life in the wilderness helps to explain the empathy for a companion's mood swings and the tolerance of irrational behaviour which often characterised hermit relationships. The intensity of the grief experienced by Albert when Adelin left him to follow Bernard to his retreat on the Îles de Chaussey is testimony to the strength of the bonds which could be forged in the wilderness and the dramatic consequences when these bonds were broken.<sup>173</sup>

These arrangements in many ways parallel those of the Egyptian and Syrian desert hermits of the third and fourth centuries, where the practice of mentoring disciples was regarded as essential in the search for perfection of the *vita eremita*. The hermits of the middle-eastern deserts were not solitaries in the strict sense but lived in *laurae* - 'rows or clusters of solitary cells round a common centre'.<sup>174</sup> This common centre included a church and a bake house where ascetics would gather on Saturdays and Sundays for shared worship and to collect their weekly bread ration. The Oxford English Dictionary defines the Greek word *laíra* as a 'lane', 'passage' or 'alleyway'. Chitty refers to the term as a 'market', rather like the Arabic souk, and it was to these 'common centres' that hermits brought their produce, mainly rope, baskets and salt extracted from the vast natron lakes of Nitria and Scetis. These goods were traded for other necessities on the Saturday morning, and after partaking of shared meals and Sunday worship they returned to their individual cells on the Sunday evening carrying water, bread and raw materials for the week ahead. Palladius of Galatia (d. circa 420-430 AD) in his *Lausiac History* gives details of a community of around five thousand men living in cells scattered over the mountain of Nitria and a further six hundred anchorites in the great desert. At the 'common centre' five bakeries could be found along with a church served by eight priests, a

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<sup>173</sup> *Vita Bernardi*, PL 172:1390-1, 'Senior itaque, dilecti discipuli solatio viduatus, in tantae tentationis incidit barathrum, ut nimia et irrationabili affectus maestitia sese suspenderet.....'.

<sup>174</sup> Chitty, p. 15.

guest house, doctors confectioners and wine-sellers,<sup>175</sup> a description which is not dissimilar to a small market village. Palladius also explains how groups of hermits employed agents or *oikonomoi* to conduct the business of buying and selling on their behalf.<sup>176</sup> M. Dunn interprets this collective action as evidence of 'group identity', arguing that while they lived separately, in pairs or small groups they still acknowledged that they were all part of a greater whole.<sup>177</sup>

It cannot be claimed, however, that the communities of north-west France were an exact mirror image of those in the middle-eastern deserts. By the time of Palladius' History (419-420) these hermit communities had existed for almost a century, during which time they had been able to experiment and develop their unique structures of communal support and shared worship. The Lives of the Desert Fathers and other sources present well-structured and administratively-organised communities, unambiguous in objectives and able to withstand the test of time.<sup>178</sup> The eremitic network of north-west France, on the other hand, was short-lived, existing for approximately forty years, and the hagiographic sources do not present the picture of a community which was structured and administered as strongly as its fourth-century precedent. There is no evidence of a 'common centre', although local villages and hamlets could provide basic needs such as a bake house. Though the hermits of north-west France were similarly engaged in manual labour, there is little solid evidence that goods were made for sale or barter as in the desert *laurae*, and although there was a need to ward off idleness and provide basic needs, any surplus was usually given up for alms rather than sold. Shared worship was a common factor and western hermits did follow a pattern of private prayer, meditation and recitation of psalms similar to that of the Desert Fathers.

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<sup>175</sup> Palladius, *The Lausiac History of Palladius*, trans. by W. K. L. Clarke (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1918), p. 58.

<sup>176</sup> Palladius, *Lausiac History*, ch. 10.

<sup>177</sup> Dunn, p. 15.

<sup>178</sup> The communities in both Egypt and Palestine lasted a little over four hundred years and only met their demise with the Islamic incursions from the east in the early seventh century.

To what extent the hermits of the eleventh and twelfth centuries were influenced by the lifestyle or the teachings of the Desert Fathers is difficult to say. Those who had received some instruction in theology were most probably familiar with the *Vitae* and *Dictae* of the Fathers, and this would apply to the leaders of this network: Robert of Arbrissel, Vitalis of Savigny, Bernard of Tiron and Peter de l'Etoile. Did they consciously set out to establish a Thebaid in the forests of north-western France or was it more a case of challenges requiring practical solutions – solutions which evolved naturally as the numbers living in the forests increased? Hagiographers and chroniclers were in the privileged position of being able to draw the comparisons from their own knowledge of the ancient texts. Geoffrey Grossus in his *Vita Bernardi* certainly equated the forests of Brittany and Maine to the Egyptian Thebaid, a sentiment echoed by some chroniclers. Modern historians have also adopted this term and have used it freely in discussing the flourish of eremitic activity in this geographical area, but the majority of nameless, silent hermits<sup>179</sup> were unlikely to have been *literati* and, although they may have heard stories of lives of the Fathers and other saints, it is doubtful that they were acquainted with the theological arguments understood by their more educated brethren. The priests and monks who ultimately came to lead them adopted the generally approved principle that individuals should undergo supervision and training to prepare for the rigours of life in the wilderness. Even the early monastic model recognised the need for training through its novitiate system, and in the fourth century many hermits had come to the desert via this route.<sup>180</sup> The informal living structures practised by the hermits of north-west France contained ideas inherited from the lives of the Desert Fathers which provided them with tried and tested conventions and restraints, despite the apparent self-determination of their existence. Even without a strict rule in the monastic sense, the precepts of poverty, humility and obedience were central to the eremitic life and had to be observed.

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<sup>179</sup> Jean Leclercq refers to those hermits who speak and those which do not speak, ‘... *ceux dont on parle et ceux dont on ne parle pas...*’, ‘L’érémisme en occident’, in *L’eremitismo*, p. 28.

<sup>180</sup> For example Cassian and St Benedict advise training before leaving the monastery.

From the time that human beings first came together to form communities, a hierarchy of authority has always developed to provide leadership and police the agreed rules of those communities. Thus it was with the eremitic network in north-west France, despite its seemingly relaxed attitude to individual living. This authority was based on the acknowledged leadership of key figures and, in many cases, of a master/servant relationship among these *eremitae*. Grossus refers to Vitalis of Savigny as *princeps eremi*.<sup>181</sup> It was Vitalis whom Peter de l'Etoile approached to enquire whether the young Bernard could join the hermits in the forest.<sup>182</sup> When decisions had to be made it was Vitalis who summoned the council of anchorites<sup>183</sup> and a few years later, when the young Adelin returned to the forest after abandoning his companion to follow Bernard, it was Vitalis who imposed the threat of excommunication if he should do it again.<sup>184</sup> Robert of Arbrissel and Ralph of La Futaie were also regarded by Grossus as '*principes et magistri*',<sup>185</sup> whose status Bernard was soon to acquire. Robert of Arbrissel was referred to as '*magister*' by his followers<sup>186</sup> because, as Baudry of Dol informs us, 'he did not want to be called Lord or Abbot'.<sup>187</sup> In the early days at Obazine no rule had been decided upon because 'it was the decision of the master which took the place of the law'.<sup>188</sup> These examples clearly show the authority and status held by these leading figures in the eremitic communities of the forest. Van Moolenbroek styles them 'hermit-priests'<sup>189</sup> and this gives a clue to the origin of their status in the forest. Robert of Arbrissel and Vitalis had held positions of authority prior to entering the eremitic 'wilderness', and were literate and knowledgeable in spiritual matters. Bernard, although well-educated, still had to undergo his novitiate before to earning himself the status of *princeps et magister*.

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<sup>181</sup> *Vita Bernardi*, PL 172: 1391.

<sup>182</sup> *Vita Bernardi*, PL 172: 1381.

<sup>183</sup> *Vita Bernardi*, PL 172: 1381, 'Dominus autem Vitalis anachoretas concilii more convocat...'.

<sup>184</sup> *Vita Bernardi*, PL 172: 1391.

<sup>185</sup> *Vita Bernardi*, PL 172: 1381.

<sup>186</sup> Andrew of Fontevraud, in the second life of Robert of Arbrissel, uses the term *magister* frequently when referring to Robert.

<sup>187</sup> Baudry, *Vita Roberti*, p. 606.

<sup>188</sup> *Vita Stephani*, p. 70, 'Cumque nulla alicuius ordinis lex posita haberetur, instituta magistri pro lege erant...'.

<sup>189</sup> Moolenbroek, p. 161.

The master/servant relationship can also be seen in the lower ranks within the eremitic communities, particularly through the common practice of forming partnerships, two hermits sharing a cell, usually an older hermit and a younger disciple. Bernard, as already mentioned, chose to live with the older Peter, who taught him not only how to live as an ascetic in the ‘wilderness’ but also those practical skills essential for survival in a harsh environment. The young Adelin was the disciple of his ‘master’ Albert.<sup>190</sup> Even beyond the borders of north-west France it was common to find hermits living in partnerships. This was a structure insisted upon by leaders as a means of providing instruction to the uninitiated, enforcing the principles of obedience and humility and also serving as a support mechanism to encourage and motivate each other in worshipping God vigilantly and without interruption. English hermits were no exception. Godric of Finchale became the companion of an older hermit called Aelfric, previously a monk at Durham. He agreed that Godric should become apprenticed to him and they lived together at Wolsingham as solitaries. Though not all had the companionship of a fellow hermit, some might be supported by a lay servant or a willing helper close by. Robert of Knaresborough had four servants, while Wulfric, as previously mentioned, preferred the service of young boys from the local village. Godric of Finchale later had several servants catering for his needs, although he complained that they were often lazy, rebellious and dishonest. At some point he employed his nephew as his servant, possibly on the basis that a family member would be more trustworthy.<sup>191</sup> In fact, family members frequently offered support and provided companionship. Godric’s mother Aedwen and his sister moved north to be near him. His sister later followed her brother’s example and became a solitary while in France. William

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<sup>190</sup> Other examples of partnerships in the area of Savigny and Tiron are attested in the first acts of Savigny. Moolenbroek, p. 214, mentions Albert and William Fils-Angot and William and Peter as central couples in small groups of hermits still living in the neighbouring forests.

<sup>191</sup> *Vita Godrici*, p. 139.

Firmat similarly had the support of his mother at his first hermitage at Sept-Frères.<sup>192</sup>

Examination of the networks established by hermits in England and France during the eleventh and twelfth centuries demonstrates that most hermits were reliant on others while they pursued their search for spiritual perfection. Far from living as self-sufficient, self-regulating recluses distant from habitation and human interaction as in the traditional view, in reality, many, if not the majority, either shared their cells with companions, often in a master/servant relationship, lived alone but with fellow ascetics nearby, or were supported by relatives or family servants. In France, the support structures which grew up to deal with the hundreds of followers of hermit leaders were undoubtedly partly responsible for the clustering effect of small eremitic communities in certain areas, which often had earlier traditions of holy men and women and where they would be well received by local society.<sup>193</sup> By the end of the first quarter of the twelfth century many of these communities had been engulfed by the 'new' monastic orders and are not referred to again, although as Van Moolenbroek has pointed out, the monasteries of Savigny and Tiron did not absorb the whole eremitic population of the area.

Conversely, because English eremitism was never subjected to the same pressures, it continued in the same format throughout the high to late middle ages, as informal structures of individual solitaries with religious or lay companions providing the support required. This allowed eremitism to flourish much longer than in France and to expand, reaching a peak in the mid- to late-thirteenth century. It did not, however, eventually escape attempts at greater regulation and control by the Church which, through subtle means, brought hermits and their hermitages under its dominion<sup>194</sup> and, with the introduction of official services of enclosure, a symbolic death

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<sup>192</sup> *Vita Firmati*, p. 335.

<sup>193</sup> The relationships between hermits and lay society will be discussed in Chapter 5.

<sup>194</sup> Brian Golding, 'The Hermit and the Hunter', in *The Cloister and the World: Essays in Medieval History in Honour of Barbara Harvey*, ed. by John Blair and Brian Golding (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), p.104.

to the world, as will be seen in the following discussion of hermits and their relationships with the Church.

## Chapter 4

### Hermits and their Relationships with the Church

From the earliest days of the Christian Church there had always been a minority who preferred to opt out of mainstream religion and pursue a more individualistic path. Hermits had lived on the edge of communities and co-existed with traditional Church institutions throughout the centuries.<sup>195</sup> The concept of withdrawal was not new. By the late eleventh century, however, it is possible to discern a shift in eremitic activity. Henrietta Leyser interprets this as a transition from traditional to new hermits; the latter, she claims, 'were concerned primarily with asceticism and austerity', placing less emphasis on the need for solitude.<sup>196</sup> It is easy to see how Leyser arrived at her theory but, as with the application of terms discussed in chapter two, it segregates hermits into clearly defined groups and implies that all traditional hermits were solitary while the new hermits were characterised by their intense asceticism (although, admittedly, Leyser does accept that these divisions are not rigid). In reality, the reasons behind the shift in eremitic activity were much more practical: hermits found a need to adapt to changing circumstances. It was not that hermits no longer sought to withdraw from the world, but that the world came to them. As a result of the increase in their numbers they became more of a religious focal point, which inevitably brought them and their way of life to the attention of both ecclesiastical and secular authorities. The services which hermits, recluses and anchorites could provide were increasingly more widely sought as people looked for alternative ways to demonstrate their faith. Furthermore, larger hermit communities intensified pressure on scant resources such as

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<sup>195</sup> Apart from the hermit communities of the Egyptian and Syrian deserts, hermits can be found in Western Europe during the same period but references are scant and written Lives virtually non-existent, the Life of Martin of Tours by his contemporary Sulpicius Severus being a rare exception; see Clare Stancliffe, *Saint Martin and his Hagiographer: history and miracle in Sulpicius Severus* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983). For more detailed accounts of eremitism before the Gregorian Reform, see Licence, *Hermits and Recluses*, which covers the later Anglo-Saxon period in England, and Heuclin, *Aux origines monastiques*, for the development of eremitism in France from the fifth to the ninth centuries.

<sup>196</sup> Leyser, *Hermits*, p. 21. See Chapter 2 for discussion on her use of the terms 'traditional' and 'new'.

land, building materials, food and alms.<sup>197</sup> All of these factors resulted in necessary adjustments in the way hermits led their lives and interacted with the Church and social communities.<sup>198</sup>

The development of popular interest in eremitism and consequent growth in the number of eremitic communities occurred at a time when the Church, of which hermits had always been an integral part, was itself undergoing a major reformation. Customs which had once been familiar and accepted practice were suddenly viewed by those seeking reform as negligence at best, immoral and corrupt practice at worst, and sparked a campaign to cleanse and purify the Church of abuse and malpractice. Reformers desired a Church free from secular dominance, which meant an end to lay ownership of church property and influence over appointments to ecclesiastical offices. This latter ambition ignited the bitter dispute between the papacy and emperor known as the Investiture Contest, which endured sporadically for more than a century. Reforming popes, the most ardent of whom was Pope Gregory VII (1073-85), particularly targeted married clergy and simoniacs (those who had purchased clerical office) claiming the removal of these two worst abuses would help to raise the status and authority of those in holy orders. Needless to say, changes to practices which had existed for centuries met with fierce resistance, which formed a tense and uneasy backdrop to the growth in popular piety occurring at local level, such as the increased interest in eremitism.

It is too simplistic to say that the impetus of the reform programme led directly to the unprecedented peak in the popularity of eremitism or that hermits played a major part in pushing the reform forward. Nevertheless, the whole concept of the eremitic life embodied many reform ideals such as chastity, austerity, purity and morality, and it is therefore not surprising to find evidence that certain individual hermits, predominantly the hermit-preachers of France, supported particular aspects of reform. Some hermits,

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<sup>197</sup> There were similar circumstances which affected the friars a century later.

<sup>198</sup> For discussion on hermits and relationships with secular society see Chapter 5, and for the services which hermits provided see the Section on Hermit Activities, Chapters 6-8.

however, took this a step beyond the official reform programme, particularly through their provision of religious opportunities for women and in the manner in which they embraced voluntary poverty (*paupertas voluntatis*). For the Church authorities the actions of hermits were often regarded as steps too far and could invite rebuke or even worse, accusations of heresy, another phenomenon which also saw a renewed vitality in the latter half of the eleventh century. These were turbulent and restless times, but it was also a period in which hermits were successful in carving a niche for themselves which was, for the most part, acceptable to the Church authorities. In exploring this niche it is important to consider whether the increase in eremitic activity was a consequence of the perceived lack of piety and abuses within the Church or whether eremitism went through an evolution at this time, moving from the sidelines to form a more conventional outlet for faith and devotion. What role did hermits have within the Church during this era of reform, and how did they fit into ecclesiastical structures which were constantly undergoing transformation? In what ways, if any, did this affect their relationships with the Church? A comparison of the careers of two wandering preachers provides an excellent example of how the aims and ideals of eremitism both sustained and undermined the reform programme, and illustrates the conflicting reactions of the Church authorities when confronted with experimentation and innovation.

In the year 1116<sup>199</sup> 'a false hermit' called Henry walked into the city of Le Mans and immediately beguiled the inhabitants with the eloquence of his preaching. The anonymous author of the *Gesta Pontificum Cenomannensium* described him as 'unshaven, tall and of athletic gait, walking barefoot even in the depths of winter, a young man always ready to preach, professed of a fearful voice...., his home in the doorways, his bed in

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<sup>199</sup> The exact date is uncertain. The only source for the appearance of Henry of Le Mans, the *Gesta Pontificum Cenomannensium*, claims that Bishop Hildebert was about to leave on a visit to Rome. This can be verified for the year 1100 but not for 1116 according to Moore, *The Origins* p. 298, note 2. However, there seems to be common agreement with Moore for the later date; see Lambert, *Medieval Heresy* p. 44, and Dalarun, *Robert of Arbrissel: sex, sin and salvation*, p. 112.

the gutters.<sup>200</sup> Henry's anticlerical message attracted a large following of men and women, including many from the lower ranks of clergy, but it was the effect that his penitential theme had on the 'corrupt' women of the town which most horrified the author of the *Gesta*. 'Women who had not lived chastely' were persuaded to renounce fornication, cast off their clothes, cut their hair and burn both in public ceremonies. Henry then advised the young men in the town to marry these same women, giving them clothing of low value, 'just enough to cover their nakedness'. The author takes pleasure in assuring his readers that the women soon returned to their old ways and that this experiment was a failure. On returning from his journey to Rome, Bishop Hildebert of Le Mans found his city in chaos. The people had turned against the clergy 'with such fury that they refused to sell them anything or buy anything from them... not content with pulling down their houses... they would have stoned and pilloried them'.<sup>201</sup> The Bishop banished Henry from his diocese and, according to later reports, the preacher continued to create disturbances elsewhere and was condemned as a heretic.

Two decades before this incident, Bishop Marbod of Rennes wrote a letter to another wandering preacher, Robert of Arbrissel.<sup>202</sup> In this letter he repeated what he had heard about Robert's appearance and reputation, '...having discarded your canonical dress, skin covered by a hair shirt and a worn out cowl full of holes, your legs half-naked, your beard long... barefoot, offering a strange spectacle to all...' which might convey moral authority among 'simple folk' but served to create an impression of madness among the wise. The letter is full of condemnation of the themes of Robert's preaching and the way in which he conducted himself as a religious leader. Marbod accused Robert of censuring the vices of those in orders, even slandering and abusing those in high office, and rebuked him

<sup>200</sup> *Gesta Pontificum Cenomannensium*, in *Recueil des Historiens des Gaules et de la France*, ed. by Martin Bouquet, (Paris: Libraires Associés, 1798), XII, p. 547. Translation from Robert I. Moore, *The Birth of Popular Heresy* (London: Edward Arnold, 1975), p. 34.

<sup>201</sup> Moore, *Birth of Popular Heresy*, p. 35.

<sup>202</sup> Marbod of Rennes, *Epistolae*, PL 171: 1480-86. Dalarun, *Robert of Arbrissel: sex, sin and salvation*, p. 45 gives the date for the composition of this letter between 1098 and 1100.

for his practice of cohabitation with women: ‘You deign to join women not only by day at a common table but also by night in a common bed – or so it is reported’. For Marbod, Robert was not only placing his own soul in danger by such activities but also jeopardising the lives of those who left their homes, families and local priests in order to follow him. Soon after this letter was written, Robert established the abbey of Fontevraud, perhaps as part of his grand design, but more likely in response to the reprimand meted out by the Bishop of Rennes. Yet Robert did not mend his ways entirely, because in 1107 Geoffrey, Abbot of Vendôme and nephew of Robert’s patron, Rainaud of Craon, was also disposed to write an equally disparaging letter about Robert’s intimacy with women.<sup>203</sup> Despite his continued association with the opposite sex, Robert was not condemned as a heretic.

These two incidents are remarkably similar in detail but have completely different outcomes. Henry and Robert both preached a strong anticlerical message, which stimulated riots against the clergy in Le Mans in the case of the former and led to parishioners abandoning their priests in Maine and Anjou in the case of the latter. Both were concerned with the social problems increasingly encountered by women – especially spinsters, widows and prostitutes – generated by changing attitudes to marriage and celibacy. Both adopted the physical appearance of the penitent, scantily clad with bare feet and emaciated bodies, evidence of the austerities they practised and symbolic of their rejection of riches and temporal cares. These two wandering preachers recognised the injustices and immoralities of the world around them and were motivated to make a difference, with one becoming a condemned heretic while the other was lauded as a reformer and innovator within the Church. The inconsistency in the reaction to these events was symptomatic of the tensions within a Church which acknowledged the need for reform but at the same time feared innovation, which was often interpreted as a threat to its authority. The episode at Le

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<sup>203</sup> Geoffrey of Vendôme, *Epistolae*, PL 157: 33-212; see also Jules de Pétigny, ‘Lettre inédite de Robert d’Arbrissel à la comtesse Ermengarde’, *BEC*, 5, ser. 3 (1854), 209-235, and ‘Robert d’Arbrissel et Geoffroi de Vendôme’, *BEC*, 3, ser. 5 (1853/4), 1-30.

Mans was perceived as one such threat, while Robert was permitted to continue to preach and work with the women at Fontevraud.

Although the incidents are similar, the contrast in the reaction each received can be explained through the dissimilarities in the personalities and the circumstances of their relationships with the Church. By 1100, when Marbod wrote his letter, Robert was already well-known by the ecclesiastical community. He had served as archpriest in Rennes during 1089 – 1093. Educated in the schools of Paris and Angers, he would have crossed paths with many leading churchmen. Marbod, for example, was director of the cathedral school in Angers during Robert's studentship there. As fellow Bretons each, no doubt, would be aware of the reputation of the other and in all likelihood the master came to know the student remarkably well.<sup>204</sup> Robert's reputation had been further enhanced when in 1096 Pope Urban II, while on his campaign to gather support for the first crusade, ordered Robert to preach before the distinguished crowd gathered in front of the church of St Nicholas. Apart from the Pontiff, this assembly included four archbishops, four bishops and Count Fulk IV of Anjou.<sup>205</sup> So impressed was the Pope with Robert's eloquence that he 'ordered and enjoined on Robert the office of preaching'.<sup>206</sup> Later the same year and again in the presence of Pope Urban II, Robert established his first foundation, a house of canons at La Roë, in order to satisfy his critics on the large number of undisciplined disciples roaming the forest of Craön. Robert's reputation was, therefore, well established by the time Marbod deemed it necessary to check the behavioural excesses of his former pupil.

Robert was also surrounded by a close-knit circle of other distinguished ecclesiastics. Bishop Hildebert was a noted friend and patron. Baudry of Bourgueil, Robert's hagiographer, was a member of the same scholarly circle. While there is no verifiable evidence that they met, Baudry most

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<sup>204</sup> Dalarun, *Robert of Arbrissel: sex, sin and salvation*, p. 43.

<sup>205</sup> Bruce L. Venarde, *Robert of Arbrissel: A Medieval Life* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2003), p. 125, note 32.

<sup>206</sup> Translation in Venarde, *Robert of Arbrissel*, p. 14.

probably knew about Robert through association and reputation,<sup>207</sup> and Robert's acquaintance with the Abbot of Vendôme has already been noted above. Among this circle of *literati* of north-west France, Robert's activities and opinions regarding church reform would have long been acknowledged and accepted. It is unlikely they would have seen any reason to regard him as a threat to authority as, at all times, Robert had demonstrated his willingness to conform and as a result was permitted to pursue his career of choice.

Henry, on the other hand, was an unknown entity. Silence in the sources written prior to the author's outburst in the *Gesta* suggests that he made an unanticipated arrival in the region where he was, at first, welcomed as a preacher. This was not uncommon during the period of Lent when preachers were in demand to convey the penitential message to the public. Bernard of Clairvaux suggests that he was a black monk who began his preaching career in Lausanne,<sup>208</sup> but when Henry was examined by Bishop Hildebert, he displayed an ignorance of the offices which naturally aroused suspicion. Why his knowledge and skills were not tested at the outset is difficult to comprehend. While the content of his preaching does not appear to have been unconventional (the merits of a reformed church and guidance on leading a moral and pious life), it was the method of delivery and his own temperament which were his undoing.<sup>209</sup> To the authorities of Le Mans, Henry was an outsider, untutored, having no connection with a scholarly circle and therefore, no local church dignitaries to vouch for his orthodoxy. Of even greater concern was his inability to explain by what authority he had the right to preach, a subject undergoing much scrutiny and discussion within the Church in the early decades of the twelfth century.

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<sup>207</sup> Venarde, *Robert of Arbrissel*, pp. 3-4, suggests a closer relationship but there is no hint in Baudry's *Vita* that he and Robert knew each other personally, which explains the hagiographer's complaint that Petronilla gave him only 'a few notes that contained next to nothing... except that he was of Brittany stock'.

<sup>208</sup> *The Letters of Saint Bernard of Clairvaux*, ed. and trans. by Bruno Scott James (Stroud: Sutton, 1998), p. 389.

<sup>209</sup> Moore, *Origins*, pp. 87, views Henry as a reformer who was merely attempting to cleanse a town of corruption and depravity, and through his treatment of prostitutes and his anticlerical stance was reinforcing his message to refrain from immorality and love of riches.

Henry operated beyond the boundaries of ecclesiastical structures, Robert of Arbrissel at all times worked on behalf of and within those structures.

These anecdotes are evidence of a Church which was not at ease with itself – a Church which recognised the need for reform but at the same time feared innovation, which explains the inconsistent reactions when faced with such challenges. Following the reforms promulgated by Pope Gregory VII, many issues still remained unresolved or were slow in being implemented. This fuelled anticlerical sentiment, creating tensions between traditional clerics and ecclesiastical reformers who continued to press for further change. Clerical marriage, the practice of simony and secular involvement in many aspects of church government became the all-consuming topics of the day, and hermits were not immune from the outcomes of these debates. Robert of Arbrissel, for instance, entered his vocation at the height of the era of Gregorian Reform. His early years provide a range of examples of all that was wrong in the unreformed church of Brittany. Robert was the son of a priest, Damalioch, and thus issue of a clerical marriage. On his father's death he inherited the priesthood from his father, which was the accepted practice in Brittany at this time.<sup>210</sup> His hagiographer, Baudry, even hints that Robert might have married or at least have had some sexual encounter before leaving Rennes. His problems were further complicated when a 'sword-bearing illiterate' was elected as bishop of Rennes.<sup>211</sup> Sylvester of La Guerche had never been ordained, but as he was Robert's superior, the young priest was obliged to support his bishop and obey his commands. Sylvester wished to introduce a programme of reforms among the clergy of Rennes, which led to calls of hypocrisy, and Robert, tarred with the same brush, was forced to flee from the city. Being in an untenable position, Sylvester was deposed by papal legate sent by Gregory VII in 1078. Almost fifty years were to pass before a Council at Nantes (1127) forbade priests in Brittany from passing their benefices to their sons.

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<sup>210</sup> Whether this was before or after he was ordained is not clear, but Robert was definitely serving as a priest by 1076, at which time he was about thirty years of age.

<sup>211</sup> Dalarun, *Robert of Arbrissel: sex, sin and salvation*, p. 14.

Robert's career is not the only one which confirms the disorder within the church in north-west France at the close of the eleventh century. A young monk by the name of Anastasius and his colleague (also called Robert) encountered the practice of simony at the abbey of Mont St Michel. This forced them to leave and establish a hermitage on the nearby island of Tomberlaine. Anastasius had been a year at the abbey when he learned that the abbot had obtained his office 'by a significant amount of money' which he gave on taking up his post.<sup>212</sup> Anastasius was mortified, complaining that 'having searched for a place suitable to his ideals', he had been 'deceived by a fraud of the Devil'.<sup>213</sup> His anxiety to dissociate himself from this evil spurred his decision to lead the eremitic life. Geoffrey Grossus, author of the Life of Bernard of Tiron, confirms that these were not isolated cases. He explains that at that time (circa 1080-90) it was customary in Normandy for priests to marry, to bequeath churches to their sons and daughters as an hereditary right and to give churches as dowries when their daughters married.<sup>214</sup> While Geoffrey gives the impression that he did not approve these customs, he does accept that this was part of Norman culture and tradition. Bernard of Tiron himself, however, was less tolerant. As prior of Saint Savin he entered into a conflict with his abbot, Gervase, concerning the simoniacal acquisition of a chapel and supported the papal legate's judgement against the action of his abbot.<sup>215</sup> Bruno of Chartreuse, while teaching at the cathedral school of Rheims, similarly collaborated in the papacy's successful effort to remove Archbishop Manasses for incidents of simony.

From the examples above, it is clear that hermits were aware of the need for change and supportive of actions taken to cleanse the Church of malpractice

<sup>212</sup> *Vita Anastasii*, PL 149: 428, '... per pecuniam infinitam quam dederat in abbatiam subintraverat'.

<sup>213</sup> *Vita Anastasii*, '... qui locum idoneum suo proposito quaesierat...'. 'Unde supra modum dolens, et affirmans se diabolica deceptum....'.

<sup>214</sup> *Vita Bernardi*, PL 172: 1392, 'Porro pro consuetudine tunc temporis per totam Normanniam hoc erat, ut presbyteri publice uxores ducerent, nuprias celebrarant, filios ac filias procrearent, quibus hereditario jure post obitum suum ecclesias relinquenter; filias suas nuptui tradentes, multotiens, si alia deesset possession, ecclesiam dabant in dotem.'

<sup>215</sup> *Vita Bernardi*, PL 172: 1376-7; Beck, *Saint Bernard*, p. 196.

when they were in a position to do so, but it was not within their remit to take on the task of reform for its own sake. Reforming attitudes were slow to penetrate remote regions which were steeped in the traditions of the past and, therefore, implementation of change was naturally prolonged. This was exacerbated by the fact that malpractice within the Church encompassed the highest ranks, operating at the heart of politics. With monarchs using ecclesiastical offices and lands as rewards for loyalty or to acquire allegiance, it was inevitable that the divide between secular and spiritual would become blurred. Members of the royal council frequently held high office, or offices, within the Church and a sizeable percentage of church lands, tithes and privileges were in the hands of lay lords, giving justification to the objective of reformers to end secular control of the Church. Orderic Vitalis mentions half a dozen clerics of high ranks who benefited personally from their ecclesiastical assets, kept concubines or were guilty of simony. One of these was Odo, half-brother of William the Conqueror, who was scandalously given the Bishopric of Bayeux in 1049 when he was barely fifteen years of age, an incident which clearly demonstrates how a large proportion of church wealth could fall into the hands of a few scions of ruling families.<sup>216</sup> Ranulf Flambard, Bishop of Durham, was another who, from the perspective of those seeking reform, was the epitome of all that was undesirable in the Church. He was, himself, the product of a clerical marriage, being the son of a priest from Bessin, near Bayeux. As royal chaplain to King William II he encouraged the prolongation of vacant sees in order to obtain their revenues and personally administered sixteen abbeys and bishoprics, among them Chertsey, Canterbury and New Minster.<sup>217</sup> In 1099 he became Bishop of Durham, an office which William of Malmesbury claims he obtained by simony, handing over one thousand pounds for the privilege.<sup>218</sup> While in exile in Normandy in 1101 he obtained the bishopric of Lisieux for his brother Fulcher, which later passed to Flambard's son, Thomas, just twelve years

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<sup>216</sup> Orderic Vitalis, *Ecclesiastical History*, Book IV, p. 116 and Book VI, 378.

<sup>217</sup> David Knowles, *The Monastic Order in England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), p. 613, note 3.

<sup>218</sup> William of Malmesbury, *De gestis pontificum anglorum*, ed. by N. E. S. A. Hamilton, RS 52 (London: Longman Press, 1870), p. 274, note 3.

old. Flambard had at least two more sons by his English mistress Alveva (Aelgifu), who was also the aunt of the hermit Christina of Markyate. Through Alveva, Flambard became acquainted with the young Christina, and the author of her life tells how on two occasions she was forced to rebuff his attempts to seduce her.<sup>219</sup> It is worthy of note, however, that the same Flambard was also a worthy patron of the hermit Godric of Finchale, agreeing to grant him the land on which he built his cell.<sup>220</sup> Godric appears to have accepted his patronage without question.

As seen from the example of Flambard, England was no exception to the controversial issues surrounding traditional practice and church reform. The Life of the hermit Wulfric of Haselbury provides a further example. Three priests are mentioned, two of whom were married and had children. Osbern, the son of Brichtric and Godida (Godgyth), inherited his father's post as local priest at his death circa 1135.<sup>221</sup> Segar, another parish priest, had four sons, all of whom became Cistercians at Ford Abbey – three as choir monks and one as a lay-brother.<sup>222</sup> Wulfric does not seem to have been troubled by the marital status of either priest, accepting the situation without rebuke or condemnation. John of Ford, Wulfric's hagiographer, on the other hand, does seem to support the argument in favour of clerical celibacy in his telling of the tale of Wulfric and the woman of Totnes whom he converted from a life of concubinage with a certain priest (*de concubina presbyteri cuiusdam*) to friendship with God.<sup>223</sup>

<sup>219</sup> Talbot, *Christina*, p. 41-3; Robert I. Moore, 'Ranulf Flambard and Christina of Markyate', in *Christina of Markyate*, ed. by Fanous and Leyser, pp. 138-142, presents a more favourable account of Flambard, suggesting that he was attempting to assist his good friends, Autti and Beatrix, Christina's parents, by wooing the young girl with a view to marriage, an arrangement which would have granted the family social prestige in Northamptonshire and throughout the kingdom. For another interesting and less favourable account of Flambard and Christina see Alexander, *Hermits*, pp. 234-6.

<sup>220</sup> Tudor, 'Saint Godric', pp. 195-211 (p. 206). See also Victoria Tudor, 'Reginald of Durham and St Godric of Finchale: a study of a twelfth-century hagiographer and his major subject' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Reading, 1979), p. 244, in which she mentions another of Flambard's sons, Ralph the Clerk, working in his father's household.

<sup>221</sup> *Vita Wulfrici*, p. 102.

<sup>222</sup> *Vita Wulfrici*, p. 38.

<sup>223</sup> *Vita Wulfrici*, p. 103.

Reformers throughout Western Europe were working against centuries of tradition and ingrained custom, a world in which it was natural for fathers to hope that their sons would inherit their benefices. The realisation of change also created many practical problems, such as those confronting the wives of married priests who were cast aside following the enforcement of clerical celibacy, causing further resentment and a determination to uphold tradition. Despite the best efforts of reforming popes such as Gregory VII, Paschal II and Urban II, changing attitudes over practices which had endured for centuries would be a protracted business and could only be achieved through a gradual process. In England the Council of Winchester of 1076 decreed that married priests would not be forced to give up their wives but no new clerical marriages should take place in the future.<sup>224</sup> It was a quarter of a century later before this more tolerant stance changed and Anselm declared at the Council of Westminster (1102) that priests and deacons must give up wives if they had them and that they could not celebrate mass if conducting 'illicit relations with a woman'. The same Council also ruled that 'sons of priests should not inherit their father's churches'.<sup>225</sup> The Second Lateran Council (1129) upheld these rulings by a decree that a marriage of a priest, deacon or subdeacon was deemed *matrimonium non esse*. Yet as late as 1200 Gerald of Wales lamented that 'the houses and huts of our parish priests are larded over by their mistresses and full of creaking cradles, new-born babies and squalling children'.<sup>226</sup>

It was the mid-thirteenth century before any significant progress in overcoming these abuses was made.<sup>227</sup> Hermits had a limited role in this aspect of reform, participating only in cases which directly affected them, as demonstrated by the examples cited above. Nevertheless, as the world began to engulf the solitude of the hermit, eremitism became an extension of

<sup>224</sup> *Councils and Synods and other documents relating to the English Church I* (871-1204), ed. by D. Whitelock, M. Brett and C. N. L. Brooke (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), p. 619.

<sup>225</sup> *Councils and Synods*, p. 675.

<sup>226</sup> Gerald of Wales, *Speculum ecclesiae*, in *Giraldi Cambrensis Opera*, ed. by J. S. Brewer, RS 21 (London: Longman Press, 1861-91), IV, pp. 4 and 313.

<sup>227</sup> Colin Morris, *The Papal Monarchy: The Western Church from 1050 to 1250* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), p. 539, provides a good summary of changes within the church over these two centuries.

the reform programme. It is difficult to assess the degree to which hermits consciously participated or even to gauge what their opinions on different issues might have been. The vast majority, about whom we know so little, were most probably passive recipients of the reforming messages and remained for the most part untouched by the heated disputes taking place around them. That others were active proponents of change cannot be denied, and once again, the examples of Robert of Arbrissel and Henry of Le Mans illustrate how the Church responded to their views. Parallel with the reforms imposed from above, new and innovative ideas developed based on a desire to restore the original ideals of early Christianity. Monasteries and the numbers of monks joining them increased at an alarming rate during the eleventh and twelfth centuries,<sup>228</sup> driven largely by the religious zeal and devotion of the myriad new orders, often seen by historians as a reaction to the monopolistic hold of the Benedictines.<sup>229</sup> Opportunities became available for lay piety to find an outlet in popular movements, in which women were also able to create a niche outside the nunnery. Participation of lay folk in popular religious outlets, however, created a thin dividing line between heresy and orthodoxy, which left many issues regarding the role of women and the extent to which individuals could determine how they worshipped largely unresolved.

Most historians acknowledge a close relationship between hermits and reform, citing as evidence the proliferation of new monastic orders, the majority of which began from eremitic roots during the last decades of the eleventh century and early twelfth century. Those favouring this view claim that interest in the eremitic life developed out of a decline in traditional monasticism, an event which has become popularly known as the ‘crisis of cenobitism’. Dom Morin was the first to use the phrase in his article on the correspondence between of Ivo of Chartres and the hermit, Rainaud.<sup>230</sup> Rainaud responded to Ivo’s accusation that he would cause scandal by

<sup>228</sup> Morris, *Papal Monarchy*, pp. 57-8.

<sup>229</sup> Brenda Bolton, *The Medieval Reformation* (London: Edward Arnold, 1983), pp. 17-32, sees this as a series of different reactions to the crisis in the church as a whole, including that of monasticism.

<sup>230</sup> Dom G. Morin, ‘Rainaud l’ermite et Yves de Chartres: un épisode de la crise du cenobitisme au XIe-XIIe siècles’, *RB* 40 (1928), 99.

leaving his house, thought to be St Jean de Vignes in Soissons, by accusing coenobites of being worldly, living too well, being more interested in battles than in psalms and having no reverence for poverty. Rainaud is a rare but welcome example of a hermit's voice and a witness to the malaise which many felt had crept into religious life. Robert of Molesme expressed similar views, which prompted his adoption of eremitic values first at Molesme and then Citeaux.<sup>231</sup> Three decades after Morin's article, Leclercq developed his thesis further, claiming that it was not a crisis of monasticism but a 'crisis of prosperity'. The accumulation of wealth, embellishments of grand monastic buildings and the growing exclusivity of what had become an urban monasticism provoked, according to Leclercq, a reaction in favour of poverty which could only be guaranteed in the desert.<sup>232</sup> More recently Van Engen has argued convincingly against the theory of a crisis of monasticism and claims that the rise of new orders, which arose out of eremitic values, is a separate and unconnected subject.<sup>233</sup> Benedictine houses, he contests, continued to flourish and Black Monks in England tripled in number in the decades following the Norman Conquest to reach a peak during the reign of Henry I. For many decades following the Norman Conquest, Benedictine monasteries were also the first choice for anyone wishing to establish a new foundation, as in Yorkshire, for example, with Selby, Whitby and St Mary's, York.<sup>234</sup> A similar pattern existed on the continent of Europe, with both Benedictine and Cluniac houses enjoying a swelling of ranks during the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries.<sup>235</sup> Bruce Venarde supports this conclusion, claiming that 'Benedictine communities continued to multiply and thrive' with the first half of the twelfth century marking the apex of expansion.<sup>236</sup> The rise of eremitism,

<sup>231</sup> Orderic Vitalis, *Ecclesiastical History*, Book IV, p. 312.

<sup>232</sup> Jean Leclercq, 'La crise du monachisme aux XIe et XIIe siècles', *Bullettino dell' Istituto Storico Italiano per il medio evo e Archivo Muratoriano* 70 (Rome, 1958), 24-25.

<sup>233</sup> John Van Engen, 'The "Crisis of Cenobitism" Reconsidered: Benedictine Monasticism in the Years 1050-1150', *Speculum* 61:2 (1986), 269-304 (p. 276).

<sup>234</sup> Janet E. Burton, *The Monastic Order in Yorkshire, 1069-1215* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 23.

<sup>235</sup> Burton, *Monastic Order*, pp. 276-7.

<sup>236</sup> Bruce L. Venarde, *Women's Monasticism and Medieval Society: Nunneries in France and England, 890-1215* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), pp. 181-2 and Figure 9.

therefore, has to be seen as a complementary outlet for religious devotion and not as a replacement of traditional monasticism.

The new orders did, without doubt, wholeheartedly espouse reforming ideals, which formed the basis of their rules and customs, but this was not reform which was initiated from the centre. These new foundations emerged spontaneously from the clusters of primitive eremitic communities of north-west France, the Limousin, Burgundy and other areas previously discussed, including Savigny, Tiron, Fontevraud, Arrouaise and Prémontré as well as Molesme, Citeaux, Grandmont and Obazine in the south. Within a short span of time, approximately fifty years, the individuality and freedom of the loose-knit, informal structures examined in Chapter 3 were transformed into conventional, formally regulated monastic institutions. Eremitsim had been forced to make adjustments both in their structures and in their ideals. Bishop Marbod's letter to Robert of Arbrissel is illustrative of the attitude of Church authorities to the masses<sup>237</sup> wandering freely through the countryside. The lack of control, the mixing of sexes and the integration of social groups were innovations which went too far, and certainly beyond the remit of church reform. Toleration of such behaviour would undermine the status and power of clerical office, the very antithesis of what reform was aiming to achieve. The pressure on all hermit leaders to institutionalise must have been immense, and Henry of Le Mans serves as an example of what happened to anyone who refused to conform. The Waldensians met with the same reactions from authority towards the end of the twelfth century.<sup>238</sup> Institutionalisation, therefore, with its firm control and tighter regulation led to the demise of the *laura-style* communities of the forest wildernesses, and by the mid-twelfth century references to such eremitic groups disappear. The Church had skilfully and successfully contained a popular expression of faith within its own conventional structures.

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<sup>237</sup> Marbod refers to the masses as *vulgaris* or *vulgares*. See Dalarun, *Robert of Arbrissel: sex, sin and salvation*, pp. 45-6.

<sup>238</sup> Gabriel Audisio, *The Waldensian Dissent: Persecution and Survival c.1170-c.1570* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

Eremitism in England during the reform era followed a very different path from that in France. The relationship between hermits and church authorities was more localised, with authority and control operating through a form of church patronage. Hermits who were permanently based in a cell or cave posed less of a threat than the wandering hermit-preachers of France. As there were no large gatherings of disciples following hermit-leaders there was no pressure to institutionalise. With no indigenous new monastic orders, apart from the Gilbertines, innovation was limited and channelled in different directions. As in France, however, the Church was still able to exert its influence over hermits and contain eremitism within ecclesiastical structures. This occurred in one of two ways: either through ecclesiastical and lay patronage of hermitages<sup>239</sup> or by establishing a degree of influence over a hermit, persuading him (or her) to accept the authority of an established ecclesiastical institution, which usually involved the adoption of that institution's rule. Both of these examples are found in the north-east region of England, an area which experienced a 'monastic revival' during the post-Conquest era.<sup>240</sup> Monasticism in the north had fallen into a state of decline, with most of the great Anglo-Saxon houses, such as Jarrow and St Hilda's at Whitby, reduced to ruins. The author of the *Historia Selebiensis monasterii* records that in 1069 'throughout the whole of Yorkshire – except for the congregation of Durham – there could scarcely be found either a monk or a place for monks'.<sup>241</sup> This revival was not so much an attempt to reform the lax observance of a rule, which has been seen as the purpose behind French eremitism, but an endeavour to re-establish Benedictine monasticism to its former glory. As Burton confirms, the re-birth of monasticism in the north-east of England evolved out of devotion to its

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<sup>239</sup> A more detailed discussion on lay patronage can be found in Chapter 5.

<sup>240</sup> For different interpretations of this 'monastic revival' see Derek Baker, 'The Surest Road to Heaven: Ascetic Spiritualities in English Post-Conquest Religious Life', in *Sanctity and Secularity: The Church and the World*, ed. by Derek Baker, SCH 10 (Oxford: Blackwell, 1973), pp. 45-57, also Alexander, *Hagiography*, p. 39, and more recently Burton, *Monastic Order*, pp. 31-3, for the revival in the north.

<sup>241</sup> 'Per totam enim Eboraci syriam excepta Dunelmensi congregacione, nec monachus nec monachorum locus aliquis in illis diebus facile valuit reperiri.' Text and translation are from Burton, *Monastic Order*, p. 26, where the full manuscript reference can also be found.

Anglo-Saxon heritage.<sup>242</sup> That hermits were responsible for initiating the monastic revival is not disputed, but they did not set out with this as their objective. The three companions (Aldwin, Reinfrid and Aelfwig) who set out from the monasteries of Winchcombe and Evesham in c. 1073 were simply seeking to lead a life of voluntary poverty in imitation of the monks who had lived there earlier.<sup>243</sup> Neither did they establish the kind of informal, *laurae*-style communities found in north-west France a couple of decades later. They did attract followers. Reinfrid left Jarrow for Whitby because the solitude he sought eluded him, but the companions who gathered around these hermits were fewer than in France and so the English hermits did not experience the same pressures. Furthermore, the hermitages which were established, usually in the ruins of the old monasteries, were short-lived and virtually monastic from inception. The monk Benedict of Auxerre arrived in England in 1069 desirous of establishing his own desert in the wilderness and settled in or close to the *vill* of Selby. The following year he became abbot of the monastery of Selby.<sup>244</sup> Similarly, Reinfrid, moving on from the nascent eremitic community at Jarrow, settled at Whitby in 1077 and was elected abbot in 1078.<sup>245</sup> In both cases the swift transition from hermitage to abbey was the result of royal and noble patronage, William I in the case of Benedict and William de Percy in the case of Reinfrid. Patronage, both lay and ecclesiastical, had a prominent influence on English eremitism which may have acted as a restraint on innovation and novelty. In matters of faith and future salvation patrons would favour the safety and security of well-established institutions.

Despite the intervention of patronage, some hermits did manage to maintain a degree of independence, but in the majority of cases, even they were

<sup>242</sup> J. Burton, 'The Monastic Revival in Yorkshire: Whitby and St Mary's, York', in *Anglo-Norman Durham 1093-1193*, ed. by David W. Rollason, Margaret M. Harvey and Michael Prestwich (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1994), pp. 41-51, (p. 41).

<sup>243</sup> Symeon of Durham, *Libellus de exordio et procursu Dunelmensis ecclesie*, in *Symeonis monachi Opera Omnia I*, ed. by Thomas Arnold, RS 75 (London: Longman, 1882-5), pp. 108-113.

<sup>244</sup> Burton, *Monastic Order*, p. 30.

<sup>245</sup> Burton, *Monastic Order*, p. 33. See pages 33-38 for Burton's discussion of the sources for the foundation of Whitby, from which she has attempted a feasible chronology on Reinfrid's part in this and the reasons for his swift succession as abbot.

brought under the control of a local institution. According to the research of Victoria Tudor, this is what happened in the case of Godric of Finchale (c.1070 – 1170) and the monks of Durham Cathedral Priory which, at the time was a young institution itself, being established in 1083.<sup>246</sup> On rejecting his secular career as a merchant, Godric spent some time deciding how to lead his religious life and finally settled as a hermit at Finchale, probably in 1112 or 1113. He was granted the land for his cell and oratory by the Bishop of Durham, Ranulph Flambard.<sup>247</sup> For the following twenty-five years Godric led an independent life as a hermit in the manner he chose, without the guidance of a Rule but devising his own Office<sup>248</sup> and dividing his time between prayer, meditation and manual labour. From 1138, according to Tudor, supported by Dominic Alexander, the relationship between Church and solitary underwent a major change which resulted in a formal association between the hermit and the monks of Durham. This began with a close friendship with Reginald, his would-be hagiographer, which developed into regular visits from other monks who eventually settled permanently with him.<sup>249</sup> Between 1138 and 1149 Godric was persuaded to accept Roger, prior of the house, as his religious superior<sup>250</sup> and after Roger's death in 1149 the hermit 'subjected himself and all his possessions to the authority of the prior's successors'.<sup>251</sup> Tudor refers to his new status as that of an 'associate monk' although he was never professed and continued to live at Finchale.<sup>252</sup> In some ways this was a sensible move, as Godric by this time was an old and sick man and the monks were (no doubt) genuinely sincere in wishing to care for him, but as he was known for his aversion to company, this arrangement seriously

<sup>246</sup> Victoria Tudor, 'Reginald of Durham and Saint Godric of Finchale: Learning and Religion on a personal level', in *Religion and Humanism*, ed. by Keith Robbins, SCH 17 (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1981), pp. 37-48 (p. 39).

<sup>247</sup> The *Vita Godrici*, pp. 65-66, gives details of Godric's search for a suitable site and Flambard's agreement that he could live at his chosen place. See also Tudor's thesis 'Reginald of Durham', which offers greater detail on the extent of the grant and also the possibility of a ceremony of seisin physically settling the hermit on the site.

<sup>248</sup> *Vita Godrici*, p. 110.

<sup>249</sup> *Vita Godrici*, pp. 179, 195, 227, 243 and 256.

<sup>250</sup> *Vita Godrici*, pp. 135-6.

<sup>251</sup> Tudor, 'St Godric', p. 204.

<sup>252</sup> Tudor, 'Reginald of Durham', p. 287. See pages 285-7 of this thesis for a fuller discussion on the confusion over the use of the term 'monk' in connection with Godric's new status.

compromised his seclusion. It also had a considerable impact on his independent eremitic life. Prior Roger introduced the Rule of St Benedict to the hermit's cell and taught Godric the importance of obedience in a life dedicated to the service to God. In order to comply with this instruction, Godric was forced to modify his austerities, which were considered too severe for a Benedictine 'associate monk'.<sup>253</sup> The control which the Church was then able to exert over the hermit even extended to vetting his visitors; if they were carrying a wooden cross this communicated to Godric that the prior had given his consent to a conversation with this person.<sup>254</sup>

Through a slow and gradual process Durham Priory embraced Godric within their sphere of influence. What was the motivation behind this action by the Durham monks? Godric posed no threat to the Church of the kind that the wandering preachers did in France. Nevertheless, he was still a free agent and over the years attracted much interest among the laity, who sought his advice on all manner of problems. As his fame spread so he became more of a local focal point, and although there is no direct evidence, it is possible that the authorities became more apprehensive about his self-regulation, especially as he had never enjoyed a religious or monastic training. Like the hermits of the forest-based informal structures in France, he was representative of the late eleventh-century trend for popular piety and so required cautious scrutiny. Tudor, however, sees more sinister aims in the actions of the monks of Durham Priory: they wanted possession of his land and hermitage. She claims this was driven by 'sheer greed' and justifies this accusation by claiming that the original approach came from the monks and not the hermit, the former even resorting to forgery to substantiate their claim.<sup>255</sup> Dominic Alexander takes a less accusatory view of the ambitions of the monks, claiming that Reginald, in writing about this episode of Godric's life, was merely defending the traditional monastic

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<sup>253</sup> See *Vita Godrici*, pp. 76, 85-6 and 89-90, for some examples of Godric's ascetic practices.

<sup>254</sup> *Vita Godrici*, p. 136.

<sup>255</sup> Tudor, 'Reginald of Durham', pp. 290 and 376. See pages 370-375 of this thesis for Tudor's full discussion on the campaign of the monks to obtain the hermitage and its surrounding lands, including her evidence for the forged charter of Bishop Rannulph Flambard.

version of religious life and that the monks at Durham were ‘concerned to distinguish themselves from other contemporary monastic or ascetic developments’.<sup>256</sup> If this interpretation is accepted, it suggests that this relationship between Godric and the Church was more about a rivalry between two opposing views on how to lead a religious life. T. Licence, however, appears to agree with Tudor that the monks of Durham were driven by materialistic opportunism, noting that a similar process was applied in the acquisition of the hermitage of Godric of Throckenholt (c. 1060 – c. 1140) by Nigel the Bishop of Ely. As Licence says, ‘encouraging hermits to cultivate wasteland could be a lucrative and undemanding business’.<sup>257</sup>

Reform was pursued with greater intensity in continental Europe than in England.<sup>258</sup> Eremitic involvement in reform was limited to specific religious and social issues. Sometimes those issues could create tension in the relationships between Church and hermit. A number of hermits in France were concerned about the difficulties facing women wanting to enter the religious life and for a Church which was increasingly focussed on an outward display of material wealth. That Robert of Arbrissel and Henry of Le Mans were both reprimanded for their perceived unhealthy interest in the plight of women and for inciting lay anticlericalism says more about societal changes than it does about the behaviour of these two preachers. In recent decades, much has been written about medieval women which reflects on their restricted roles in religious life and how this changed during the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Traditionally, there was only one route which women could follow and this was by entering a Benedictine nunnery.<sup>259</sup> By the eleventh century these had become houses for the daughters of aristocratic families, who could offer sizeable dowries and regular gifts for the maintenance of the nunnery. The sources provide scant evidence of women solitaries in either England or France before the rise of

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<sup>256</sup> Alexander, ‘Hermits’, pp. 78-79.

<sup>257</sup> Licence, *Hermits & Recluses*, p. 100.

<sup>258</sup> Herbert, ‘Augustinian Priories’, p. 131.

<sup>259</sup> Michel Parisse, ‘La tradition du monachisme féminin au haut moyen âge’, in *Robert d’Arbrissel et la vie religieuse dans l’ouest de la France, Actes du colloque de Fontevraud 13-16 décembre 2001*, ed. by Jacques Dalarun (Turnhout: Brepols, 2004), p. 107.

eremitism, although this is not to say that they did not exist. Therefore, for the vast majority of women participation in a spiritual life was unattainable. The arrival of the hermits in the forests of north-west France demonstrated that there was an alternative way to take part in the religious life, and both men and women flocked to the 'deserts' as disciples of the new hermit leaders. These communities embraced the opportunity of offering spiritual roles for women of all ranks and walks of life. 'Neither sex is excluded from the Kingdom of Heaven' claimed Gaucher of Aureil, who built a house for the sisters who came to him a stone's throw from his own cell.<sup>260</sup> The foundation of Obazine in the Limousin was said to have attracted five hundred women, for whom Stephen constructed a house close to his own. This was moved to a site further away when it was considered to be too close to that of the men. Vitalis of Savigny also welcomed women among his followers and in 1105 built a retreat for them at Prise-aux-Nonnes.<sup>261</sup> Following a dispute in 1120 he moved them to the gates of Mortain and established them in the convent of La Trinité at Neufbourg. The convent was later given the name of La Blanche because of the colour of their habits.<sup>262</sup> Norbert of Xanten was similarly occupied with the housing of women and established a convent at Prémontré in 1121, where they were subjected to a severe discipline and were mainly responsible for the poor and sick.<sup>263</sup> In the valley of Etival-en-Charnie, Alleaume established a double monastery in 1109; in the same year Salomon, a disciple of Robert of Arbrissel, built a house for women at Noisyseau, and in 1112 Ralph de la Futaie established St Sulpice near Rennes for the same purpose.<sup>264</sup>

<sup>260</sup> 'Vie de Gaucher d'Aureil', ed. by Jean Becquet, *Revue Mabillon* 54 (1964), 25-55 (p. 52), 'Vir beatus Gaucherius neutrum sexum a regno Dei exceptum; quare ex utroque pariete, virorum scilicet ac mulierum, celestem nitens edificare Iehrusalem, quantum iactus est lapidis a cella sua habitaculum seminarum construxerat...'.<sup>261</sup>

<sup>261</sup> *Gallia Christiana* 11 (Paris, 1870), *Instrumenta*, p. 108.

<sup>262</sup> *Gallia Christiana* 11, p. 111; Raison and Niderst, 'Le mouvement érémitique', 38.

<sup>263</sup> Ernst Werner, *Pauperes Christi: Studien zu sozial-religiösen bewegungen im zeitalter des reformpapstums* (Leipzig: Koehler and Amelang, 1956), p. 56; Herbert Grundmann, *Religious Movements in the Middle Ages*, trans. by Steven Rowan (London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995) pp. 44-50; Ursmer Berlière, 'Les monastères doubles aux XIIe et XIIIe siècles,' Académie de Belgique Classe des Lettres et des Sciences morales et politiques 18 (Brussels: Lamertin, 1923), pp. 22-3.

<sup>264</sup> Léon Guillotreau, 'L'abbaye d'Etival-en-Charnie et ses abbesses, 1109-1790', *Revue historique et archéologique du Maine* 49 (1901), 113-139. Raison and Niderst, p. 35, give details of the smaller houses cited.

Apart from this wider provision for women, the major innovation of the hermit communities was the open-door policy for women (as well as men) from all social backgrounds. Vitalis of Savigny was particularly concerned for the conversion of prostitutes, while Robert of Arbrissel welcomed 'many women...., poor and noble, widows and virgins, old and young, whores and those who spurned men.'<sup>265</sup> His foundation comprised four houses; the largest was dedicated to the Virgin Mary for the virgins, widows and matrons and the three smaller were priories, St John the Evangelist for the men, St Mary Magdalene for repentant women and St Lazarus for the sick.<sup>266</sup> By establishing these foundations the hermit leaders were giving emphasis to an ideal of greater religious egalitarianism where anyone from any walk of life, not just women, should be allowed the freedom to make some choices in worship and devotion to God. This message was not limited to hermit communities but can also be found in the Cathar and Waldensian heresies and again from the late twelfth century onwards with the development of the *Beguinages*. There was clearly a growing demand which the Church was unable or unwilling to meet. For women, however, it was an arduous struggle. Even among reformers, the very idea of women having any freedom or opinions on religious issues was insupportable.

Throughout the middle ages women were characterised as the daughters of Eve, the temptress, the cause of all man's sins, and because of this impurity were not allowed any liturgical or priestly function and were required to remain always under the authority of men.<sup>267</sup> Opinions on this interpretation of the female role in society began to change at the same time as the numbers of eremitic communities began to increase. The Virgin Mary began to replace 'the dangerous Eve' as the symbolic figure of womanhood, representing both virginity and maternity at the same time.<sup>268</sup>

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<sup>265</sup> Baudry, *Vita Roberti*, p. 606.

<sup>266</sup> Daniel Prigent, 'Fontevraud au début du XII<sup>e</sup> siècle: les premiers temps d'une communauté monastique', in *Robert d'Arbrissel*, ed. by Dalarun, p. 259.

<sup>267</sup> For a discussion on virginity and woman as the source of evil see John M. Bugge, *Virginitas: An essay in the history of a Medieval Ideal*, (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1975), especially pp. 5-58.

<sup>268</sup> Jacqueline Smith, 'Robert of Arbrissel: *Procurator Mulierum*', in *Medieval Women*, SCH Subsidia 1, ed. by Derek Baker (Oxford: Blackwell, 1978), pp. 175-184 (p. 176).

The nineteenth-century French historian Jules Michelet saw a connection between the *restauration de la femme* and the eremitic foundations which catered for women.<sup>269</sup> For him Robert of Arbrissel was a protector of women and guardian of their interests.<sup>270</sup> A contemporary of Michelet, J. Pétigny, similarly saw the hermit leaders as attempting to raise women from their low status and claimed that Robert was inspired by a ‘feeling of pious and tender compassion for the female sex’.<sup>271</sup> By the early twentieth century Gougaud had turned this theory round and claimed that by his intimacy with women, referred to by Bishop Marbod and Geoffrey of Vendôme in their letters discussed above, Robert was intentionally testing himself by attempting to attain a type of martyrdom, the practice of syneisactism commonly found in Celtic asceticism.<sup>272</sup> More recently Dominique Logna-Prat took this theory a stage further, claiming that the *mulierum consortia* were an essential part of the penitential design whereby Robert could claim he had overcome temptation and was truly ‘dead to his sex’.<sup>273</sup> These are interesting suggestions, but it cannot be said for certain that Robert was aiming to achieve any of these ideals and there is no evidence for these practices in any French or English eremitic community. Neither can it be claimed that hermits were responsible for changing attitudes towards the female sex. They did, however, tap into existing popular feeling and responded positively by providing alternative routes for women to pursue a religious life.

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<sup>269</sup> Jules Michelet, *Histoire de France* I (Paris: Calmann-Levy, 1870), pp. 285-6.

<sup>270</sup> For a discussion of Robert as protector of women see Smith, ‘Robert of Arbrissel’, pp. 175-184.

<sup>271</sup> Pétigny, ‘Robert d’Arbrissel’, p. 14.

<sup>272</sup> Louis Gougaud, ‘*Mulierum Consortia: Étude sur la syneisaktisme chez les ascètes celtiques*’, *Eriu: Journal of the School of Irish Learning* 9.2 (1923), 9-10.

<sup>273</sup> Dominique Logna-Prat, ‘La femme dans la perspective pénitentielle des ermites du Bas-Maine (fin XIe-début XIIe siècles)’, *Revue d’histoire de la spiritualité* 53 (1977), 61.



## Chapter 5

### Hermits and their Relationships with Society

Since primary sources for the study of eremitism were written by ecclesiastics, evaluation of the relationship between hermits and the Church is rendered relatively straightforward. These authors have their own particular reasons for writing and, those having been recognised, allowances can be made for their partiality, prejudices and hidden objectives. Using the same texts to decipher the role of hermits in the wider society is more challenging. That hermits engaged with secular society at all might seem anomalous, given that seclusion was a fundamental principle of eremitism. The language of eremitism refers to hermits as exiles and of being ‘dead to the world’ yet, in contradiction, hagiographers drew attention to the crowds which gathered around them in the forests of France or the numerous visitors who found their way to hermit cells in England. Even allowing for hagiographical licence, it cannot be denied that hermits became popular and were endowed with a special status within their communities. From being ordinary priests, monks, chaplains, merchants, soldiers, young girls fleeing marriage or widowed countesses, their decisions to forsake the temporal world and move to the *eremus* transformed them into semi-divine individuals believed to possess holy wisdom obtained directly from God which, in turn, earned them the respect and admiration from the whole of society. How can this phenomenon be explained? Historians have made numerous attempts to answer this question, which has resulted in a broad range of views on the role and function of the hermit in the middle ages.

In 1971 Peter Brown published his seminal paper exploring the function of holy men living in the deserts of Egypt and Syria during the fourth and fifth centuries. This initiated a debate concerning the holy man as a mediator between villagers and the outside world, a ‘hinge-man’ who was a substitute for the local patron in times of crisis, for, as Brown says, ‘what men expected of the holy man coincides with what they sought in the rural

patron'.<sup>274</sup> Brown subsequently modified his arguments, claiming that he had not given sufficient emphasis to the religious aspects of the holy man's role.<sup>275</sup> Nevertheless, his concept of the holy man as intermediary was widely accepted at the time, being revisited in subsequent decades and used as a model for the evaluation of the role of hermits in Western Europe. One major limitation in attempting to apply Brown's thesis elsewhere is that his subjects were the hermits of the Syrian and Egyptian deserts of the fourth to sixth centuries, a period when that society was in transition from a polytheistic to a monotheistic world. Andrew Louth has re-examined this subject most recently and has concluded that Brown's holy men have to be seen in the broader context of the experiences of the early Church.<sup>276</sup> The distance in place and time, and the differences in culture and tradition make any comparison with the hermits of the eleventh and twelfth centuries an imperfect exercise.

Despite this, Brown's original theory was adopted by Henry Mayr-Harting, who produced a sound and valuable study of Wulfric of Haselbury in an attempt to assess the social functions of English hermits. An example of an enclosed hermit, Wulfric nevertheless had a very strong presence in the community. Mayr-Harting shows how Wulfric was very involved and knowledgeable in all aspects of life beyond his cell, in politics, religion and at a local level; he acted as arbitrator, advisor, doctor and banker and as such was a "hinge-man" between the local community and the wider world'.<sup>277</sup> But Mayr-Harting does not use this case study as a general conclusion regarding the broader function of hermits. Susan Ridyard revisited Mayr-Harting's study, taking Godric of Finchale for her study, which, like that of Wulfric, is a detailed analysis of one hermit's interaction

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<sup>274</sup> Peter Brown, 'The rise and function of the holy man in late antiquity', *Journal of Roman Studies* 61 (1971), 80-101 (p. 87).

<sup>275</sup> Peter Brown, *Authority and the Sacred: Aspects of the Christianisation of the Roman World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 59 and 63.

<sup>276</sup> Andrew Louth, 'Holiness and Sanctity in the Early Church', in *Saints and Sanctity* ed. by Peter C. Clarke and Tony Claydon, SCH 47 (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2011), pp. 1-18.

<sup>277</sup> Mayr-Harting, 'Functions of a Twelfth-Century Recluse', p. 344.

with those around him but which, again, makes no assumptions about the role of the hermit in the wider society.<sup>278</sup>

It was not until 1990 that an innovative interpretation of the function of the hermit was offered by Christopher Holdsworth in a paper entitled 'Hermits and the Powers of the Frontier'. While accepting the influence of the opinions of Peter Brown, Holdsworth also acknowledged a debt to the cultural anthropologist Victor Turner and his work on rites of passage in African tribal communities, paying particular attention to the concept of liminality.<sup>279</sup> Turner explained the liminal state as one of being in limbo, of being 'betwixt and between', as when individuals are excluded from a society they were once part of and have not yet been re-incorporated into it.<sup>280</sup> Holdsworth conjectures that hermits on entering the *eremus* crossed the threshold to a state of liminality and points to the similarity in the characteristics of both: of being dead to the world, existing in a wilderness, acceptance of humility and of a 'reversal of worldly status, in which the underling comes to the top whilst the highest is brought low'.<sup>281</sup> This could certainly help to explain how ordinary members of society, on adopting a life of eremitism, became high-status figures. Holdsworth concludes that by living on the frontier, existing on the margins of society and beyond the constraints of an ordered world, hermits acquired the power enabling them to function as mediators, counsellors and wise men. While this theory has an attraction, it is a twentieth-century construct imposed upon what could be seen as an inexplicable phenomenon of the central middle ages and it is highly unlikely that hermits, nor their hagiographers, regarded entrance into the *eremus* in this way. Caroline Bynum has certainly argued that Turner's theory is not applicable as far as women religious are concerned.<sup>282</sup>

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<sup>278</sup> Susan J. Ridyard, 'Functions of a Twelfth-Century Recluse Revisited: The Case of Godric of Finchale', in *Belief and Culture in the Middle Ages. Studies presented to Henry Mayr-Harting*, ed. by Richard Gameson and Henrietta Leyser (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 236-50.

<sup>279</sup> Holdsworth, 'Hermits', pp. 55-76, (pp. 56 and 68).

<sup>280</sup> Turner, *The Ritual Process*, p. 81.

<sup>281</sup> Holdsworth, 'Hermits', p. 68.

<sup>282</sup> Caroline W. Bynum, 'Women's Stories, Women's Symbols: A Critique of Victor Turner's Theory of Liminality', in *Anthropology and the Study of Religion* ed. by Robert L.

Furthermore, as Geremek has shown, hermits were just one group which fell into the category of ‘marginal men’; lepers, outlaws and vagabonds, heretics and *jongleurs* are some of the groups he places on the margins of structured society,<sup>283</sup> but none of these are recognised as possessing the kind of power which has been attributed to hermits. One explanation for this could depend on how the different marginal groups arrived at that state: hermits volunteered to exclude themselves from the mainstream, whereas lepers and outlaws did not.

There is no denying that hermits did attain positions of influence and maintained a high status in both the spiritual and temporal worlds, but this arose more from the deeds they performed and contacts they had with their communities than any notion of being frontiersmen. To what extent is it possible to claim that hermits held positions of power and if they did, how can we assess its nature? Power can be wielded in many ways and is based on complex relationships among groups, institutions and individuals.<sup>284</sup> In his study of the inquisitorial use of power in the Languedoc, James Given argues that above everything else, inquisitors were seeking to control behaviour, but he also recognises that such power ‘cannot simply be reduced to a matter of will and intention of would-be rulers’. He concludes that inquisitors had perfected their techniques to the extent that reality itself could be altered.<sup>285</sup> This theory recalls Foucault’s presumption that there can be no power without an ‘economy of discourses of truth’ which not only shapes the way people view the world, but also makes it impossible for them to view it in any other way.<sup>286</sup> Through the Inquisition’s ‘technologies of power’, including intimidation and interrogation, leading to confession,

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Moore and Frank E. Reynolds (Chicago: Centre for the Scientific Study of Religion, 1984), pp. 112-17.

<sup>283</sup> Bronislaw Geremek, ‘The Marginal Man’, in *Medieval World*, ed. by Jacques Le Goff and trans. by Lydia G. Cochrane (London: Collins and Brown, 1990), pp. 347-371.

<sup>284</sup> R. A. Dahl, ‘The Concept of Power’, *Behavioural Science* 2 (1957), 201-15.

<sup>285</sup> James B. Given, ‘The Inquisitors of Languedoc and the Medieval Technology of Power’, *American Historical Journal* (1989), 336-59 and James B. Given, *Inquisition and Medieval Society: Power, Discipline and Resistance in Languedoc* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2001), pp. 1-5.

<sup>286</sup> Given, *Inquisition and Medieval Society*, p. 3; Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-7*, ed. and trans. by Colin Gordon and others (Brighton: Harvester, 1980), p. 3.

Given contends that fantasies could be created which, through coercion and power, could be given legal validation and become socially accepted.<sup>287</sup>

The power which Given is describing here is that associated with what he himself calls an ‘institution of government’, and therefore we might expect that its members were consciously and actively seeking to control and direct the behaviour of those it sought to dominate. Was this, however, the intention of the hermit, and if not, how can we assess what the nature of their power might have been?

The power of the hermit has traditionally been explained through his capacity to influence events or the activities of others, even those who ranked among the highest in the land. Peter Brown, Henry Mayr-Harting and Christopher Holdsworth claim that this was achieved through their skills of prophesying, interpreting visions, performing miracles and cursing, as for example, when the cellarer at Montacute Abbey drowned following a curse issued by Wulfric because the former had withheld the latter’s supplies. While there is no doubt that the holy men cited in these works did command the respect of their contemporaries and, indeed, offered a valuable service, even filling vacuums within geographically and politically fragmented entities, a satisfactory explanation for the derivation of this presumed power has yet to be offered. A search through the primary texts is unlikely to yield any hint that hermits harboured any conscious desires to dominate or control the behaviour of others. More commonly, hagiographers stressed the obligatory environment of ‘infinite solitude’, as when Marbod of Rennes stressed that the aim of Robert of Brioude was to build his cell ‘far from the haunts of man’.<sup>288</sup> There was also frustration when people attempted to invade their space, as when Wulsi sought permission to leave his cell at Crowland and establish himself at Evesham where he hoped to avoid disturbance, or Wulfric refused to open his door when visitors called. The whole ethos of the hermit lifestyle implied subservience, deference and meekness, in following, as most of them

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<sup>287</sup> He cites as one example of this the contemporary assumption that Jews regularly committed ritual murder or poisoned wells.

<sup>288</sup> Marbod of Rennes, *Vita Sancti Roberti abbatii Casae Dei*, *PL* 171: 1510.

claimed, the monastic virtues of humility, obedience and poverty. If such virtues drove their motivations, then power was not an attribute they should have been seeking. The well-known founders of the new monastic orders might seem to be exceptions to these claims, but even they took on these roles reluctantly, the pressures on them to do so leaving them with limited options.

The solution to this paradox – that hermits could be humble, obedient and subservient yet wield considerable power at the same time – lay with the hagiographers. The purpose of the *Vitae* was to promote the virtues of their subjects, to give pre-eminence to the skills of the hermit in mediating divine power, while the ensuing attainment of eternal salvation is portrayed as an honour justly deserved for loyal service to God. Power, which is so often credited directly to the hermit, derives from the words of their hagiographers because it is they who subjectively selected what was worthy of being recorded.<sup>289</sup> Authors' selections of deeds and events were made for their own purposes and presented from the perspective of their own prejudices, using the literary genre fashionable at that time. Hagiographers had to present their material to best advantage if they were to persuade others to their cause, and in the manner of the 'spin doctors' of today, transformed negative aspects of eremitical lives into virtues by explaining them as struggles against evil or as temptations which, inevitably, the hermit always overcame, justly revealing his sanctity. As hagiography is the main source of knowledge for the role and functions of medieval hermits, modern perceptions are also formed by the propaganda and we perhaps see an image of power and authority when none existed.

Hermits did not always have good relationships with their local communities, as is shown in the examples discussed below. Trust and respect from their compatriots had to be won and this was achieved through the example of exemplary lives. Asceticism and rejection of temporal cares, along with the virtues embodied within the eremitic life, were sufficient

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<sup>289</sup> The aims and objectives of authors when writing about hermits are discussed further in Chapter 1, pp. 29-32.

evidence that a holy man lived in their midst – rumour and gossip, no doubt, did the rest. Once a hermit had been accepted by a local community, an expectation developed that he would perform the functions of healer, miracle worker, protector and mediator, in much the same way as saints were expected to protect their *familiae*.<sup>290</sup> Undoubtedly, an ascetic and holy figure, and all that this symbolised, could generate hopes and expectations in the psyche of those living in an unstable and precarious world, while the faith of the people in the ability of a hermit to relieve their anxieties put pressure on him to respond in a manner which the traditions of the Scriptures and the Church dictated.<sup>291</sup> The faith of the people played an extremely significant part in the function of the hermit in society, for without their enduring belief in his holiness and divine talents, there could be no power in the hermit. It was faith which drew large crowds to the cells of holy men; it was their belief that encouraged them to seek cures, to request that injustices be corrected and to see miracles when no other explanation could be found. This mentality was endorsed by Baldwin, Abbot of Ford, who confirmed that ‘all miracles are either through faith or because of faith... what God requires is faith, not the power to do miracles’.<sup>292</sup>

Peter Brown’s concept of the holy man as a figure of power was adopted by others to establish the relationships hermits had with society and, as a concept, has had a profound influence on the way in which the medieval hermit has been perceived by historians. It is an approach which suggests that social contact was invariably on the hermit’s terms, that interaction usually had supernatural connotations and that hermits were always welcome and valued members within their neighbourhoods. This was not always the case, however, as the evidence also shows that tensions between hermits and the secular world were frequent and that a connection with local social structures was often lacking. As demonstrated in Chapter Three,

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<sup>290</sup> Head, *Hagiography*, pp. 187-201. There is a more detailed consideration of Thomas Head’s theories in Chapter 8.

<sup>291</sup> Ludo Milis, *Angelic Monks and Earthly Men: monasticism and its meaning to medieval society*, (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 1992), found a similar relationship between monastic communities and the wider world, which he termed ‘mutual reciprocity’.

<sup>292</sup> Baldwin of Ford, *Liber de Commendatione Fidei*, PL 204: 604, 606.

hermits were more than adept at looking after themselves and each other. The support structures they established for living in groups in the forests of France or independently in caves and cells in England demonstrated their resilience in adapting to the harshness of their circumstances. Yet despite this they still had to rely on the wider society to contribute to their subsistence, more so for those who were strictly enclosed.

On entering the eremitic life, the first and overriding requirement was to procure a cell or a small parcel of land on which to build a hermitage, which inevitably brought them into contact with landowners, estate managers, foresters and others of similar jurisdiction. Hagiographers, following their intentions to show that their subjects were directed by God, usually attribute the foundation of a hermitage to divine intervention as the hermit was directed to a particular site through a series of dreams or visions. The author of the Life of Geoffrey of Chalard explains how this hermit experienced a vision of ‘a place situated on a hill with the River L’Isle running at its feet’.<sup>293</sup> Geoffrey was shown other sites which he rejected because they did not correspond to his vision, but his search ended when an inhabitant of the village of Versavaux invited him to view a site in the forest which, he advised the hermit, ‘will conform more to your needs’.<sup>294</sup> On seeing it, Geoffrey instinctively knew this was the place to establish his hermitage. Moreover, it was the cemetery of a ruined church and already a sacred place. The frequency and similarity of these stories about the origins of hermitages suggest the employment of hagiographical *topoi*, and in the case of Geoffrey’s settlement, the intention of the author might have been to emphasise a symbolic restoration of religious worship which would be pleasing in the eyes of God.

A similar story is found about an English hermit, known simply as the Baker of Dale. He also had a dream in which the Virgin Mary advised him

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<sup>293</sup> *Vita Beati Gaufredi*, ed. by Auguste Bosvieux, *Mémoires de la société des sciences naturelles et archéologique de la Creuse*, 3 (1862) pp. 75-120 (p. 78), ‘...per visum demonstravit ei locum in monte situm, Ila fluvio subterfluente...’.

<sup>294</sup> *Vita Beati Gaufredi*, p. 80.

to go to Depedale to serve her and her Son in ‘*vita solitaria*’.<sup>295</sup> On finding the place, with the help of a local woman, he carved for himself out of the rock a small dwelling and an altar and so established his hermitage.<sup>296</sup> Depedale was actually on the estate of ‘a certain man of great power’, Ralph fitzGeremond, lord of Ockbrook and Alveston. The *Narratio Fundationis* explains that, having returned from Normandy to visit his lands and forests, Ralph decided to hunt in the woods of Ockbrook, where he saw smoke rising from the cave of the man of God. Outraged, he wondered by what ‘impudence anyone dared to make himself a habitation in his wood without his permission’.<sup>297</sup> When he found the man ‘clothed in old rags and skins’ and learned why he was there, Ralph was ‘smitten at the heart’ and willingly donated the land as well as the tithe of his own mill at Borrowash.<sup>298</sup> It would seem that divine intervention did not always make allowances for the material concerns of landowners, and in reality a hermit’s choices were limited by those resources that were available.

Noble patronage had a strong influence in where and how hermits chose to settle, and this is demonstrated clearly in the case of Bernard of Tiron.

Having settled a small community at Chênedet in the forest of Fougères, he had to leave when the seigneur, Ralph of Fougères, realised that the hermits had begun to clear much of the land for agriculture. Situated close to his castle, it was his prime hunting ground, in which he had enclosed some wild beasts ready for the chase, rendering it totally unsuitable for an eremitic community. Ralph offered them an alternative site much further away in the forest of Savigny which had fertile soil and was well served by rivers.

Unfortunately for Bernard, Vitalis of Savigny, a companion from his early eremitic life, also enjoyed Ralph’s patronage and had already built a

<sup>295</sup> Thomas de Musca, ‘Chronicle’, p. 3.

<sup>296</sup> Thomas de Musca, ‘Chronicle’, p. 3.

<sup>297</sup> Thomas de Musca, ‘Chronicle’, p. 3, ‘*Magnae autem potestatis homo quidam, nomine Radulphus, Filius Geremundi...*’, and ‘...indignanter admirabatur vehementius, quo temeritatis fronte auderet aliquis in bosco suo mansionem sibi facere, sine ipsius licentia’.

<sup>298</sup> Thomas de Musca, ‘Chronicle’, p. 3, ‘...veteribus panniculis et pellibus indutum.’

‘...compunctus corde idem Radulphus Filius Geremundi, et videns ipsius hominis calamitatem, concessit sibi locum; deditque ei decimam molendini sui de Burgo, ad ipsius sustentationem’.

hermitage here,<sup>299</sup> just two *stades* distant from Bernard and his companions. This was a distance of approximately four hundred yards and, as Geoffrey Grossus (author of the Life of Bernard) expresses it, 'divine providence did not want two luminaries to live so close together'.<sup>300</sup> One of them had to move away and, although Geoffrey does not admit it, Bernard no doubt felt that he should defer to his earlier master and sent a small group of his disciples to find another suitable place. Attempts to avoid close proximity to other hermitages placed an additional pressure on hermits, especially when at the mercy of their patrons for the gift of any available land as, for example, in the Limousin, where the communities of Obazine and Coyroux were so close that it was possible to hear the bells of one church from the other.

Although Ralph of Fougères was a sympathetic patron of hermits, his benevolence could only be stretched so far. With the expansion of these eremitic communities, his forests were obviously becoming overpopulated with hermitages, judging by the short distance between the dwellings of Bernard and Vitalis. Not only was this a drain on local resources, but the fact that hermits were also clearing swathes of forest land affected Ralph's own business and recreational pursuits. For secular benefactors the protection of material possessions often took precedence over spiritual interests. Conflicting aims of patrons could similarly affect the lives of hermits, and Bernard of Tiron's search for a suitable location continued to be problematic due to a disagreement between a different patron and his mother. The companions Bernard had sent ahead to find an alternative site, once again following instructions given in a vision, approached Rotrou II, Count of Perche. Geoffrey Grossus tells that Rotrou welcomed them and offered them land in the area of Arcisses, close to his own castle of Nogent, where his ancestors had built a chapel.<sup>301</sup> This was a very generous donation of fertile soil surrounded by forests, irrigated with fountains, suitable for the cultivation of vines and the construction of dwellings.

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<sup>299</sup> This was the foundation of what was to become the great monastery of Savigny.

<sup>300</sup> *Vita Bernardi*, PL 172: 1405.

<sup>301</sup> *Vita Bernardi*, PL 172: 1405-6.

Having granted this area to Bernard and his followers in perpetuity, Rotrou then withdrew from the agreement due, it would appear, to his succumbing to pressure from his mother, Beatrice, who happened to be a patron of Cluny and had welcomed some members of the order into her castle. She feared her son's gift, being so close to that of her own beneficiaries, would cause provocation.<sup>302</sup> Given that Bernard had already engaged with the Cluniacs in a bitter dispute over the ownership of the monastery of St Cyprian, it was probably a wise decision. He accepted the outcome in good spirit and agreed to Rotrou's offer of land at Tiron-Gardais, which became the foundation of the mother church of the order of Tiron. Relationships between hermits and their patrons, therefore, could often be strained, and where this was the case, the hermit appears as a subservient figure rather than as one of power as argued by Peter Brown and Christopher Holdsworth above. As is often the case with hagiography, however, authors were not averse to turning these stories to their advantage, and use such incidents as moral *exempla* by giving the hermit a controlling hand in the relationship with his benefactor.

An example of this is found in the Life of Robert of Knaresborough, a hermit of the late twelfth century, who began his eremitic life in a cave but moved to a cell alongside the church at Rudfarlington in Knaresborough forest when Helena, a *matrona nobilis*, became his patron.<sup>303</sup> Attacks by thieves and his growing popularity forced him to seek other locations, first at Spufforth, a market centre near Knaresborough which was also under Helena's patronage, and then at Hedley Priory following an invitation from the monks. When it became clear that they did not appreciate Robert's asceticism, he returned to his earlier cell at Rudfarlington, where Helena granted further gifts of lands, farm animals and craftsmen to help with the building of barns and a hospice.<sup>304</sup> Unfortunately for Robert, and with echoes from the tale of the Baker of Dale, Helena's lord, William de

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<sup>302</sup> *Vita Bernardi*, PL 172: 1406.

<sup>303</sup> According to Golding, 'The Hermit and the Hunter', p. 99, note 20, Helena has not been identified, but he surmises that she was a member of either the Plumpton or Perci families and was certainly a vassal of William de Stuteville, as Rudfarlington lay within the fee of Knaresborough.

<sup>304</sup> Golding, 'The Hermit and the Hunter', pp. 99-100.

Stuteville, was furious when he came across the small eremitic group in the middle of his hunting forests. He ordered the destruction of the cell, an order which he gave a rather symbolic three times, at which point he had a bad dream. He was confronted by three men, as black as ink, armed with two maces and pulling spiked sledges. In the dream, William was handed one of the maces and told to defend himself as the three men were champions of the hermit, upon which he fell to his knees and begged for mercy. The following day, William, having had an almost miraculous change of heart, went to make his peace with Robert and thus became his generous patron and benefactor, granting him land from the rocks above the River Nidd to Grimbald Kirkstone as well as horses, oxen, a granary, a house for the poor and donations of food annually at Christmas for Robert and thirteen poor men. The unknown author of Robert's Life, in true hagiographical fashion, has put in place all the characteristics of a moral *exemplum*, illustrating how selfish and violent behaviour, especially against one of God's servants, will result in divine retribution. William's dream, of course, reflects his guilty conscience, hence his rush the following morning to make amends for his conduct. In this example, the hagiographer demonstrates the power of the hermit to good effect.

These examples show that relationships between hermits and patrons often began acrimoniously, but hagiographers invariably reveal a harmonious ending with the hermit as the victor in these disputes. It is impossible to say how far we can trust these accounts and there is every possibility that tensions between secular patrons and hermits continued to cause friction. There is little doubt, however, that donations, whether of land or other goods, were accepted in all humility or through a mutually agreeable settlement. These tensions no doubt reflect the growing demand for a valuable resource as more arable land was required to sustain a growing population.<sup>305</sup> This gave rise to an increase in land reclamation particularly

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<sup>305</sup> It is impossible to calculate accurately population trends for the eleventh to thirteenth centuries although it is generally accepted that populations were increasing across Europe at this time. However, see *British Population History: From the Black Death to the present day*, ed. by Michael Anderson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 74 and Figure 1, p. 77, in which John Hatcher, using the Domesday survey as his starting point,

in areas which Dr. Brian Golding refers to as ‘marginal land’ - fens, marshes and woodlands.<sup>306</sup> Forests, however, had been sacrosanct since the Norman Conquest when they were designated as royal hunting grounds and in which a separate legal system operated, imported with the Normans and known as the forest law.<sup>307</sup> These laws, known as ‘venison and vert’, were primarily for the protection of the king’s game, along with the green undergrowth necessary for the sustenance of the animals. Anyone caught poaching, foraging, constructing fences or using wood for building, faced draconian penalties, such as the loss of hands or blinding, and that is why it was important for hermits to obtain the goodwill and consent of landowners before building hermitages. Woodland hermits like Godric of Finchale, Robert of Knaresborough and the communities of north-west France frequently constructed their own dwellings, grazed animals and cultivated garden plots in such areas, all of which could potentially have contravened these laws.

With extensive afforestation throughout the twelfth century, a third of England was arbitrarily brought under the jurisdiction of forest law.<sup>308</sup> This inevitably had an impact on the amount of land available for the increased numbers wishing to live an eremitic life. They were not only contending with those charged with the protection of hunting grounds, as in the case of the hermits Clement and Hervey, who were regularly harassed by foresters,<sup>309</sup> but were also competing for patronage with the monastic orders, particularly the Cistercians with their requirement for large areas of grazing land for sheep, and with the Cluniacs, as seen in the case of Bernard of Tiron. Land that had once been considered ‘waste’, the symbolic desert

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shows the sharp population increase in England from approximately 1.5 million to 2.5 million in 1100 A.D. to approximately 4.5 million to 6 million by the end of the thirteenth century.

<sup>306</sup> Golding, ‘The Hermit and the Hunter’, p. 114.

<sup>307</sup> Significantly, the word ‘forest’ in the middle ages was not limited to thickly wooded areas as today but referred to any land where the king’s animals sheltered, so could also include pasture and heath land.

<sup>308</sup> Golding, ‘The Hermit and the Hunter’, p. 114.

<sup>309</sup> *The Stoneleigh Leger Book*, ed. by Rodney H. Hilton, Dugdale Society 24 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960), pp. xii-xvi.

in Western Europe, had become a commercially valuable resource.<sup>310</sup> After the Baker of Dale's hermitage had been acquired by Augustinian canons, they had to return to their mother house of Calke when Henry II decided he wanted the land for hunting. Ralph of Fougères had moved Bernard of Tiron's early group to a more distant site for the same reason, and the additional half carucate of the wood at Swenesco granted by King John to Robert of Knaresborough was only given as long as it did no harm to the royal forest. Brian Golding sees these conflicts of interest as an underlying tension between the 'powerful of this world' and those of 'humble devotion'.<sup>311</sup>

Despite the apparent tensions between secular interests and ecclesiastical attitudes over eremitic communities, there is evidence of a growing acceptance of hermits by the aristocracy and landed classes. Benefactors could ostensibly come from all social ranks,<sup>312</sup> but naturally the sources tend to reflect charitable acts from those with the means to do so. Ann Warren has examined the extent of support from different social groups through the endowments and donations granted to English anchorites from the twelfth to the fifteenth centuries. Beginning with royal sponsorship, she explores how the preferences of individual monarchs varied throughout this period. Using evidence from the Pipe Rolls for the reigns of Henry II (1154-89), Richard I (1189-99) and John (1199-1216) and supplemented for Henry III onwards by the Close Rolls and Calendars of Patent Rolls and Entries in the Papal Registers, she has identified the numbers of anchorites supported or endowed and how they were maintained by each monarch. The motivations for providing this support, however, are much more speculative. Henry II, for example, typically gave one penny a day to his favoured anchorites while John's preference was to sponsor hermits. Henry III's gift of choice for his beneficiaries was wood for their hearths.<sup>313</sup> The pattern of Henry II's

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<sup>310</sup> See Golding, 'The Hermit and the Hunter', p. 114 for details on the commercial value of forests and hunts, with additional references in the footnotes.

<sup>311</sup> Golding, 'The Hermit and the Hunter', p. 116.

<sup>312</sup> Licence, *Hermits and Recluses*, p. 94. Tom Licence makes an excellent contribution to the general discussion of patronage of English hermits on pages 91-105.

<sup>313</sup> Warren, *Anchorites*, pp. 146 and 165. The distinction between anchorite and hermit used here is taken from Warren's own use of the terms.

alms-giving fluctuated, showing increases in 1171-2 and again in 1181-2. The increase during the first period could be explained by feelings of guilt which led to increased acts of piety following the murder of Archbishop Becket in 1170, but Warren suggests that on both occasions Henry II was concerned for his own death and that this accounted for his increased benefactions. However, she acknowledges that 'many groups shared in this wider distribution of Henry's wealth', and also states that thirty-six different institutions were recipients of royal grants.<sup>314</sup> Records such as these, therefore, cannot be used as substantive evidence that royalty valued hermits, recluses and anchorites more highly than other deserving groups.

The same conclusion equally applies to Warren's surveys of donations and grants from lower social ranks, nobility, gentry, merchants and other lay groups, where last wills and testaments are her main sources of information.<sup>315</sup> Wills for the merchant and lay groups only survive in useful numbers for the later middle ages, a period when lay piety began to express itself through an escalation in charitable grants in general and to non-religious institutions in particular, such as hospitals, prisons, leper houses and those caring for the poor.<sup>316</sup> These show that hermits were not only competing with other religious groups for benefactors—especially in the thirteenth century with the advent of the mendicant orders—but also increasingly with secular foundations as well. In order to gauge the true value which different sectors of the community placed in particular on hermits, a comparison needs to be made with the patterns of alms-giving to other religious or charitable institutions. This might offer some indication of whether they were favoured more, or less, than other religious groups.<sup>317</sup>

Warren's survey approaches the subject of benefactions to anchorites from the perspective of their patrons, but the records she uses are limited in what

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<sup>314</sup> Warren, *Anchorites*, p. 146, and footnote 24.

<sup>315</sup> Warren examines the benefactions of these groups in Chapters 6 and 7 of her book.

<sup>316</sup> Warren, *Anchorites*, p. 227. This is based on bequests of London testators. As urban populations were growing and were the places where these secular charitable institutions were established, it might be expected that hermits would face greater competition for grants here than they would in rural areas.

<sup>317</sup> Warren, *Anchorites*, pp. 146-7.

they reveal about the relationships between the two. The Rolls give no indication as to whether monarchs ever met the hermits they sponsored or what criteria were used when determining which ones to support.

Accounting records, by their very nature, reveal little about the relationships between the donor and the recipient. Similarly, wills and cartularies rarely disclose whether there had been any personal interaction between the two parties. Nevertheless, when they are used in conjunction with other sources, a mixed picture emerges of associations between hermits and different levels of society. References to communications between hermits and monarchs are few, but where they do exist the reactions of the hermits are quite revealing. Wulfric maintained a stern but paternal relationship with King Stephen, who visited the hermit at least twice during his reign. On the first occasion the hermit chastised Stephen for failing to rule as he should,<sup>318</sup> and at a later date, some time before the Treaty of Wallingford (pre-1153), Wulfric severely chided him a second time, following which the King ‘wept copiously’ and made his confession.<sup>319</sup> Yet when Queen Matilda visited him ‘he did not pay much attention to her’,<sup>320</sup> only prophesying that Stephen would be taken captive and she would make herself pleasant to the poor, clearly a message to Matilda that she needed a lesson in humility. King Henry I made at least one visit to Wulfric, thought to have been around 1130 when he spent Christmas at Winchester, and they spoke at Wulfric’s window for some time, but regrettably there is no account of the content of their conversation. Another example of a royal meeting with a hermit occurred when King John was taken by Sir Brian de l’Isle to visit Robert of Knaresborough sometime in 1216. King John was not only kept waiting but the hermit also, rather audaciously, tested the King’s humility by picking an ear of corn and offering it to John with the command, ‘If you are a king, make another like it’. When John admitted that he could not, Robert was satisfied saying that there was no other king but the one Lord, and monarch and hermit parted on amicable terms.<sup>321</sup>

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<sup>318</sup> *Vita Wulfrici*, p. 21.

<sup>319</sup> *Vita Wulfrici*, p. 117.

<sup>320</sup> *Vita Wulfrici*, p. 108.

<sup>321</sup> *Metrical Life*, p. 132.

The sources do not reveal the same number of encounters between royalty and hermits in France,<sup>322</sup> although the close connection between Fontevraud and the Plantagenets has been well documented and may stem from the support given by the Counts of Anjou to Robert of Arbrissel and his earlier establishments prior to Henry II's accession to the throne of England. The only significant encounter between French hermits and monarchy which was widely reported at the time took place at the Council of Poitiers in 1100, when Bernard of Tiron and Robert of Arbrissel opposed the adulterous King Philip I over his liaison with Bertrade, the fifth wife of Fulk le Réchin, count of Anjou.<sup>323</sup> Philip and Bertrade had been excommunicated twice at earlier councils and this indictment was to be repeated at Poitiers. The assembly had been convened by two papal legates, John of Gubbio and Cardinal Benedict of Saint Eudoxia, to settle pressing issues concerning concubinage, consanguinity and incest,<sup>324</sup> subjects close to the hearts of hermits, as revealed earlier. The proceedings degenerated into a riot when William IX, Count of Poitiers, gave the command to kill all those prelates present who wished to condemn Philip. The Count was motivated by the fact that his own marital circumstances were similar to that of his King. As the clerics hurriedly fled the scene, Bernard and Robert remained steadfast and 'decided to pronounce the sentence of excommunication', making them martyrs in the eyes of Bernard's hagiographer.<sup>325</sup> The incident does reflect the continuing tensions which existed between secular powers and the Church and, as shown elsewhere, Robert and Bernard were devoted to supporting the reform initiatives regarding marriage. Their actions at the Council of Poitiers thus come as no surprise; however, it is the hagiographer who interpreted their actions as the conduct of men with a gift of divine power. Hermits were not averse to standing up to those in authority and failing to show the deference expected

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<sup>322</sup> This could be due to the geo-political fragmentation of France in this period, rather than that French monarchs did not encounter or sponsor hermits.

<sup>323</sup> *Vita Bernardi*, PL 172: 1396.

<sup>324</sup> Dalarun, *Robert of Arbrissel*, pp. 101-5, discusses the deeper issues underlying the debates at the Council of Poitiers in 1100. The controversial impact of the union between King Philip I and Bertrade has been examined by Georges Duby, *The Knight, the Lady and the Priest: the making of modern marriage in medieval France*, trans. by Barbara Bray (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983), pp. 3-18.

<sup>325</sup> *Vita Bernardi*, PL 172: 1396, '... ut nec ab incepto excommunicationis desisterent'.

to those of higher rank, yet despite this, or perhaps because of it, they were constantly sought as confidantes by the aristocracy and landed gentry who sought their advice and guidance.

It is, however, through the many stories of hermits and their interactions with those of lower rank which demonstrate the special relationships they shared with their local communities. Even here, relationships with local neighbourhoods were not always instantly harmonious, especially when a hermit or group of ascetics first arrived in a locality. Godric of Finchale's peasant neighbours watched enviously as the hermit's crops ripened on land which had been common pasture for generations and, in an act of revenge, they released their sheep and cattle into the field, destroying his harvest.<sup>326</sup> Similarly, it was made clear that Stephen of Obazine and his early band of followers were not welcome when no-one invited them for a meal after a service on the feast of the Resurrection, despite the fact that one hermit sang the Mass and another administered communion. The group returned to their settlement after the service feeling very sad.<sup>327</sup> The anonymous author of the Life of Geoffrey of Chalard also recalled how this hermit told the tale of an earlier ascetic, Robert, whom he believed to be from Flanders, and who was expelled from his hermitage with a 'rare violence' by the neighbouring priests,<sup>328</sup> but, unfortunately, offers no explanation for their conduct.

There were frequent occasions when hermits were made to feel unwelcome and had to work hard to win the trust of the local clerics and inhabitants. They were often seen as foreigners in the neighbourhood because, following the eremitic practice of living in 'voluntary exile', hermits preferred to establish themselves some distance from their place of birth and, as strangers, were naturally regarded with suspicion. Hence the resentment and anger directed towards Godric, a newcomer in the midst of a traditional community, which was compounded when Flambard, Bishop of Durham, local lord and patron of the hermit, gave him the pasture to grow his crops.

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<sup>326</sup> *Vita Godrici*, pp. 74-5.

<sup>327</sup> *Vita Stephani*, p. 50, '... cum nullus eos ad prandium invitaret, non absque mestitia ad metatum medire ceperunt'.

<sup>328</sup> *Vie de Geoffroy du Chalard*, p. 65.

It would seem that villagers had good reason to be nervous of newcomers in their midst. The cold reception meted out to Stephen of Obazine may have been the result of a *pseudochorita* (false hermit) who had previously lived in the area and who,<sup>329</sup> having built himself an oratory and been offered many gifts by the local people which he willingly accepted, was found to have absconded with all their donations, when they returned to hear him sing a solemn Mass, never to be seen again. The author of Stephen's Life tells us that those who had believed in this false hermit 'found themselves ridiculed and offended' and that it hardened them against newcomers.<sup>330</sup> Incidents such as these might have been common as contemporaries increasingly warn of 'false hermits'. The author of the *Gesta Pontificum Cenomannensium* chose this term for Henry of Le Mans<sup>331</sup> and in a letter Robert of Arbrissel warned Ermengarde, Countess of Brittany, to beware of hypocritical monks and hermits who pretend to make long prayers in order to be noticed by others.<sup>332</sup>

By far the most damning contemporary account of hermits is found in the poem *De Falsis Eremitis qui Vagando Discurrunt*, written by Pagan Bolotin sometime between 1120 and 1135.<sup>333</sup> Unlike the condemnation of false hermits by other contemporaries, this poem is a satire; Dom Jean Leclercq considers it to be criticism of all eremitic orders rather than any specific group and certainly not aimed at any particular individual. Nevertheless, the author refers to his false hermit as 'having a preference for leaving the cloister to prowl around the towns', and says that 'he works hard at being seen and knowing the news' while 'the bishop honours him as a holy man' and seeing this 'the wise are deceived', a description which could certainly, at first glance, apply to the hermit-preachers of north-west France.<sup>334</sup> If Leclercq's dates for the composition of the work are accepted, and there is no reason to suppose that he is incorrect, most informal eremitic communities had become institutionalised by the time this poem was written

<sup>329</sup> *Vita Stephani*, p. 52.

<sup>330</sup> *Vita Stephani*, p. 52.

<sup>331</sup> See Chapter 4.

<sup>332</sup> Pétigny, 'Lettre inédite', pp. 225-235.

<sup>333</sup> Pagan Bolotin, pp. 52-86.

<sup>334</sup> Pagan Bolotin, p. 80, lines 126-133.

and the wandering hermit was less common. The most acceptable explanation for this poem is given by Leclercq in a footnote: that satire as a literary genre was becoming fashionable and it was just as common to criticise the vices of the clergy as it was the monks. The poem, then, need not be taken too seriously as a general condemnation of hermits or of eremitism.<sup>335</sup>

Despite the tensions and suspicions instigated by the sudden appearance of a hermit, the *Vitae* suggest that any animosity rarely lasted long.

Hagiographers tell how individuals or groups were very quickly 'discovered' by the local populace, whether driven by curiosity or a desire to befriend the newcomer. In the Life of Stephen of Obazine, the author tells how a man on his way to church, carrying alms for the poor who had gathered there, came across 'the retreat of the hermits'; seeing these unknown people clothed in religious habits, his surprise quickly turned to pity and he gave them the provisions instead. A short while after this, some 'bergers' found the eremitic group and spread the word in the neighbourhood, which led to many more visitors who brought with them food as alms and received 'food for the soul' in return.<sup>336</sup> This popularity did not abate, according to Stephen's hagiographer, who explains the hermit's dilemma about how he should care for so many as 'he had not chosen this site to gather vast crowds but to live there in solitude'.<sup>337</sup>

This has echoes of the problem confronting Robert of Arbrissel when living in his *eremus* at Craon and again later in Anjou, the implications of which are discussed elsewhere. Robert's companion, Bernard of Tiron, not only had 'an abundant multitude of hermits, but also a crowd of people' around him and, having settled his followers at Tiron, another multitude arrived soon after. When Anastasius found his ideal solitude, the 'inhabitants arrived from everywhere' and 'were so numerous you could see the candles

<sup>335</sup> Other contemporary satires include Walter Map, *De Nugis Curialium: Courtiers' Trifles*, rev. ed. by C. N. L. Brooke and R. A. B. Mynors (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983) and Nigel Wireker, *A Mirror for Fools: the book of Burnel the Ass*, trans. by J. H. Mozeley (Paris: University de Notre Dame Press, 1963).

<sup>336</sup> *Vita Stephani*, p. 51.

<sup>337</sup> *Vita Stephani*, p. 59.

burning before his cell from the mountains around'.<sup>338</sup> Not all hermits were as accommodating to those who wanted to meet them. When William Firmat was besieged by visitors from Tours, he moved to Laval in the forest of Concise to rid himself of the crowds. On another occasion, he fled in secrecy overnight because he wished to 'serve God alone in the solitude', and he moved again when, claiming the hermit had performed a miracle, the inhabitants of the nearby village named him 'Saint Firmat',<sup>339</sup> an accolade the hermit fiercely rejected. English hermits, whether enclosed or living freely, were, according to their hagiographers, just as popular and experienced the same recognition as those in France. John of Ford advises that Wulfric of Haselbury was constantly in demand ('all day long visitors came knocking at his window to gain advice or comfort'<sup>340</sup>), as, indeed, was the case with Godric of Finchale, who 'came into contact with a large number of people', and Bartholomew of Farne who, even in the isolation of his island retreat, was visited not just by monks but also the laity.

Far from living on the margins, hermits became integrated into social life. By the thirteenth century onwards in England, at least one holy man or woman could be found close to most towns and villages. As Rotha Mary Clay's work has shown, an increasing number of urban hermits favoured the more rigorous life of total enclosure in a cell, but who were still able to serve the community in functional ways, as gatekeepers, for example. Despite the language of hagiography, which placed hermits in the midst of a symbolic wilderness, remote from other human existence, the evidence suggests that they also had close relationships with those around them. In many ways this was forced upon them for, as has been shown, they were unable to survive without the support of their communities, which provided land, cells, or the means to build them, clothing, fuel and food. Rural hermits were much more self-sufficient, particularly where communication networks assisted them to support each other. In France, the early eremitic communities had similar relationships with their neighbourhoods, but it is

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<sup>338</sup> *Vita Anastasii*, *PL* 149: 430.

<sup>339</sup> *Vita Firmati*, p. 337.

<sup>340</sup> *Vita Wulfrici*, pp. 48-9.

difficult to determine the extent to which eremitism became urbanised as the evidence is unavailable. Certainly, by the mid-twelfth century, most hermit groups had become embodied within monastic institutions and those wishing to live in solitary fashion were encouraged to live alongside a priory or church.

It is clear that hermits were able to carve a niche for themselves within the social milieu and that the extent of communication with others varied. Acceptance was not always a certainty, and tensions and strains were visible, which might have reflected the political, economic and social instabilities of local communities. Once established, however, they became the focus for the rectification of local injustices, misfortunes and adversities and, in this way, the perception arose that they were mediators of divine power, an insight which hagiographers were keen to promote for different reasons.

## Section 3

### Hermit Activities

#### Introduction: The Active Hermit

On 23<sup>rd</sup> February 1117 Robert of Arbrissel died and was subsequently buried at Fontevraud, an occasion which marked the end of an extremely active and eventful career. Recognised as one of the principal advocates of the eremitic life, he is often cited as an example of a medieval hermit.<sup>341</sup> Herein lies the paradox. Given the modern notion of hermits as solitaries, removed from humanity and unconcerned with temporalities, could they also be active in society? Furthermore, the question arises as to whether the label ‘hermit’ is the correct one to apply to all the characters discussed in this study. Terminology and its use by contemporaries have been explored in Chapter 1. This section explores the interaction hermits had with secular society and examines those activities in which they participated.

Concepts of activity today are based on the assumption that individuals are, or should be, involved in some type of communal activity on a day-to-day basis whether it be at work, on the sports field, in clubs, in charity work, pursuing shared hobbies and interests and so on. The adoption of the term ‘leisure activities’ suggests that even our relaxation time should be occupied. In fact, modern society encourages a positive participation with others throughout the day. Those of a less energetic disposition are often regarded as passive, unmotivated and apathetic. It is therefore not surprising that if asked to define a hermit most modern individuals would reach for the stereotype: a recluse, contributing little to community life, possibly displaying traits of eccentricity. Opting out of all forms of social intercourse today is viewed as decidedly odd. Modern society does have its

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<sup>341</sup> Leyser, *Hermits*, p. 21. Henrietta Leyser appears to recognise the paradox and asks ‘if a hermit is not necessarily a solitary who is he?’ Her solution is to draw a distinction between ‘new hermits’, such as Robert of Arbrissel, and traditional hermits.

‘hermits’,<sup>342</sup> those who prefer, or are forced, to retreat from worldly intrusion, who are undoubtedly regarded as eccentric, and in some cases as worthless members of an underclass. Given this view of social un-involvement, it is easy to see how when twenty-first century attitudes are imposed on eleventh- and twelfth-century patterns of life, our image of hermits becomes an archetypal construct to fit any era or geographical location, a one-size-fits-all label to apply to every eremitic personality of the middle ages regardless of his/her individual conditions or circumstances. Given this construct, the eremitism of the eleventh and twelfth centuries in England and France, as it appears in the sources, reveals the many surprising and varied forms of living adopted by those called hermits.

In trying to determine medieval perceptions of ‘activity’ two difficulties are encountered. Firstly, there appear to have been different degrees, or levels, of activity and secondly, as one would expect in a study covering some centuries, views on such abstract matters changed in accordance with an evolving society. At the first level there was a general acceptance that everyone had a place and within that place they would each have duties and responsibilities to fulfil. Society expected that each person would perform his/her role whatever that might be: tilling the land, producing food, the management of estates, protecting communities, administering to spiritual needs, and so on. The tripartite division of society into *laboratores*, *bellatores* and *oratores* is indicative of this desire to maintain a social order where each individual has an active role to play. Inactivity was synonymous with idleness and sloth was one of the seven cardinal sins, leading to the temptations of the devil’s work, a breakdown of harmony and an imbalance in society. There was a need to keep the populace actively productive for the benefit of the community as a whole, a goal which would be recognised in our own modern industrial and commercial world.

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<sup>342</sup> Peter France, *Hermits: The Insights of Solitude* (London: Pimlico, 1997). See chapter 8 for a modern example of a hermit, Robert Lax, born in New York State and who withdrew to the Greek island of Patmos.

The tripartite division of society into *laboratores*, *bellatores* and *oratores*<sup>343</sup> reflected the necessity and the desire of the feudal societies of the middle ages to maintain a social order in which each individual was required to play his/her part.<sup>344</sup> There was a general acceptance among these strictly hierarchical societies that every individual had been appointed to his place in life by God, and that each had duties and responsibilities to fulfil in that role. Some worked on the land to produce food and other necessities of life, some ruled and were responsible for maintaining laws and protecting their communities, and some praised God, administered to spiritual needs and gave moral guidance. There was a need to keep the populace actively involved for the benefit of the community as a whole, a goal which is easily recognisable within our own industrial and commercial world. To be uninvolved and therefore seemingly inactive was synonymous with idleness and it is not surprising that sloth was one of the seven cardinal sins leading to temptation by the devil and a breakdown of social harmony.<sup>345</sup> Physical activity need not be confined to the *laboratores* and *bellatores*, as is demonstrated in the monastic tradition of the *opus manuum*. The Rule of St Benedict claims that 'idleness is an enemy of the soul' and that monks should occupy themselves at certain times by the labour of their hands.<sup>346</sup>

While the tripartite view of society has become widely accepted by historians such as Jacques Le Goff and Georges Duby, Giles Constable has shown that contemporary observations of society were much more complex and varied. For example, in the conclusion to his work on the

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<sup>343</sup> Adalbero of Laon, *Carmen ad Rotbertum regem*, ed. by Claude Carozzi, *Classiques de l'histoire de France au moyen âge*, (Paris, 1979), pp. cxvi-vii and written circa 1027-30. Jacques Le Goff has made frequent reference to this 'Tripartite Schema'. See particularly *Time, Work & Culture in the Middle Ages* trans. by Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), pp. 53-7 and 110-116. See also *Medieval Civilisation*, trans. by Julia Barrow (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988), Chapter 8, and Georges Duby, *The Three Orders: Feudal Society Imagined* trans. by Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980) and *The Chivalrous Society*, trans. by Cynthia Postan (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977).

<sup>344</sup> Milis, *Angelic Monks*, p. 87. Drawing on Adalbero of Laon's social structure, Milis uses this division to illustrate his argument of 'functional reciprocity', the need to choose the most efficient system for a productive society.

<sup>345</sup> Constable, *The Reformation*, p. 15 and footnote 66.

<sup>346</sup> *The Rule of Saint Benedict, in Latin and English*, ed. by Justin McCann (London: Burns and Oates, 1952), chapter 48.

reformation of the twelfth century, he suggests that authors of the eleventh and twelfth centuries increasingly described a bipartite ‘division of society into clergy and laity’. The clergy were sub-divided into secular and regular branches, the former being ‘clerics who worked in the world’, and the latter were ‘those who lived under a rule’.<sup>347</sup> Constable claims that the twofold division of society was expressed in the ‘celebrated and influential’ canon in Gratian’s *Decretum* which declared that ‘There are two types of Christians’.<sup>348</sup> Here the clergy were those dedicated to contemplation and prayer while the second type of Christian, the laity, owned property, conducted business, married and paid tithes. The rubric attributes this canon to St Jerome, but Constable insists that it ‘almost certainly dates from the eleventh century’ when reformers were attempting to cleanse the Church from abuses such as clerical marriage and possession of land and property. Whoever the author was, he seems to have had a specific group of clergy in mind, while Constable feels that the emphasis on this bipartite division of society meant that the regular clergy were disregarded.<sup>349</sup> Other commentators, such as Hugh of St Victor and Stephen of Tournai and canon lawyers like Ivo of Chartres also acknowledged the concept of two orders in society.<sup>350</sup>

Medieval commentators saw their world divided between the temporal and active life and the spiritual and contemplative. The classical origin of *contemplatio* related to surveying in the sense of ‘looking at attentively’. By the twelfth century, contemplation had taken on a meaning akin to meditation or other similar spiritual pursuits. Unlike our own society, many commentators in the middle ages considered contemplation to be an active task and performed regularly in everyday life. There was no implication of inactivity. Herein lies the great intellectual debate of the middle ages stemming from the time of the Desert Fathers: should those in regular orders

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<sup>347</sup> Constable, *The Reformation*, p. 321 and *Three Studies*, pp. 294-5.

<sup>348</sup> Gratian, *Decretum*, c. 12 q. 1 c. 7, in *Corpus iuris canonici*, ed. by E. Friedberg (Leipzig: Tauchnitz, 1879), ‘*Duo sunt genera Christianorum*’.

<sup>349</sup> Constable, *The Reformation*, p. 321. However, in *Three Studies*, pp. 295-6 he says that the concept of a separate order of monks, remained despite this bipartite division of society.

<sup>350</sup> Constable gives examples of the views of each of these in *The Reformation*, 321-322, and *Three Studies*, pp. 294-5.

live lives of social activity or retreat into spiritual contemplation, withdrawn for the most part from their surrounding communities? Or could they do both? Constable has revealed how perspectives on the socially active life changed over time, in fact, turned full circle. The clerics were divided into regular and secular branches. The regulars, living according to a rule, were, in theory at least, to withdraw from the world, having renounced all temporalities and dedicated their lives to the greater glorification of God through prayer and contemplation. The secular clerics, on the other hand, were to remain very much part of the world, performing pastoral duties and having the care of souls. Living very much *in* the world, they commonly held positions and responsibilities which would not distinguish them from a lay person. In fact, in terms of the ongoing debate concerning the lifestyles of clerics, and by comparison with those of the cloistered orders, it is easy to reach the conclusion that secular clergy were, in fact, very active in the community.<sup>351</sup> Divisions become even more imprecise with the advent of the canons regular and their attempt to bridge the gap between the enclosed world of the monastery and that of pastoral care in the community.

The emergence of the new orders and the parallel monasticisation<sup>352</sup> of secular clerics, i.e. canons, further complicate the issue. With each new order claiming to be more contemplative than the last, disputes arose concerning definitions of active and contemplative. The Cluniacs, vehemently criticised by St Bernard<sup>353</sup> for their lengthy liturgy at the expense of manual labour, justified their choice by claiming that they followed the life of Mary of Bethany, sister of Lazarus, in holy leisure and were, therefore, a contemplative order. The Cistercian author of the *Dialogus duorum monachorum*, where this justification was argued, maintained that his order was the more solitary and contemplative because

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<sup>351</sup> Gerald of Wales, *Epistola ad Stephanum Langton, Archiepiscopum Cantuariensem*, in *Anglia Sacra*, ed. by Henry Wharton, II (London: Richard Chiswel, 1691), pp. 435-438, suggests that secular clergy were of the active branch when he tried to dissuade Stephen Langton from becoming a hermit: *Licet ergo securior existat, ut nostis, multoque tranquillior vita contemplativa; longe tamen utilior, quia multos ad salutem perficit multumque lucrum Christo facit, ideoque longe strenuior et gloriosior, est activa.*

<sup>352</sup> A term used by Constable in *The Reformation*, p. 324.

<sup>353</sup> Bernard of Clairvaux, *An Apology for Abbot William*, trans. by Michael Casey, Cistercian Fathers Series 1 (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1970).

they did not live in towns and villages. As Constable has shown, this illustrates the variety of opinions which were held by different monastic orders and the different interpretations contemporaries placed on the words ‘contemplative’ and ‘active’.<sup>354</sup> Those of a contemplative inclination would choose the life of Mary, the *vita theoria*, which came to be associated with monks and more specifically hermits and anchorites, while those choosing the *vita actualis* were opting for a life in the world. Thus continued the debate to which many of the renowned theologians and intellectuals of the eleventh to thirteenth centuries contributed. How should the two ways of living be interpreted and defined and, more pertinently, which of the two was the better life to pursue? Goscelin, in writing the *Liber confortatorius* for the recluse Eve, described the active life of Martha as those who minister to the sick or settle disputes, while the contemplative life of Mary he ascribed to those who sought ‘the peace of the contemplative life’.<sup>355</sup> The *Ancrene Wisse* advised anchorites not to perform charitable works, accept worldly responsibilities or own property: ‘Martha’s job is to feed and clothe the poor as a lady of a house does. Mary ought not to be at all concerned with this’,<sup>356</sup> a directive which clearly illustrates the contemporary perception of action as being the direct opposite of contemplation. Activity was regarded as a distraction for anchorites, filling minds with trivia when they should be performing spiritual devotions. Yet not all of them were as totally cut off from human society as some contemporary clerics might have wished.<sup>357</sup> There are plenty of examples of anchorites who, for whatever reason, found themselves involved with social commitments and earthly ties. Loretta, who had been countess of Leicester, was very much aware of contemporary events and used her influence to support the causes of outlaws, debtors, suspected murderers and

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<sup>354</sup> Constable, *The Reformation*, p. 53.

<sup>355</sup> Goscelin, *Liber confortatorius*, p. 85.

<sup>356</sup> Millett, *Ancrene Wisse: Guide for Anchoresses*, p. 156.

<sup>357</sup> Aelred of Rievaulx, in *De Institutione Inclusarum*, written for his sister, tells of ‘the garrulous old gossip pouring idle tales into her (the recluse) ears’ and of the chatterboxes who ‘spend the whole day indulging their curiosity...., A vice which is becoming more and more prevalent today among recluses’. Quotations have been taken from *Aelred of Rievaulx: Treatises and Pastoral Prayer*, introduction by David Knowles, Cistercian Fathers Series 2 (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1995), pp. 46-7.

nuns.<sup>358</sup> Similarly, Brother Nicholas secured the release of Gilbert de Hoton from the penalty of outlawry imposed on him for the crime of rape, while Miliana, an anchorite from Steyning in Sussex, had to turn to the law to secure her grant of loaves, a case which, incidentally, she lost.<sup>359</sup> So anchorites, in a more narrowly defined sense, could be quite active and the contemplative label did not mean inactivity or complete seclusion. Warren has shown that 'contemplative' had many meanings, but that, surprisingly, in her study of English medieval wills, the use of the word does not appear until the fifteenth century which, she argues, reflects changing attitudes to anchorites.<sup>360</sup>

Many contemporaries felt that the contemplative life was the higher ideal but that it was fraught with dangers and should not be entered into without some kind of novitiate which embodied work and action. Peter Damian was a staunch upholder of such a view, saying that 'the labour of good work comes before the repose of contemplation',<sup>361</sup> and likened the life of Rachel (or Mary) to a hermitage and that of Lia (or Martha) to a monastery, the latter being a preparation for the former.<sup>362</sup> By the thirteenth century, a further change was noted which acknowledged the existence of 'active contemplatives', those who held activity to be part of their vocation, and was probably initiated by the arrival of the mendicants. Thomas Aquinas, (1225-1274) himself a Dominican, recognised a balance between the two while still claiming that the contemplative held greater merit. He specifically cited preaching and teaching as activities in which contemplatives might participate and it is possible to see here a clear argument in favour of the paradoxical notion of an 'active hermit'.

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<sup>358</sup> Frederick M. Powicke, 'Loretta, Countess of Leicester', in *Historical Essays in Honour of James Tait*, ed. by J. Goronwy Edwards and others (Manchester: private subscription, 1933), p. 266.

<sup>359</sup> For Brother Nicolas, see Warren, *Anchorites*, pp. 162-3 and for Miliana, see L. F. Salzman, 'A Litigious Anchorite', *Sussex Notes and Queries* 2 (1928/9), 135-7.

<sup>360</sup> Warren, *Anchorites*, pp. 100 and 119-120.

<sup>361</sup> Peter Damian, *De perfectione monachorum*, *PL* 145: 291-328.

<sup>362</sup> Peter Damian, *Epistola XII*, *PL* 144: 393.

What of the hermit, the supposedly solitary individual who rejected the world and sought the 'desert' for the benefit of his own salvation? Where does he/she really fit into this consideration of the active versus the contemplative way of living? In general terms medieval hermits were extremely active individuals, but it must be remembered that we are looking at a broad diversity of characters, careers and motivations. A detailed examination of the various activities later in the following chapters will reveal that some were very much involved with the world, either willingly or reluctantly, while others did achieve relative seclusion. However, even the latter found that the world developed a habit of seeking them out. Due to such diversity, it is impossible to place hermits as a total group, either purely within the active or reclusive camp, although it is possible to do so with individuals. The argument is further complicated by the fact that a large number of those often referred to as hermits may have lived only a short period of their lives in solitary seclusion. As far as we can tell from the *Vitae*, Robert of Arbrissel spent only two out of his possible fifty-six adult years 'in the desert',<sup>363</sup> although there were, no doubt, other brief periods of retreat. His remaining years flowed with activity.<sup>364</sup> According to the *Rouleaux des morts*,<sup>365</sup> Vitalis of Savigny seems to have spent seventeen years living the life of a hermit, but this does not mean seventeen years as a solitary. Conversely, others sought regular periods of contemplation to complement what they may have seen as active lives. A popular devotion, particularly among regular clerics, was a retreat into seclusion for the period of Lent, but such contemplative inclinations do not necessarily earn the title 'hermit'.<sup>366</sup> Contemporaries struggled to agree definitions and categorisations: the world of the Church was divided into active and contemplative and those with a religious calling were theoretically to operate in one or the other, which was the ideal. In practice,

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<sup>363</sup> *Vita Roberti*, p. 605.

<sup>364</sup> His activities included student, priest, founder of the houses of La Roë and Fontevraud, administrator, preacher, teacher, adviser and counsellor.

<sup>365</sup> *Rouleaux des morts du IXe au XVe siècle*, ed. by Léopold Delisle, Société de l'Histoire de France (Paris, 1866), pp. 283-4.

<sup>366</sup> Anastasius practised this regularly after becoming a Cluniac; see *Vita Anastasii*, PL 149: 423-436 (col. 429). Such practice had been common for many centuries; St Cuthbert and Edbert (d. 698) passed Lent on a nearby island retreat.

it was less clear-cut as members of the secular clergy could lead exemplary contemplative lives, while hermits could earn criticism for their worldliness and unholy demeanour. The reality was a blend within the boundaries of established criteria. To step beyond these criteria could, and often did, provoke criticism and condemnation.<sup>367</sup>

Through this examination of the various views of activity which can be found in medieval ecclesiastical structures, overlaid by the constantly evolving perceptions of activity among the *oratores*, we can see that the work of current historians in categorising specific groups as active or contemplative becomes more complex and perhaps, to some extent, inappropriate. Originally, the laity was seen as active and all clerics as contemplative. Around the turn of the eleventh and twelfth centuries contemporaries began to distinguish between the active/secular and contemplative/regular arms of the Church. Closer scrutiny of the various monastic orders led to their perception that some were more active than others, but how 'active' was to be defined depended on the self-image of a particular order. Finally, hermits, recluses and anchorites were perceived to be pursuing the highest ideal of the contemplative life and yet extremely active individuals are to be found in all three categories. Although the theological and intellectual debate was important to medieval intellectuals, their own categorisation appears to be no more than a useful tool to maintain a theory of sacred order.<sup>368</sup>

Most medieval writers, and especially the authors of the *Vitae*, show a preference for the term *vir Dei* rather than *eremita*. They were more

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<sup>367</sup> It is possible to see the checks and balances which were in place from the concerns expressed about and to various individuals leading some form of eremitic life. Marbod of Rennes' letter to Robert of Arbrissel warning him not to overstep the boundaries offers a good example of such control; see *PL* 171: 1480-92, while Aelred and the author of the *Ancrene Wisse* offer guidance to their protégés as to what was acceptable and what was not.

<sup>368</sup> *Libellus de diversis ordinibus et professionibus qui sunt in ecclesia*, ed. by Giles Constable and Bernard Smith, OMT (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), pp. 14-16. The author of this work confirms that there was considerable diversity in ecclesiastical ideals and the means by which these ideals could be attained. Writing of hermits the author advises that 'no one should be disturbed if a certain diversity is found in this order, and if each (hermit) arranges his own life differently...., he will not be condemned by the Lord for it'.

concerned with the sanctity of their subjects, regardless of whether these subjects were performing active roles in the world or attempting a life of solitude. When it came to the individual, the wider intellectual debate of action versus contemplation was of minor consideration. The conclusion that an individual could declare an intention of pursuing a life of solitary contemplation, while at the same time continuing to be active in the world in some way, preceded Aquinas' recognition of the merits of successfully combining the two by at least a century and a half.

Should we, therefore, apply the label 'hermit' to such a wide spectrum of the eremitic community? If hermits are regarded as contemplative and not active members of society, then from the examples examined in this study, the answer is most definitely no, because they do not conform to the modern stereotypical idea of the solitary. Rather than attempt to distinguish the active from the contemplative hermit and labour over the differences between eremitism and anchoritism, looking at the function of these individuals in society may be more meaningful. This entails looking at the range of duties and obligations embodied in the role as a whole and the fulfilment of a purpose. If they had no purpose they would have been ignored or rejected; society obviously recognised a need for hermits, recluses and anchorites. Whether they were active or inactive made little difference; they were popular figures, and even the most remote were able to draw crowds who sought them out for advice or guidance, to listen to their teaching or to experience spiritual insights.

Expressing the view that hermits were active members of the community around them does not undermine the fact that many of them did spend time in seclusion. Neither does it suggest that many of the activities they engaged in could not be undertaken in a solitary environment. As in current times, there was a need for respite from the burdens of their responsibilities and many found this in short, often frequent, retreats to the 'desert'. Such a practice did not necessarily mean that the individual intended to spend the

rest of his life in seclusion.<sup>369</sup> This was a custom found more traditionally on the continent rather than in England, where hermits tended to be based in one location. Hermit activities, therefore, could be solitary or communal and, as they were as varied as the characters who engaged in them, they have been categorised into three types: the religious, the social and the miraculous.

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<sup>369</sup> It was more difficult for females to withdraw into the 'desert' in this way. The female 'desert' was more inclined to be the anchoritic cell.



## Chapter 6

### The Religious Hermit

The following analysis of hermit activity not only emphasises the energy and dynamism with which they interacted with society but also highlights different characteristics of their roles in England and north-west France.

The religious role of the hermit is the most obvious. Without doubt, the vast majority of hermits whose lives are known to us had previously held clerical or monastic positions,<sup>370</sup> but not all. The Baker of Dale, from the little we know of him, had received no clerical or academic training at all.<sup>371</sup> Was the eremitic life, therefore, favoured more by clerics and monks than by the laity because they saw it as a role connected with their profession, something for which they had been trained? Or is it simply that we are at the mercy of a selection process which has preserved only those sources concerned with the lives of the 'religious'? Milis<sup>372</sup> has shown that, in all probability, the writings which have been preserved are only those which contemporaries deemed worth keeping for posterity or future reference. As these writings were all the labours of clerics or monks they would naturally reflect a bias in favour of their own world. Thus the activities or miraculous events associated with their saintly subjects would be carefully stored to be used as exemplars of good living, or to enhance the status of the institutions with which those subjects were connected. Consequently it is impossible for us to know how many other Bakers of Dale there were. However, from the vast numbers of ordinary people who appear to have left their homes and possessions to follow our known hermits, we can safely assume a

<sup>370</sup> Vitalis of Savigny was ordained a priest and became chaplain at the court of Robert of Mortain. William Firmat had been a canon of St Venant de Tours before becoming a hermit. Wulfric of Haselbury had held the post of parish priest at Compton prior to his 'conversion'; see *Vita Wulfrici*, p.13. Bartholomew of Farne had been a monk, although only for a year, before retreating to his island; see *Vita Bartholomei*, pp. 295-325 (p. 300).

<sup>371</sup> *Vita Bartholomei*, p. 208, 'presbyteratus gradum accepit' while travelling in Norway.

<sup>371</sup> Thomas de Musca, 'Chronicle', pp. 2-5. With regard to the selectivity of information, the Baker of Dale is only known to us because he happened to be occupying part of the land granted for the foundation of Dale Abbey. The Chronicle was written, not to commend the Baker, but to note the origins, land grants and history of the Abbey itself and to honour its benefactors. The author advises that he wrote the Chronicle in order that the facts should not become lost, p.1.

<sup>372</sup> Milis, *Angelic Monks*, pp. 4-5.

reasonable number of lay persons must have been persuaded to emulate them.<sup>373</sup> Members of these lay groups simply never became the subjects of the clerical pen, or if they did these works have not been preserved, and one is tempted to speculate that it was because they were ordinary people and not of the religious or noble fraternity.

Allowing for such selectivity and the inherent bias of the source material available to us, what forms of activity do we find in the documents which could be construed as religious? Being hermits, the most obvious preoccupation was with the ascetic practices of praying, fasting and holding vigils, which were often cited in the *Vitae* in formulaic praise of their sanctity and holiness. Walter, the author of the *Vita Sancti Anastasii*, in his brief account refers four times to Anastasius passing his time in *orationibus, jejuniis et vigiliis*.<sup>374</sup> Christian of Aumône was also found ‘tormenting his body with fasting, vigils and prayers’,<sup>375</sup> while Baudry dwells at some length and in greater detail on the extent of Robert of Arbrissel’s vigils and other ascetic practices.<sup>376</sup> Stephen of Obazine performed nightly vigils and slept in the attitude of prayer.<sup>377</sup> Such religious activities can also be found among English hermits. Bartholomew of Farne spent forty-two years meditating and never ceasing from prayer,<sup>378</sup> while Wulfric, we are told, preferred to ‘climb his mountain by night to pray alone’ and hold vigil.<sup>379</sup> Given the religious nature of the role of the hermit, these activities come as no surprise. However, it could be argued that these are the pursuits of the solitary and not the ‘active hermit’ as already defined. It is not denied that even the most active hermit had his times of solitude, but such activities were not the preserve of hermits, recluses or anchorites alone. Members of most monastic orders could, and did, seek temporary retreats, neither was it

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<sup>373</sup> There are some interesting stories of conversions such as that in the *Vita Stephani*, p. 86, where a knight and his family gave up all they had to join Stephen’s community.

<sup>374</sup> *Vita Anastasii*, PL 149: 427, 428 and 429 (twice). There are, in addition, two further references to prayers and vigils and many occasions when he had just returned from his prayers.

<sup>375</sup> Leclercq, ‘La vie de Christian’, p. 15.

<sup>376</sup> Baudry, *Vita Roberti*, pp. 604, 605 and 606.

<sup>377</sup> *Vita Stephani*, p. 74.

<sup>378</sup> Clay, *Hermits and Anchorites*, p. 5.

<sup>379</sup> *Vita Wulfrici*, p. 48.

unknown for secular clergy to do the same; yet monks and clergy were not necessarily regarded as hermits solely because of a desire to participate from time to time in the eremitic example. Select periods of solitude in the *eremum* for personal devotional practice, to bring themselves closer to God in the hope of personal salvation, did not necessarily create a hermit; but a life *totally* dedicated to this form of religious practice could be classified as that of a hermit, recluse or anchorite.

Setting aside the individual's personal reasons for pursuing such a manner of devotion, we also obtain glimpses of a further objective behind the religious activities of many hermits, the desire to provide a service for the local community. In Adalbero's tripartite schema, it was understood that the role of the *oratores* was to pray for the world. Since hermits, recluses and anchorites fell within this category, their prayers were part of their service for the temporal world which, in theory at least, they had rejected. We know from Peter of Blois, for example, that Wulsi desired the contemplative life and became an anchorite so that he could 'pray unceasingly to God for the negligences of the whole community'.<sup>380</sup> Warren's research reveals a different interpretation on the activity of praying. Her detailed examination of English wills and testaments has shown that benefactors leaving gifts to anchorites did so on the expectation that they would say prayers for the souls of the benefactors and their families.<sup>381</sup> We can only assume that such wishes were carried through, but were they doing more than this? A priest or a monk could pray for souls, so did a benefactor regard the assistance of a hermit, recluse or anchorite as being special or different? The evidence of these wills would suggest that hermits, recluses and anchorites were seen by many in society as aspiring to the highest ideals of sanctity within the ecclesiastical hierarchy, through the

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<sup>380</sup> Peter of Blois, *Chronicle of the Abbey of Croyland with the continuation by Peter of Blois and anonymous writers*, trans. by Henry T. Riley (London: H G Bohn, 1854), p. 254.

<sup>381</sup> Although Warren's study is primarily on anchorites, her evidence does throw some light on benefactions to hermits e.g. the hermit of Hoppa c. 1220, see *Anchorites*, p. 195. Her material is also, of necessity, highly selective in terms of geographical location and era, concentrating largely on the thirteenth century onwards. However, certain patterns emerge which support the theory that the prayers of hermits, as with those of anchorites, supplied a socio-religious need.

severity of their ascetic lifestyles, and these benefactors did not wish to seek the services of anyone they considered to be of lower religious status.<sup>382</sup> These prayers might have a greater chance of attaining salvation for one's soul. People paid and expected something in return; prayers for individuals therefore ultimately became a service, not charity. Apart from the provision of a social service, Warren has shown that anchorites were often dependent on such legacies simply to survive,<sup>383</sup> and hermits were even more open to donations, particularly of land on which to site their hermitages<sup>384</sup> and alms for their own sustenance, while using the surplus to provide for the poor. Therefore, prayer with all the meditative and ascetic practices which accompanied it provided a link with the temporal world even for the most solitary and contemplative of hermits, recluses and anchorites.

Other religious activities mirrored those of the parish priest, particularly where the hermit had previously been ordained. Wulfric offered a telling remark when he proposed to Brichtric that they should swap places: Brichtric should become the anchorite and he (Wulfric) the parish priest because he was always available for conferences.<sup>385</sup> It was not unknown for hermits to perform religious services or conduct some of the duties which would normally be the sole prerogative of the local priest. John of Ford informs us that Wulfric was accustomed to say a parish mass at Michaelmas each year.<sup>386</sup> Confessions, absolutions and blessings could all be undertaken for those crowds flocking to the hermit's cell door, further demonstrating

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<sup>382</sup> Warren's research does refer to an emergent 'pattern of accretion'. Benefactors did not single out anchorites but divided their gifts among many religious groups and/or various groups of poor; 'many roads to heaven were surer than a few', *Anchorites*, p. 255.

<sup>383</sup> Warren, *Anchorites*, pp. 41-52, details the various ways anchorites could support themselves. As Warren points out, 'money issues intrude all the time', despite advice from sympathetic ecclesiastics to reject material things. Financial security was always a necessity for survival, as the examples of Miliانا and the sisters Annabel and Helen de Lisle reveal, see p. 210. On seeing their financial support disappear, they have to resort to the legal systems of the temporal world for redress.

<sup>384</sup> Golding, 'The Hermit and the Hunter', p. 99, shows that Robert of Knaresborough willingly accepted the grants and donations of the 'matrona nobilis' Helena. Similarly, the *Vita Bernardi*, PL 172: 1362-1446 (col. 4104), confirms that Ralph of Fougères favoured Vitalis of Savigny and Bernard of Tiron with offers of land.

<sup>385</sup> *Vita Wulfrici*, p. 31.

<sup>386</sup> *Vita Wulfrici*, p. 55.

regular contact with the secular world through the provision of a religious service to the community.

There is evidence that participation in such activities took place on both sides of the Channel,<sup>387</sup> but the religious activity which most manifestly demonstrates the paradox of the ‘active hermit’ and, incidentally, reveals the sharp contrast between England and France, is that of preaching. It is probably no coincidence that in the eleventh and twelfth centuries north-west France experienced the emergence of the popular itinerant preacher,<sup>388</sup> but as the work of Leopold Dereine<sup>389</sup> and George Ferzoco<sup>390</sup> has shown, it was not an occurrence restricted to one region. The popularity of the wandering preacher was to be found in pockets throughout Western Europe. This raises speculative questions about the extent of the welcome preachers received in different areas and whether their popularity in certain places was in some way linked to a religious vacuum caused by lack of provision by the local church authorities. Where the Church was proactive, organised and responsive to local needs, the services of additional preachers should not have been required, in theory, but this was a time of immense change when the Church was just beginning to recognise the need to adjust to new and dynamic forces. The episcopal monopoly of preaching was no longer entirely practicable, although it was still enshrined in many texts of canon law. During this time ecclesiastical supervision and control became ever more important, partly because of the appearance of radical anticlerical or

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<sup>387</sup> Robert of Arbrissel, Vitalis of Savigny, Bernard of Tiron and others all participated in communal prayer and religious services, both for their followers and the crowds which flocked to see them.

<sup>388</sup> There is a vast literature on this phenomenon. See for example Johnnes von Walter, *Die ersten Wanderprediger Frankreichs: Studien zur Geschichte der Monchtums*, 2 vols. (Leipzig: Dieterich, 1903-6), Grundmann, *Religious Movements* and Gerard G.

Meersseman, ‘Eremitismo e Predicazione Itinerante dei secoli XI e XII’, in *L’eremitismo*.

<sup>389</sup> C. Dereine, ‘Les prédateurs apostoliques dans les diocèses de Thérouanne, Tournai et Cambrai-Arras durant les années 1075-1125’, *Analecta Premonstratensia* 59 (1983), 171-189.

<sup>390</sup> George Ferzoco, ‘Preaching by Thirteenth-Century Italian Hermits’, in *Medieval Monastic Preaching*, ed. by Carolyn Muessig (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 145-159.

heretical preachers such as Henry of Le Mans, Peter of Bruis and Peter Valdes.<sup>391</sup>

Grundmann, in his study of new religious movements, explains that in this period the Church saw itinerant preachers as a threat or challenge to the established *ordo*, so they were received with suspicion, fear and hostility.<sup>392</sup> Links with the spread of heretical ideas compounded the issue, and highlighted the difficulties encountered by the established Church in distinguishing between those who were a threat to the *ordo* and those who were simply attempting to promote reform. Furthermore, as the visible representation of the ideal of the *vita apostolica*, itinerant preachers embodied a questioning of the traditionally accepted belief in the apostolic succession: whether the Church rested entirely on hierarchical ordination, or whether it should yield to those who lived like the apostles.<sup>393</sup> Grundmann concludes that in order to preserve the ecclesiastical order, approved preachers (i.e. those whose sermons did not attack accepted doctrine) were forced into existing structures and a form of control was initiated through licences or other agreements on preaching.<sup>394</sup> It is within this context that we need to view the preaching activity of the hermits.

Itinerant preachers were not always from eremitic backgrounds and, as hermits in France were far more mobile, embracing an independence which was characteristic of the peripatetic preacher, it was a problem for the established Church to differentiate between those who potentially posed a problem of dissent and disregard for authority, and those whose lives were very much interconnected with ecclesiastical ideals in the form of the *vita apostolica*, voluntary poverty and Gregorian reform. It often transpired that the first sign of trouble was when the local clergy rallied against a new

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<sup>391</sup> The literature on the careers of these individuals is very rich; see particularly Moore, *Origins*, pp. 82-114, 102-107 and 274-7, Lambert, *Medieval Heresy*, pp. 44-49, and Audisio, *The Waldensian Dissent*, p. 7-20.

<sup>392</sup> See especially Grundmann, *Religious Movements*, pp. 7-22 and 219-226.

<sup>393</sup> Grundmann, *Religious Movements*, p. 12, viewed this issue of greater importance than the infiltration of the dualist threat.

<sup>394</sup> Grundmann, pp. 18-19. Grundmann's footnotes, nos. 58-6, provide detailed examples with source references of permissions to preach granted to Robert of Arbrissel, Bernard of Tiron, and Norbert of Xanten by different Popes. Moolenbroek, *Vital l'ermite*, pp. 164-8 discusses authorisation for preaching by Vitalis of Savigny.

arrival.<sup>395</sup> The dilemma which then confronted the authorities is aptly illustrated in a comparison of the careers of Robert of Arbrissel and Henry of Le Mans.<sup>396</sup> While in Rennes, Robert preached against the simoniacal priesthood, the act of an ardent reformer, and was driven from the city by an angry clergy<sup>397</sup> and later reproached by Marbod, bishop of Rennes. In a letter to the ‘hermit preacher’ Marbod vehemently condemned Robert’s instability, criticised his unorthodox apparel and rebuked his indulgence of female followers, but it was the content of his preaching which brought him closer to censure.<sup>398</sup> Robert conformed and the sources reveal no further criticism or distrust of his activities. By contrast, Henry was welcomed by the local clergy and given permission to preach during Lent by Bishop Hildebrand, but his brand of anticlericalism earned him the label of heretic among his contemporaries.<sup>399</sup> The itinerant preacher was often treading a dangerously thin line between orthodoxy and heresy. Those who persisted in questioning established doctrine earned themselves the stigma of heretic and the threat of excommunication or worse.<sup>400</sup>

It is difficult to assess why some, having declared an intention of rejecting a turbulent world, should suddenly leave their forest retreats and embrace the world afresh with such determination and charisma. The hermits themselves do not state their reasons but their hagiographers do provide some clues. Baudry puts much emphasis on Robert of Arbrissel’s vocation of preaching. Having established his followers as Canons of La Roë, and following the Bishop’s advice and with the permission of the clergy,

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<sup>395</sup> Dereine, ‘Les prédictateurs apostoliques’, shows that hostility between itinerant preachers and local clergy was prevalent in Flanders, Otfried of Watten and Aibert de Crespin being cited as examples. The anticlericalism of their preaching was not the only cause of ill-feeling; often the more popular preachers were seen to be taking the tithes and other gifts usually reserved for the local clergy.

<sup>396</sup> See Chapter 4.

<sup>397</sup> Baudry, *Vita Roberti*, p. 604.

<sup>398</sup> Marbod of Rennes, *Epistola VI*, *PL* 171: 1484 “*Hoc enim est non praedicare, sed detrahere.*”

<sup>399</sup> Walter L. Wakefield, and Austin P. Evans, *Heresies of the High Middle Ages* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991) pp. 107-115. Henry of Le Mans is discussed by most historians of heresy of the late eleventh and twelfth centuries. See particularly Moore, *Origins*, pp. 82-114, Lambert, *Medieval Heresy*, pp. 44-7 and Raoul Manselli, ‘Il monaco Enrico e la sua eresia’, *Bullettino dell’Istituto storico Italiano per il medio evo* 65 (1953), 1-63.

<sup>400</sup> Grundmann, *Religious Movements*, p. 9-12.

*Robertus libere discessit, ut liberius praedicationi vacaret, et expeditus quocumque quibuscumque posset proficeret.*<sup>401</sup> To Norbert of Xanten the *vita apostolica* and preaching went hand in hand; he told his companions that they had become imitators of the apostles.<sup>402</sup> At a synod at Rheims he sought renewal of his licence from Pope Calixtus II, and when encouraged to adopt a more conventional and stable life, he only agreed on condition he could continue to live an apostolic life. It is interesting to note that both Vitalis of Savigny and Bernard of Tiron, as well as Robert and Norbert, continued their itinerant preaching after establishing foundations for their followers, which suggests that preaching was their true vocation – the founding of religious houses was merely a by-product of their popularity. Even allowing for hagiographical exaggeration, there is no doubt that huge crowds flocked to hear them. Were the preaching vocations among these hermits determined by the recognition of a religious vacuum and an unfulfilled need in the spiritually aware lay world of this time? Or was this their contribution towards the Church in the process of realigning itself in the wake of the challenge from new popular unorthodox religious movements?

Reform of the Church was a preoccupation of the hermit enclaves in the forests of north-west France, where they often came together in groups to discuss the state of the Church, its reform and obedience to the papacy. The content of their preaching reflected this concern. Correction of abuse, immorality and an exhortation to poverty were regular themes of their sermons. Attacks on perceived Church malpractice were not their sole consideration, however, for the sermon could also be used as a tool of edification, broadening the appeal of the establishment in the face of attractive unorthodox ideas. Schmitt, in his introduction to a selection of extracts from sermons of the twelfth century and later, comments that the use of *exempla*, short tales used to explain moral issues, became the popular

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<sup>401</sup> Baudry, *Vita Roberti*, p. 606.

<sup>402</sup> *Vita Norberti Archiepiscopi Magdeburgensis*, *MGH SS*, 12, 675.

mode of preaching at this time.<sup>403</sup> It was a time, he argues, when the Church was preoccupied with understanding the masses, particularly in an urban environment, when it was adapting its systems to fresh social ideas and was beginning to recognise and legitimise the role played by the laity, especially those he terms ‘socioprofessionals’.<sup>404</sup> This signals an acknowledgement by the Church that there were indeed deficiencies in its provision of services for the people and that it must respond to their needs. The result was the sanctioning of preachers who were seen to be orthodox in doctrine but were often somewhat eccentric in appearance and method. Their popularity would assist in spreading the messages the Church was keen to promote.

Hermit preachers were not working in isolation, so how are we able to account for their high reputation among the lay populace? None of their sermons have survived the centuries, if indeed they were ever committed to writing. Nonetheless, we can safely assume that their messages were probably similar to those of other authorised preachers.<sup>405</sup> A study of the alphabetical lists of *exempla*, compiled from the late thirteenth century onwards but reflecting themes frequently used by earlier preachers, suggests that their sermons may have focussed on the devil, women, death and temptation.<sup>406</sup> George Ferzoco, in his study of thirteenth-century hermit preachers in Italy, has shown how witnesses reported sermons on the Creed, the authority and sanctity of the Pope, the excommunication of non-believers and exhortations to penitence.<sup>407</sup> Robert of Arbrissel’s Exhortation to Ermengarde, Countess of Brittany, has been widely accepted as an example of the content of his general preaching.<sup>408</sup> Baudry tells how on hearing Robert preach, ‘many hearts were struck and they renounced

<sup>403</sup> *Prêcher d’Exemples: Récits de prédicateurs du Moyen Age*, ed. by Jean-Claude Schmitt (Paris: Stock, 1985).

<sup>404</sup> Schmitt, p. 9.

<sup>405</sup> Schmitt cites extracts from Martin of Sully, Jaques de Vitry, Caesarius of Heisterbach and Stephen of Bourbon.

<sup>406</sup> Schmitt, p. 23.

<sup>407</sup> Ferzoco, ‘Preaching’, pp. 148-9 and 154.

<sup>408</sup> Robert of Arbrissel, *Sermo Domini Roberti de Arbrussello ad Comitissam Britanniae*, ed. and trans. by Jules de Pétigny, in ‘Lettre inédite’, pp. 209-35 (p. 225)

their evil ways'.<sup>409</sup> Conversion was a common result of such discourses,<sup>410</sup> which persuaded prostitutes to abandon their immoral livings, the rich to forsake their worldly goods and criminals to amend their ways.<sup>411</sup> Orderic Vitalis witnessed the preaching of Vitalis of Savigny, describing the anxiety and fear which he instilled in the hearts of the people with his passionate exhortations to penitence, how he filled richly-clothed women with terror and spared neither the wealthy nor the humble.<sup>412</sup> The appeal of itinerant preachers, and particularly of the hermit preachers, did not just lie in the power of their words, or the fervour of their delivery, but in the totality of their chosen way of life. The visual impact of rigorous asceticism, the bare feet, the simple and often ragged clothing and long beards, emphasised the message they brought. They taught by example, not just through the word, and this gave them a wider appeal than their fellow licensed preachers.<sup>413</sup> The success of wandering preachers lay in their physical austerities, not only as a contrast to the richly-adorned local clerics but as the living embodiment of the apostolic life. Hermit preachers, concerned for the reform of the Church, regarded the *vita apostolica* as the power strong enough to persuade and convert. This was their form of eremitism and presented no conflict with ideals of withdrawal from the world. By adopting voluntary poverty they had rejected the world's materialism and the contemplative life had become one with the active.

By the dawn of the thirteenth century, the sources fall silent on characters bearing any resemblance to a Vitalis of Savigny or a Bernard of Tiron. The Church's response to this phenomenon had been the extension of its authority over the activity of preaching<sup>414</sup> and its recognition of the need to provide for the new spirituality of the laity. The success of the itinerant preacher saw its culmination in the coming of the friars, who not only

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<sup>409</sup> Baudry, *Vita Roberti*, p. 605.

<sup>410</sup> Compare Ferzoco, 'Preaching', p. 151.

<sup>411</sup> See *Vita Wulfrici*, pp. 75-6, in which John of Ford recounts the tale of the woman of Totnes who was converted by Wulfric from her life of concubinage with a priest.

<sup>412</sup> Orderic Vitalis, *Ecclesiastical History*, Book IV p. 332.

<sup>413</sup> *Rouleaux des morts*, p. 334.

<sup>414</sup> Innocent III in the fourth Lateran Council, 1215, included unauthorised preaching in his regulations against heretics.

continued to captivate audiences with their passion and enthusiasm, but also adopted the methods of the hermit preachers in teaching by example as well as through sermons. Dominic Guzman (1170-1221), founder of the Dominican Friars, certainly recognised the value in implementing the techniques of heretic preachers, such as the Cathars and Waldensians, in an effort to combat their teachings on voluntary poverty, for example.

It was this preaching activity which provided the greatest difference in eremitic activity between France and England. England did not experience an itinerant hermit preacher before the advent of Richard Rolle in the early fourteenth century,<sup>415</sup> by which time the friars were well established and licensed preachers had become part of the ecclesiastical framework. It is also interesting to note that England did not encounter the sporadic outbreaks of heresy that appeared in France at the same time as itinerant preachers were also attaining popularity. The only suggestion of heresy in England during the twelfth century occurred around 1164-5, but even this was not home-generated, as William of Newburgh places the origin of these *Publicani in Gascony*.<sup>416</sup> Is the absence of heretics in England linked to the absence of itinerant preachers? The preaching of hermits did not occupy the thoughts of their hagiographers in England, although there is no reason to suppose that English hermits did not participate in this activity. It was the method which differed, in that preaching was more likely to have taken place at the door of the hermit's cell where villagers gathered to see them. Any preaching or instruction which did take place appears to have been undertaken with the knowledge and acceptance of the local clergy, for there is little evidence of the hostility which is found in France. It appears to have posed no threat to the ecclesiastical *ordo* and, in England at least, the sources suggest that such public service was performed with the blessing of the local clergy, revealing no animosity between priest and hermit, or monk

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<sup>415</sup> For a general account of Richard Rolle's writings see Hope E. Allen, *Writings ascribed to Richard Rolle, Hermit of Hampole, and materials for his biography*, Modern Language Association of America, Monograph series 3 (London: Oxford University Press, 1927).

<sup>416</sup> William of Newburgh, *Historia rerum Anglicarum*, pp. 131-4. Gilbert Foliot, Bishop of London also wrote to the Bishop of Worcester concerning the 'textores...qui corde conceptas haereses in vulgus... praedicant', confirming that they were itinerant preachers, see *PL* 190: 936.

and hermit. That might have been because of the greater stability of the hermit population in England, working with the ecclesiastical authorities rather than providing an alternative as they did for a while on the Continent.<sup>417</sup> In England hermit monks continued to live according to their previous monastery's rule, as did Roger at Caddington,<sup>418</sup> or Bartholomew of Farne, who revealed his intentions to Prior Lawrence before proceeding to the 'solitude'.<sup>419</sup> English hermitages or cells frequently became the foundation for later priories, as at Dale and Finchale, but these were usually encompassed within the order of the earlier incumbent or of the religious house which claimed authority over the property.<sup>420</sup> However, with the exception of the Gilbertines, no new orders originated in England, and the circumstances leading to the establishment of this order were quite different from those which appeared in France.<sup>421</sup> Despite the lack of indigenous orders, patrons in England enthusiastically welcomed those originating in France, which were distributed across the land until the Reformation.

A further contrast between the two countries is the number of new monastic orders founded in France during this early period by members of the eremitic community, an activity in which English hermits were not engaged.<sup>422</sup> France, on the other hand, began to overflow with new foundations: Citeaux, Fontevraud, Tiron, Savigny, Prémontré, Arrouaise, Grandmont, all of which arose as a result of the eremitic movement. With the exception of Robert of Molesme, the evidence does not suggest that the establishment of a new order was ever the conscious intention of its

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<sup>417</sup> There are occasional suggestions of friction as, for example, between the hermit Roger and Bishop Robert Bloet over the former's protection of Christina of Markyate. Such incidents appear to be provoked by localised and individual events and are not as a result of the general way of life of the hermit or of any perceived threat to the establishment. See William of Malmesbury, *De gestis pontificum anglorum*, Book IV, p. 314.

<sup>418</sup> Talbot, *Christina*, p. 80, 'Noster quidem monachus erat sed vivebat in heremo servans et in hoc obedientia(m) abbati suo'.

<sup>419</sup> *Vita Bartholomei*, p. 300.

<sup>420</sup> Other examples are Bartholomew of Farne and his association with Durham, *Vita Bartholomei*, pp. 295-325, and Henry of Coquet and Tynemouth, *De Sancto Henrico*, pp. 22-26.

<sup>421</sup> Brian Golding, *Gilbert of Sempringham and the Gilbertine Order c. 1130 – c.1300* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995).

<sup>422</sup> Studies on the various 'new' orders which were established at this time in France are numerous; see Leyser, *Hermits*, pp. 18-28.

founder.<sup>423</sup> As suggested elsewhere, these institutions arose as the result of enforced conformity, imposed upon itinerant preachers and other leaders of hermit communities not only because of the Church authorities' insistence on the need for stability but as a result of the very popularity and success of the hermit enclaves and of the preachers among them, who were forced to redirect their lives towards roles of administrators, regulators, legislators and reformers in the face of overwhelming numbers of followers. It is unlikely that they had ever envisaged such roles for themselves. Adaptation to these demands temporarily drew them away from their original intentions, but inclusion within the walls of a monastic establishment was not for most of them. Accordingly, once the foundations were laid, rules established and customs recorded they returned to their previous careers of proselytising and participating in temporal activities. Without the phenomenon of the itinerant preacher, the new orders with their innovative ideas would probably not have been founded but equally, without these foundations, perhaps the hagiographers would not have felt compelled to write the *Vitae* upon which much of our knowledge is based.

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<sup>423</sup> However, there is a reference to Robert, a companion of Anastasius on the Island of Tomberlaine, who tried to establish a monastery on the outskirts of Bayeux with himself as abbot, *PL* 150: 1369-78.



## Chapter 7

### The Social Hermit

While hagiographers were keen to emphasise the religious activities of their chosen subjects, the hermit's function in the secular world is not so easily gleaned from their writings. Authors were concerned with the glorification of God seen through their exemplary lives and actions of their subjects, and not whether they had a social role to play nor how it was performed. That hermits were popular is not in doubt. The evidence of the 'multitudes' who followed them into the forests of France, or those who visited their hermitages in England, cannot be ignored even if the numbers were somewhat exaggerated. It is impossible to be exact about the numbers of those who were drawn to these characters but the *Vitae* frequently hint at the exasperation felt by hermits at the constant stream of visitors. Baudry tells that Robert of Arbrissel would have preferred to be alone but that fear of the sin of guilt induced him to perform his duty of gathering many to him.<sup>424</sup> During Stephen of Obazine's early years in the *eremum* the anonymous author of his life tells how the place was populated with new arrivals and of crowds establishing themselves there.<sup>425</sup> Popularity itself is not evidence of a social function; it merely indicates that certain people found their sermons stimulating and their compassionate words encouraging. However, communities do seem to have relied on local hermits for a variety of services, and an examination of these roles reveals many of them not as solitary individuals without any human contact, but as integrated and active members of society.

The bridge between spiritual and temporal activity lies in the part hermits played as advisors, counsellors and mediators. Such services might normally be expected of the priesthood but it is impossible to know the extent to which local clergy were able or willing to perform such duties. One would expect the village priest to be accessible to his parishioners, and

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<sup>424</sup> Baudry, *Vita Roberti*, p. 605.

<sup>425</sup> *Vita Stephani*, p. 58.

to be aware of tensions in the community and the social problems which confronted his congregation, but this does not appear to have been the case. Was the local priest seen as part of the controlling authoritarianism of the ecclesiastical establishment? If so, it must be remembered that at that time the traditional Church was coming under the constant reproach of reformers and followers of the eremitic and apostolic ways of life. Did the hermit, by comparison, seem more approachable and trustworthy? These are not easy questions to answer in the absence of sources which document communications between priest and parishioner, but we are able to see how people made use of hermits in their efforts to obtain guidance and advice. John of Ford's Life of Wulfric of Haselbury provides numerous anecdotes of Wulfric's concern for others and willingness to help them. We learn that Henry, who around 1165 became abbot of the Cistercian abbey at Tintern, and later of Waverley, had previously led a dissolute existence as a brigand. After visiting Wulfric a couple of times, he atoned for his sins and joined the Cistercian order. The conversations which must have taken place between the hermit and the thief can only be imagined, but Wulfric must have had some influence over Henry's change of heart and his subsequent conversion from his wayward and unpredictable life to one of asceticism and stability. Even after his elevation to abbot, Henry continued to visit Wulfric for help and advice. He confessed to the oppressive nature of his responsibilities, the burden of his debts and his anxiety for the future, only to be reassured by the hermit that what he had spent in God's service would soon be repaid.<sup>426</sup> Would the local parish priests, Brichtric and his son Osbern, have been able to influence Henry's career or offer such guidance and reassurance as Wulfric? Would Henry have approached a parish priest to assist him with such perplexities? The answer seems to lie in the reputation and status of this hermit's position in society.

Research on pastoral care in England has revealed that the Church underwent a gradual but deeply penetrating transition. J. Blair, in a summary of contributory articles to a monograph on the subject, illustrates

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<sup>426</sup> *Vita Wulfrici*, pp. 68-73.

the “critical change in English parochial organisation which occurred between the tenth and twelfth centuries”.<sup>427</sup> This was a time when the traditional Anglo-Saxon *parochiae* were disintegrating and fragmenting to be replaced by a parish structure recognisable today. While hermits had existed in virtually every era since the birth of Christianity, it is interesting to note that they seem to have reached the peak of their popularity at a time when society was re-structuring and the Church was undergoing its gradual shift from the centralising influence of minster communities to the localism of the parishes.<sup>428</sup> Again, the inadequacy of the evidence which might explain the changing relationships between parishioners and those who were in charge of pastoral care emphasises the dangers of speculating that the hermit emerged to fill a vacuum in providing for social and religious needs. The disintegration of large-scale minster *parochiae* did not necessarily leave people underprovided, as this re-organisation could have been a response to perceived needs. Nevertheless, it is tempting to see the hermit as a figure of stability within a locality otherwise undergoing dramatic transformation.

Blair, Croom and Kemp in their studies of different localities have shown how the demise of the minster led to changes in land lordship, which in turn affected traditional local loyalties. Pastoral care once performed by a minster clerk could now be in the hands of monks or chaplains and priests under the patronage of lay lords.<sup>429</sup> With the pressures of the Gregorian Reform to remove the Church from lay control, further transfers of lordship took place and with such changes came legal disputes over boundary definitions, rights of burial and tithes.<sup>430</sup> It became more common for a parish church to be in different hands (often monastic) from the manor which it served, making the delineation of the parish different from that of

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<sup>427</sup> John Blair, ‘Introduction: from Minster to Parish Church’, in *Minsters and Parish Churches: The Local Church in Transition, 950-1200*, ed. by John Blair, Oxford University Committee for Archaeology, Monograph 17 (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 1988), p. 1.

<sup>428</sup> Blair, ‘From Minster to Parish Church’, pp. 7-9.

<sup>429</sup> It would be interesting to establish how common a phenomenon this might have been for different localities in England and France.

<sup>430</sup> Jane Croom, ‘The Fragmentation of the Minster Parochiae of South-East Shropshire’, in Blair, *Minsters and Parish Churches*, pp. 71-5. Brian R. Kemp, ‘Some Aspects of the Parochiae of Leominster in the Twelfth Century’, in Blair, *Minsters and Parish Churches*, pp. 83-92.

the lord's manor.<sup>431</sup> Such changes in the higher strata of the social and religious hierarchies meant patronage was also constantly shifting and must inevitably have weakened traditional allegiances. Furthermore, while such transition was taking place (c.1050 –1150) parishes remained 'inchoate and fluid',<sup>432</sup> a view supported by Christopher Brooke, who claims that 'until canon law laid its cold hand on the parishes of Europe, and froze the pattern which has in many parts subsisted ever since,' communities continued to lack legal definition and geographical stability.<sup>433</sup> Parishioners, therefore, must have encountered great difficulty in identifying with a local parish community, especially when proportions of tithes paid could be diverted outside the locality to mother churches or lay lords, or when families had to travel sixty miles for the rite of burial to be performed.<sup>434</sup> Although the village priest was becoming a more familiar figure in rural districts by the mid-eleventh century, he no longer had the discipline and educational support previously provided by the collegial minster to the clerk, leaving him isolated and increasingly uninformed.<sup>435</sup>

It is probable, therefore, that such far-reaching change must have had an impact on the provision of pastoral care. The system may not have been perfect before the Norman Conquest, but the pressures of population growth, urban development and proliferation of rural communities, along with demands imposed by church reformers, made ecclesiastical shortcomings even more acute in the century and a half which followed. In passing judgement, however, it is important to consider the status of a village priest and the service which his parishioners might have expected

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<sup>431</sup> Blair, 'From Minster to Parish Church', p. 14.

<sup>432</sup> Blair, 'From Minster to Parish Church', p. 10.

<sup>433</sup> Christopher N. L. Brooke, 'The Missionary at Home: the Church in Towns, 1000-1250', in *The Mission of the Church and the Propagation of the Faith*, ed. by G. Cuming, SCH 6 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), p. 72.

<sup>434</sup> Kemp, 'Some Aspects of Parochiae', p. 84, cites some examples of tithe diversion, one being the Abbey of St Peter of Castellion, Normandy which could devote two-thirds of the tithes of the church in the manor of Monkland, Leominster to itself in its capacity as lord of the manor. For an example of a mother church's retention of burial rites, see Gervase Rosser, 'The cure of souls in English towns before 1100', in *Pastoral Care Before the Parish*, ed. by John Blair and Richard Sharpe (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1992), p. 282. For examples of fragmentation of old *parochiae*, changing patterns of lordship, widespread transfer of rights and exploitation of churches, see Martin Brett, *The English Church under Henry I* (London: Oxford University Press, 1975), pp. 223-233.

<sup>435</sup> Blair, 'From Minster to Parish Church', p. 9.

from him. Historians differ in their views on the role of parish priests at this time, no doubt because wide regional variations make any generalisation on the subject unrealistic. Nevertheless, it is possible to detect an evolutionary process taking place in the Church at grass-roots level at the same time as its structure was undergoing widespread transformation at the highest levels.

Using the Domesday survey as his primary source, Lennard concludes that in the immediate post-Conquest period the priest was very much regarded as a member of the peasant community, his glebe rarely exceeding that of a larger peasant holding. Tellenbach describes a very similar situation for the priesthood on the continent.<sup>436</sup> Other sources of income such as tithes or burial fees would not necessarily raise him above this status. It was accepted that a priest should have a 'moderate standard of living' and this justified the diversion of income, regarded as surplus to requirements, for extra-parochial purposes.<sup>437</sup> This system suited the Anglo-Norman barons who, if not themselves beneficiaries, might see their own foundations gain from such additional income.<sup>438</sup> It is also significant that the priesthood appears to have remained predominantly Saxon at a time when Normans were dominating the higher orders.<sup>439</sup> This echoes the argument presented by Christopher Holdsworth that hermits in England also stemmed predominantly from Anglo-Saxon or Anglo-Scandinavian stock, giving eremitism a nationalistic dimension which might explain the special interaction hermits had with other people.<sup>440</sup> If both hermits and parish clergy shared the same nationality, Holdsworth's case does not explain any preference for hermits over local priests, but it does support the view that the holy man was able to fill a vacuum created by political and social instability.

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<sup>436</sup> Gerd Tellenbach, *The Church in Western Europe from the tenth to the early twelfth century*, trans. by Timothy Reuter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 78.

<sup>437</sup> Reginald Lennard, *Rural England 1086-1135* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959), pp. 327-9. He does acknowledge the existence of priests with income of 'manorial scale', see p. 328, and Brett, *The English Church*, p. 219, note 3, makes reference to the priest of Willerby, Yorkshire who was the brother of Athelard the Hunter, a military tenant of the Gant fee, but such examples appear to be rare. Tellenbach, *The Church in Western Europe*, p. 33, supports these views.

<sup>438</sup> Lennard, *Rural England*, p. 316, for the example of St Michael's Mount which held the church and tithe of Basingstoke.

<sup>439</sup> Lennard, *Rural England*, p. 332.

<sup>440</sup> Holdsworth, 'Hermits', pp. 58-9.

There is little reason to doubt that a comparable pattern was taking shape in the various provinces of North West France in the same period (c.1050-1150) with much the same consequences for the position of the parish priest and pastoral care. As in England, regional variations ensure the impracticality of making generalisations, but specific examples do illustrate the changes affecting these areas. Brittany, Maine, Anjou, Poitou and Touraine experienced political upheaval resulting in the re-structuring of seigneurial power. Disputes arose from ecclesiastical moves to free the Church from the exploitation of lay control and rural communities were subjected to the gradual evolution of the parish system.<sup>441</sup> Jean Delumeau, in his study of the diocese of Rennes, reports on the steady increase in the numbers of parish churches in Brittany. Apart from some new building, new parishes were created from chapels; others emerged from sanctuaries which had been joined to a priory situated within a newly-built up area at the foot of a chateau. Older parishes often had their seats within cathedrals and had to be moved out to cater for the growing rural communities - all these changes replicating the situation of flux following the fragmentation of the minster in England. His study further claims that in the eleventh century nearly all churches in Brittany were in private hands, with the Bishop of Dol providing an exception in that he held a twenty percent portion of parish churches. Where the owner of a church was the proprietor, he could transfer the holding to his children. Delumeau has found six examples of this in Rennes, but he does qualify this by pointing out that this practice was more frequently found in Brittany than elsewhere in France.<sup>442</sup> The curate would be expected to hand all or part of the offerings to the owner and, in order to establish a liveable income, he would be driven to seek other parishes. Such pluralism led to the quality of the ministry suffering as well as encouraging simony. Delumeau concludes, as does Lennard for England, that the rural priest lived the lifestyle of the peasants

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<sup>441</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the impact of these changes in these provinces, see Section 2, *Hermit Structures*, pp. 51-126.

<sup>442</sup> *Histoire des diocèses de France 10: Le diocèse de Rennes*, ed. by Jean Delumeau (Paris: Beauchesne, 1979), p. 65. For examples of the emergence of new parishes see pp. 49-51. See also John van Engen, 'The Christian Middle Ages as an Historiographical Problem', *American Historical Review* 91 (1986), 519-52.

around him, scraping a living from his smallholding, deprived of any real training and only able to give limited religious and moral instruction.<sup>443</sup>

The existence of deficiencies in this evolving role of the parish priest and in the provision of pastoral care was recognised by those who were keen to promote reform of the Church. In England William of Malmesbury tells how Bishop Wulfstan saw an urgent need to reverse the state of moral decline and took every opportunity to preach to the laity, a practice which he had adopted earlier as prior of Worcester because he felt the people were not receiving sufficient instruction.<sup>444</sup> Anselm revealed concern for the status of the parish priest at the Council of 1102 when he prohibited monks from receiving so much revenue from churches that their priests would not have enough to live on, thereby attempting to protect the priest from a greater poverty than that of his own parishioners.<sup>445</sup> Gilbert of Limerick, writing c. 1110 on the state of the Church, was also concerned that the priest should have a reasonable living, insisting that he should have at least a ploughland.<sup>446</sup> In addition, Gilbert listed fourteen duties of the priest's office. These included preaching, which should be performed each Sunday, and teaching, which he describes largely as moral guidance on the dangers of the seven deadly sins. The priest should instruct the baptized on humility against pride and vainglory, with goodwill against envy, with modesty against anger, with hilarity against gloom, with liberality against avarice, with abstinence against gluttony and that they should be fortified against lust.<sup>447</sup> Of course, it is impossible to know how many parish priests performed these duties or to what standard. No doubt, some were diligent, but those with little education would probably have struggled with Gilbert's list.

<sup>443</sup> See Jean-Marc Bienvenu, 'Renouveau de l'église Angevine (an Mil–1148)' in *Histoire des diocèses de France 13: Angers*, ed. by François Lebrun (Paris: Beauchesne, 1981), pp. 23–26, who makes similar conclusions for Anjou.

<sup>444</sup> William of Malmesbury, *The Vita Wulfstani*, ed. by Reginald R. Darlington, Camden Society 40, series 3 (London: Royal Historical Society, 1928), pp. 20 and 23, and Emma Mason, *St Wulfstan of Worcester c. 1008–1095* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), p. 67. Concern about morality among the clergy was not new, but was central to any significant religious reform.

<sup>445</sup> Brett, *The English Church*, p. 232.

<sup>446</sup> Gilbert of Limerick, *De statu ecclesiae*, *PL* 159: 995–1004 (col. 1001).

<sup>447</sup> Gilbert of Limerick, *PL* 159: 1000.

It is clear then that reformers within the Church felt that there was room for improvement, and the references found from different sources are evidence that it was a contemporary issue among the higher clergy, though it is not so easy to discover what parishioners expected of their parish clergy or whether their expectations were met. Apart from the customary services, along with burials and intercessions for the souls of the dead, it is likely they were not regarded as much more than the source of prayers for a fruitful and abundant harvest, or for the recovery of a sick cow, a provision bordering on pagan or folkloric practice still adhered to in many rural areas. However, if we follow the evolutionary process through to the end of the twelfth century, there are signs that the clergy were beginning to be viewed as a class apart, more remote from the laity and temporal concerns. In the process of this transformation Brooke feels that the 'priesthood had, in some special sense, become separated from the rest of society.... on account of its sublime function'.<sup>448</sup> The earlier social distinction of priests (*oratores*) being set apart in order to pray was being reinforced by the dictates of the Gregorian Reform. The condemnation of lay influence and the imposition of celibacy went some way to change the social perception of the parish priest. If this was so, and as a theory could be applied to the milieu of the local village, it would again support the view that the hermit might seem a more attractive proposition than a priest who now had to be regarded as distinct from the rest of his community but who, in terms of wealth and education, was no better than his parishioners.<sup>449</sup>

While the impact of reform was slower to take effect in England, Brett has shown that as early as the reign of Henry I there was a growing number who welcomed change and the power of papal jurisdiction was increasingly felt in matters of morality and conduct.<sup>450</sup> This trend reached its apogee in the second half of the century with the Becket conflict and, although the Church could not claim an outright victory in this matter, the priesthood had been

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<sup>448</sup> Christopher N. L. Brooke, 'Priest, Deacon and Layman: from St Peter Damian to St Francis', in *The Ministry: Clerical and Lay*, ed. by William J. Shiels and Diana Wood, SCH 26 (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), p. 66.

<sup>449</sup> Tellenbach, *The Church in Western Europe*, p. 94.

<sup>450</sup> Brett, *The English Church*, pp. 34-5.

elevated from its earlier subordinate status. As far as the relationship between the village priest and his congregation was concerned, there was probably little practical sign of these forces at work. Furthermore, it is impossible to tell whether the village priest would be engaged to advise or counsel on matters of a more personal nature or mediate in a dispute. In contrast, the sources do offer numerous examples of hermits engaged in these activities. The comparison may be unfair as parish priests do not appear to have lived the kind of life which caught the imagination of the hagiographer or chronicler and so the evidence is skewed in favour of the activities of the hermit. Then again, even allowing for this, an argument can still be made to support the assumption that hermits fulfilled a social need at a time of upheaval and uncertainty.

Whatever the lineage, educational achievement or previous career of the hermit, the very choice of this ascetic life in the service of God would most likely have automatically accorded him an elevated status within the community. Unlike the parish priest, the hermit was not in the pocket of a patron or proprietor and, where a hermit did have a patron, the relationship was more often than not based on a voluntary arrangement and not encumbered with obligations and dues.<sup>451</sup> This gave the hermit an air of independence, that he was his own man, making his own decisions and with a confidence usually attributed to those in a position of authority. Like the local priest he was poor, living frugally, but the hermit's poverty was voluntary and not imposed by circumstance.<sup>452</sup> He was styled '*vir Dei*' and his closeness to God was acknowledged because of his life-style, gift of prophecy and, in some cases, miracles. Although this cannot be proved, it is understandable that those with access to a local hermit might prefer to seek advice, counsel or mediation from him rather than approach a parish priest. As Mason claims in her study of St Wulfstan, a 'climate of anxiety would

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<sup>451</sup> For examples, see *Vita Wulfrici*, pp. 14-15, for Wulfric and his patron William FitzWalter. See also Golding, 'The Hermit and the Hunter', p. 99, for Robert of Knaresborough and Helena, and *Vita Bernardi*, PL 172: 1405 for Bernard of Tiron and the Count of Rotrou.

<sup>452</sup> It is interesting to note, however, that many hermits had servants.

generate a belief in someone with spiritual power', especially if they appeared to command supernatural forces.<sup>453</sup>

To what extent did hermits consider they had a responsibility to participate in pastoral care, and how did they reconcile this with their notional withdrawal from the world? An early tradition had been established by St Cuthbert who, Bede tells us, 'protected his flock...by example first and precept later... which is the real way to teach'.<sup>454</sup> According to Felix, *multi diversorum ordinum gradus* visited Guthlac who attracted the laity to his cell, not just clergy and nobility, but the sick and the poor.<sup>455</sup> Despite the occasional tale of meditation being distracted by visitors, the hermits of eleventh and twelfth century England continued this tradition of communication with the 'outside' world, offering advice, influencing decisions or taking the opportunity to instruct. In North West France, the opinion of hermits on this matter is easier to gauge, as they purposefully aimed to attract the crowds through their preaching missions and the *Vitae* show them welcoming those who approached them. A good example of such reconciliation between the active role of pastoral care and withdrawal from the world is illustrated in the career of Robert of Arbrissel. Baudry tells how Robert was 'friendly, affable, quick-witted and discerning' to the crowds of visitors who came to see him and that he was often 'consulted on matters open to doubt'.<sup>456</sup> It seems that Robert would have preferred to conceal himself from these crowds, but feared the sin of guilt, for he had read "He who listens, let him say, come"; and so he stayed for, as Baudry explains, 'it seemed to him, (i.e. Robert) therefore, that he had a duty to gather many to him'. Van Moolenbroek reaches a similar conclusion in his study of Vitalis of Savigny, who, he claims, recognised a need for the expansion of 'care for one's neighbour in poverty'.<sup>457</sup> The administration of the sacraments might be considered the prime occupation of pastoral care

<sup>453</sup> Mason, *St Wulstan*, p. 231.

<sup>454</sup> Bede, *Vita Sancti Cuthberti*, c. 26, ed. by Bertram Colgrave (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1940), pp. 240-3.

<sup>455</sup> Felix, *Vita S Guthlaci*, c. 45, ed. by Bertram Colgrave (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956), p. 138.

<sup>456</sup> Baudry, *Vita Roberti*, p. 605, 'jocundus erat et alacer, affabilis et discretus, in ambiguis consultus,....'.

<sup>457</sup> Moolenbroek, *Vital l'ermite*, p. 195.

but not all hermits were in a position to provide this service, nor indeed wished to even if they could—and female hermits and those who were totally enclosed certainly could not. Nevertheless, examples of such provision can be found. Stephen of Obazine was accepted into the priesthood<sup>458</sup> and in the dispute over who was to take overall charge of their growing community, the papal legate, the bishop of Chartres, appointed Stephen as prior, adding ‘... *curam animarum precipiendo commisit*’.<sup>459</sup> John of Ford tells us that it was Wulfric’s custom to say mass every year at Michaelmas.<sup>460</sup> It would seem then that hermits had a traditional role in pastoral care, not in the mandatory sense of the parish priest but on a voluntary basis which was motivated by duty as well as a genuine desire to help not only those in physical need, but also those affected by the anxieties and uncertainties of everyday life.

Hermits did not stop at the traditional boundaries of pastoral care: teaching, preaching and caring for the souls who sought their advice. They were often keen to espouse ‘good’ causes and offer assistance to those not in a position to defend their own rights. Loretta of Hackington is an excellent example of a ‘socially minded’ *reclusa* who was not only willing, but apparently able, to exercise her influence to the advantage of certain unfortunate souls. Daughter of William of Briouze, a one time friend of King John, she later married (c.1196) Robert fitzPernel, the earl of Leicester, a man very much at the centre of the court of King Richard, which introduced Loretta to the aristocratic milieu of England and Normandy.<sup>461</sup> She had influential connections and was well placed to exert pressure on decision-makers. Sometime in 1221 she became a recluse at Hackington about a mile to the north of Canterbury where, it seems, her influence continued as champion of the poor and outcast. The Close Rolls offer some insight into the *extent* of her activities in support of certain individuals but give no indication as to whether such intervention on behalf

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<sup>458</sup> *Vita Stephani*, p. 44.

<sup>459</sup> *Vita Stephani*, p. 66.

<sup>460</sup> *Vita Wulfrici*, p. 55.

<sup>461</sup> See Powicke, ‘Loretta’, pp. 247-271, for a detailed genealogy of Loretta and her early life.

of others was a common practice, and thus whether this was a function which she perceived as obligatory or expected of her. Loretta's life as a recluse lasted forty-five years, yet the Rolls offer just five examples of her mediation: obtaining a pardon for a woman outlawed for concealing a fugitive; intervening on behalf of local poor, William le Jay and Martha a widow, who could not pay their tallage; obtaining a privilege for Juliana, the prioress of the nearby nunnery of St Sepulchre; mediating on behalf of a Shropshire man who had killed another; and, towards the end of her life, assisting Henry III and her nephew, Simon, earl of Leicester regarding the rights and liberties of the earldom and honour of Leicester.<sup>462</sup> Thomas of Ecclestone provides one other instance of Loretta's activity as a recluse. He mentions her, along with Stephen Langton, then archdeacon at Canterbury, and lord Henry of Sandwich, as being active on behalf of a small group of Friars Minor which arrived in England in 1224.<sup>463</sup> Ecclestone tells how, because they held her in the highest esteem, she was able to persuade magnates and prelates to support the Friars. This suggests that Loretta was in communication with a number of dignitaries beyond her own locality for a reasonable length of time, and that she was fully aware of this new order and the difficulties which they encountered.

It could be that these few incidents represent the sum total of her activities in the wider community but it is more likely that many other occasions, particularly if they did not involve financial or judicial disputes, have simply passed unrecorded. Her status in her previous secular life no doubt encouraged petitioners to seek her aid, hopeful that her influence with temporal authorities would still carry weight, and Ecclestone's brief account confirms that this was the case. The location of her cell, so near to Canterbury, would also offer ease of access for passing travellers. As Powicke suggests, virtually anyone of importance would pass through Canterbury at some time and it is probable that a number of these would

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<sup>462</sup> *Calendar of Patent Rolls*, 1266-72, p. 727; *Close Rolls*, 1254-6, p. 48; *Calendar of Patent Rolls*, 1247-58, p. 502, and *Calendar of Patent Rolls*, 1258-66, p. 10. See also *VCH, Kent*, ii, p. 143 and *Calendar of Patent Rolls*, 1258-66, pp. 32 and 51.

<sup>463</sup> Thomas of Ecclestone, *Tractatus de adventu fratrum minorum in Angliam*, ed. by Andrew G. Little (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1951), pp. 25-6.

take the opportunity to visit.<sup>464</sup> Loretta provides a good example of a recluse who, having taken her vows to withdraw from the world,<sup>465</sup> continued to maintain a connection with it, using her influence, mediation and good works to support the impoverished and rejected. The extent to which such activity was pursued as a direct result of her aristocratic background is difficult to judge, but it is highly likely that people continued to perceive her in that role and came forward with their petitions in the same way as they would had she remained in the temporal sphere. That she chose to position herself near to the primatial cathedral in England and close to the busy highway between Canterbury and London indicates that she did not intend to be completely remote from the temporal world. She could have selected a more isolated spot or joined her sister Annora at Iffley for greater seclusion. That she perceived her role as a mixture of contemplation and devotion to Christ while espousing the causes of the disadvantaged, would match the expectations which the local community might place on her.<sup>466</sup>

The endorsement of certain causes by hermits was not uncommon. Robert of Knaresborough felt responsibility for the small group of poor men which came to him. He also established a hospice for the sick and for travellers.<sup>467</sup> Hugh, a mid-twelfth century hermit, administered a hospice until it became a Premonstratensian priory.<sup>468</sup> Pons de Léras established a custom for his brothers that they ‘would receive everyone in the hospice, feed the hungry, clothe the naked, bury the dead and fulfil other deeds of piety and mercy’.<sup>469</sup> Stephen of Obazine would personally go in search of grain, obtaining credit if he could not procure it by other means, in order to feed the poor in time of famine. During one famine it was claimed that he contracted debts of 3,000

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<sup>464</sup> Powicke, ‘Loretta’, p. 266.

<sup>465</sup> Powicke suggests that Loretta went through the formal enclosure ceremony. Since she lived in the early thirteenth century, when greater regulation was being introduced, this is very likely, but there is no written evidence for this.

<sup>466</sup> Jacqueline Duff, ‘The Power of the Hermit’, unpublished paper given at the Leeds Medieval Conference (2003).

<sup>467</sup> Golding, ‘The Hermit and the Hunter’, p. 99.

<sup>468</sup> Howard M. Colvin, *The White Canons in England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1951), pp. 139-43.

<sup>469</sup> Hugh Francigena, ‘The Tract of the Conversion of Pons of Léras’, in Head, *Medieval Hagiography*, p. 507.

solidi to feed 3,000 poor men.<sup>470</sup> Vitalis of Savigny spent most of his seventeen years as a hermit providing food and clothing for the poor, offering hospitality, caring for lepers and finding husbands for prostitutes.<sup>471</sup> Henrietta Leyser has shown that the houses of the new orders on the continent invariably incorporated a hospice within their compounds, as at Fontevraud, Prémontré and Affligem. That there were so many examples of hermits, or eremitic communities, voluntarily participating in such activities demonstrates that charitable work and pastoral care took precedence over their aims to dissociate themselves from the temporal world. Temporalities such as material wealth, personal ownership and luxurious living were indeed to be shunned, but this need not exclude communication with the secular world. As the *exempla* of holy men and the *vita apostolica*, local communities came to them, not only for spiritual guidance but for their physical nourishment also. It was expected of them and the hermits seemed to be more than willing to fulfil those expectations. While charitable provision was embodied in the Benedictine tradition, it was the hermits of the eleventh and twelfth centuries who promoted this activity as an important part of the eremitic lifestyle and in this were the forerunners of the Franciscans and to some extent the Beguines.

<sup>470</sup> *Vita Stephani*, p. 142.

<sup>471</sup> *Rouleaux des morts*, pp. 283-4.

## Chapter 8

### Miracles, Visions and Prophecies

Miracles, visions and prophecies were an important part of the activities frequently attributed to hermits, and hagiographers were obsessed with these and other signs of divine intervention. Such a fixation distorts our perceptions of reality, rendering it difficult to determine the actual facts of an individual hermit's life. As we have previously seen, authors of *Vitae* had their own agendas, and the emphasis they gave to tales involving the supernatural served not only to magnify the glory of God through the sanctity of their subjects but in some cases also to satisfy the earthly requirements of clerical authorship. Coupled with this was the heavy influence of hagiographical *formulae*. A common practice, widely accepted in medieval literary circles, was to plagiarise from earlier *Vitae* or to adopt popular *topoi*.<sup>472</sup> Reginald of Durham openly admits that three of the miracles of Bartholomew of Farne parallel those of St Cuthbert, St Benedict and Godric of Finchale.<sup>473</sup> This only serves to increase current scepticism. To what extent should we accept the validity of these accounts? If we disregard them altogether we run the risk of losing the historical significance of the hagiographical genre and of overlooking one of the primary functions of the hermit in society, that of mediator between God and His believers. The modern secular world seeks logical explanations for the mysterious and seemingly implausible phenomena described by medieval authors. In order to understand fully the role of miracle workers, visionaries and prophets in medieval society, we need to have an appreciation of how that society perceived such events. It simply accepted the inexplicable; if an event had no rational explanation or was not recognised as the work of nature, it must be a miracle.

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<sup>472</sup> This practice was not restricted to the lives of saints. Asser, for example, borrowed heavily from Einhard's Life of Charlemagne when writing his Life of Alfred. See Head, *Hagiography*, p. 38, where he discusses the use of earlier hagiographical texts and *topoi* to 'flesh out' a portrait of a hero. Geoffrey of Burton, *Life and Miracles of St Modwenna*, Introduction, pp. xiv – xxvi, provides a specific example of a twelfth-century Life relying heavily on earlier works.

<sup>473</sup> *Vita Bartholomei*, pp. 311-312.

Benedicta Ward has clearly shown the complexities inherent in attempting to define a miracle as it would have been understood in the middle ages. “The word ‘miracle’ covers a wide spectrum of events, each with its own context and interpretation,” and this, Ward argues, “makes us recognise that our usual definition of ‘miracle’ as the direct intervention of God in the normal running of events is a narrow and modern concept...”<sup>474</sup> People profoundly believed what they had experienced or witnessed. They reported or recorded what they *thought* had happened, interpreting those events within the conventions and principles of their own time. It is important therefore that we respect this perspective in our attempts to appreciate the view taken of the miracle at that time.

Augustinian theories laid the foundation for an understanding of miracles and their purpose in the world throughout much of the medieval era. In the *De Civitate Dei*, Augustine argued that wonders were revelations of the omnipresence and omnipotence of God on earth; God worked through nature, which was His own miraculous creation, verifying His power to intervene directly in worldly events. Everything that happened was according to His will.<sup>475</sup> Of relevance to the study of holy relics and the cults of saints is Augustine’s justification of the necessity to record and publicise the wonders which occurred at shrines. He anticipated the widespread use of miracle stories as teaching aids, the *exempla* adopted by preachers in their sermons to assist them in the conversion of unbelievers and in strengthening the faith of practising Christians. He therefore advocated the collection of examples of posthumous miracles for, he argued, God responded to prayers offered to the saints via their relics.<sup>476</sup> Such were the practices and beliefs passed down through subsequent centuries and described in the hagiographical literature and miracle collections.

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<sup>474</sup> Benedicta Ward, *Miracles and the Medieval Mind: Theory, Record and Event 1000-1215* (London: Scolar, 1982), pp. 214-215.

<sup>475</sup> St Augustine, *City of God*, trans. by Henry Bettensen (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1950), Book 21, chapter 8 and Book 22, chapter 8.

<sup>476</sup> St Augustine, Book 22, chapter 8.

From the twelfth century onwards, as the Church sought to regulate the spontaneous growth of popular piety which was manifesting itself through pilgrimages, veneration of relics and the proliferation of the cults of saints, so attempts grew to authenticate miracles. Miracles were not always initially accepted by the Church at face value. Although it acknowledged the benefits which might accrue from the promotion of these practices, it also recognised the need to control their direction. Its response was to seek a more refined definition of *miracula* and to separate it from any popular concept of magic. Ecclesiastical authority had long condemned the invocation of demons as a supernatural aid, but its practice must have lingered on in folklore, since contemporary commentators made frequent reference to its use. Accounts of miraculous acts were to be questioned and, in intellectual circles at least, scepticism became more apparent. St Bernard advised his followers to distinguish between *miracula/signa* and *merita/virtutes*: that the first should be admired and the other imitated.<sup>477</sup> William of Canterbury, a recorder of the Becket miracles, warned that the miracle tales of the poor should be accepted with caution because they were more likely to lie.<sup>478</sup> During the canonisation of Gilbert of Sempringham, Innocent III claimed the evidence for miracles was on occasions ‘misleading and deceptive, as in the case of magicians,’<sup>479</sup> while Peter Quivel, a thirteenth-century bishop of Exeter, recommended that miracles be treated with greater objectivity. Ironically, the increase in cynicism towards miraculous acts mirrored the growth of recorded miracles and the associated cults of the miracle-workers. The various efforts of the Church to curb and channel these practices for its own purposes led to canonisation becoming more difficult to attain.<sup>480</sup> In turn this created an ambivalent attitude

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<sup>477</sup> Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermon on St Martin*, in *Opera Omnia*, ed. by Jean Leclercq and others (Rome: Cisterciensis, 1956), 5, p. 407.

<sup>478</sup> See *Materials for the History of Archbishop Thomas Becket*, ed. by James C. Robertson, RS 67, (London: Longman, 1875-85), I, p. 524; Ronald C. Finucane, *Miracles and Pilgrims: Popular Belief in Medieval England* (London: Dent, 1977), p. 102 and Ronald C. Finucane, ‘The Use and Abuse of Medieval Miracles’, *History* 60 (1975), 5.

<sup>479</sup> *Selected Letters of Pope Innocent III concerning England (1198-1216)*, ed. by Christopher R. Cheney and William H. Semple (London: Thomas Nelson, 1953), p. 28.

<sup>480</sup> Finucane, *Miracles and Pilgrims*, pp. 36-8, has shown how the papacy of the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries relegated the authority of determining the qualities for

towards the manifestation of any wondrous act (*acta mirabilis*). The papacy and its supportive commentators adopted a sceptical attitude towards reported miracles, stemming from their anxieties about exploitation and uncontrolled dependence on supernatural aid. This, however, was in the face of growing popular and local veneration of holy men and women by the *rustici*, stimulated by folkloric practice and often encouraged by cathedral and monastic chapters for reasons of status and commercial gain. It is against the background of such ambivalence that the following discussion of miracle-working hermits is set.

Traditionally, miracles are associated with sainthood and the evidence suggests that the reporting of such phenomena was primarily to promote a claim for canonisation.<sup>481</sup> Prophesying, visions and miracles were not exclusively eremitical powers; the wider family of saints was equally well endowed with these talents. Yet not all saints were hermits, nor were such powers the sole prerogative of hermits. Miracles had become a pre-requisite of sainthood, but they were not required to become a hermit. This leads to the next conundrum: were all hermits saints? As outlined above, the qualifications for recognition of sanctity were still being debated in the twelfth century, but many hermits whom we now accept as saints were not universally acknowledged as such in their own time. Robert of Knaresborough was never officially canonised, neither was Godric of Finchale.<sup>482</sup> Cults were invariably local and short-lived and sometimes needed support to continue. John of Ford promoted the cult of Wulfric of Haselbury through the writing of his *Vita* in the mid-1180s, some thirty years after Wulfric's death. Towards the end of his hagiography John revealed his distress at the lack of devotion to the hermit during this time; it

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canonisation to itself, requiring not just a specific number of miracles from the saint, all witnessed, but also evidence of a virtuous life.

<sup>481</sup> For debates on this subject see the works by Thomas Head, Patrick Geary and Ronald Finucane listed in the bibliography.

<sup>482</sup> Golding, 'The Hermit and the Hunter', p. 102 and Ward, *Miracles*, p. 78. Wulfric of Haselbury and Christina of Markyate were similarly overlooked as candidates for canonisation.

is therefore interesting to discover that miraculous activity eventually began to take place from the very time that the *Vita* appeared.<sup>483</sup>

Despite campaigns started soon after death (or sometimes even before) canonisation might not be achieved for centuries. For others, as far as we can tell, such an accolade was not even sought, as in the case of the Baker of Dale.<sup>484</sup> Very few hermits were privileged to have their *Vitae* recorded, but for those who were, authors invariably included any associated miraculous events, adhering to accepted *formulae*. Of the hundreds of hermits who existed in England between circa 1050-1250, there are only seven extant *Vitae* originating from this time.<sup>485</sup> We only become aware of the existence of most others from a name on a foundation charter, an entry in the rolls, or by having been noted as a loyal companion to an individual of greater renown. In 1181 the *inclusus* Adam of Gloucester, for example, is noted in the Pipe Rolls as having received sixty shillings, while 'Raginaldus eremita' appeared as a witness on a charter dated 1114 which ceded land to Savigny.<sup>486</sup> We only learn of the hermit Ivo because he is mentioned as the companion of Robert of Knaresborough, as is the case with Gobert, who accompanied Peter de l'Etoile at Fontgombault.<sup>487</sup> Without a *Vita* it is impossible to tell whether any other individuals from among the broader eremitic communities in England and France were, in fact, miracle-workers,

<sup>483</sup> *Vita Wulfric*, p. 132-5.

<sup>484</sup> Thomas de Musca, 'Chronicle', pp. 1-10 and Howard M. Colvin, 'Dale Abbey—its Foundation', *Derbyshire Archaeological Journal*, new series (1940), 14.

<sup>485</sup> These are Godric of Finchale, Wulfric of Haselbury, Bartholomew of Farne, Christina of Markyate, Robert of Knaresborough, Henry of Coquet and Godric of Throckenholt. Clay had attempted a breakdown of the numbers of hermits in England county by county as an appendix to her work, *The Hermits and Anchorites of England*, from which it is apparent that there were large numbers of men and women pursuing the eremitic life from the eleventh to the thirteenth centuries. Dr. Eddie Jones, 'Hermits and Anchorites of Oxfordshire', pp. 51-77, has shown that for Oxfordshire, at least, her figure was lower than current research indicates and this could well be the case for the rest of England. As part of my own on-going research, I am compiling a database of hermits in England and France (see Appendix III). The extant *Vitae* for France are more numerous, but, again, are representative of a very small percentage of the total numbers leading an eremitic life.

<sup>486</sup> *Pipe Roll*, 17 Hen. II: 84 which also notes 'Ade incluso .lx.s.'; Moolenbroek, *Vital l'ermite*, p. 294.

<sup>487</sup> *Metrical Life*, pp. 57-8; Jacques de Bascher, 'Fontgombault et les ermites du Maine. Robert d'Arbrissel, Bernard de Tiron, Vital de Savigny, Raoul de la Futaie et l'expansion eremitique de Fongombault (XIe-XIIe siècles)', *La Province du Maine* 85 (1983), 121-138 (p. 125, n. 10).

visionaries or prophets. We can only assume that had they been, more of them would have become the subject of the hagiographer's pen.

Here the modern scholar is faced with further challenges resulting from the limited availability of the source material. Is the ratio of extant *Vitae* to numbers of hermits due to the accidents of survival of such documents, or is it because only a few were written? It is impossible to know, since the selection of the subject matter was often influenced just as much by political, social or ecclesiastical ambition as by spiritual revelation. It is dangerous to make generalisations based on so few examples, since this is likely to reflect the prejudices of medieval authors. However, if the *Vitae* are placed within the context of the more extensive hagiographical material, it is possible to draw some conclusions concerning the semi-divine qualities of hermits and to reveal how this role affected their relationships with the medieval Church.

It is impossible to establish the percentage of hermits who actively performed miracles, either during their lifetimes or posthumously. Where we have the benefit of a *Vita*, it is likely there will be some reference to *miraculae* but the depth and detail varies enormously. Some authors placed greater stress on these than others; for example, John of Ford's *Life of Wulfric* reads as a collection of miracle stories with details of the saint's life interspersed. Reginald of Durham's *Vitae* of Godric of Finchale and Bartholomew of Farne follow a similar pattern, the former also having its own appended miracle collection. Baudry, on the other hand, in composing his *Life of Robert of Arbrissel*, makes no reference to specific miraculous events but refers to miracles in general terms. The word *miracula* occurs just five times in the final paragraphs of this particular *Vita*, each time referring to the good works that Robert performed in his lifetime - establishing hospitals for lepers and feeding the hungry - rather than to any specific and unexplained phenomena.<sup>488</sup> Despite his concern for the last

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<sup>488</sup> Baudry, *Vita Roberti*, p. 607, 'Qui de terra est, de terra loquitur, et miracula in corporibus admiratur: qui autem spiritualis est, languidos et leprosus, mortuos quoque

days and death of Robert, Andrew, the author of the *Altera Vita*, places little emphasis on the theme of miracles.<sup>489</sup> Like Baudry, Walter, the author of the Life of Anastasius, makes just one reference at the close of his brief *Vita* to 'many miracles' which occurred at this hermit's tomb. He then proceeds to describe only three in detail, rather than recount them all 'lest', he explains, 'we seem to be guilty of pride'.<sup>490</sup> Although it might seem that there were more supernatural occurrences associated with English hermits than with French, it must be said that, for the majority of hermits in either country there is no record of such activity. This might indicate, from the small number of hermits whose names are known, that contemporaries afforded greater significance to divinely inspired deeds than to any other aspect of a hermit's career.

Regardless of hagiographical objectives, tales involving visions and prophecies as well as miracles support the view that these provided the mean by which the hermit could interact with neighbouring communities and form bonds and relationships with the laity who were often the beneficiaries of such divine intervention. Thus the hermit could become an integral and active member of society and a conduit through which he or she could provide a link between God and the faithful. The constant flow of visitors who wished to see these holy men and women to seek cures from disease, restoration of sight or speech, freedom from demons or prophetic guidance in decision-making, act as testament to the trust which ordinary people placed in their spiritual skills. The ultimate test of such trust is apparent in the story of the parents who, believing their daughter to be dead, waited patiently at the door of Godric of Finchale's cell in the hope that he could bring her back to life. In spite of Godric's own misgivings, the expectation of the girl's family was never in doubt. Their trust was

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*convaluisse testatur, quando quilibet animabus languidis et leprosies suscitandis consultit et medetur.*' See pages 607-8 for all five references to miracles.

<sup>489</sup> Jacques Dalarun, *L'impossible sainteté: La vie retrouvée de Robert d'Arbrissel (v. 1045-1116), fondateur de Fontevraud* (Paris: Cerf, 1985), in which Dalarun discusses the discovery and content of the *Altera Vita* by Andrew.

<sup>490</sup> *Vita Anastasii*, PL 149: 432.

rewarded when, after praying for three days, Godric watched amazed as the little girl crawled towards the altar in his oratory.<sup>491</sup>

This incident, more than any other, demonstrates the burden of responsibility a community often placed on holy men and women. Whether the decision of those parents to seek Godric's aid stemmed from deep faith or from grief-stricken desperation is irrelevant. Either way, the family truly believed that Godric possessed the gift of restoring life. It is difficult to determine at what stage in Godric's career this incident took place; however, Stephenson, editor of the *Vita*, suggests that it must have been soon after he had established himself at Finchale.<sup>492</sup> That being the case, the tale is even more poignant since initially Godric had not been well received by his neighbours<sup>493</sup> and his reputation was not yet assured. It would seem then that his status as a holy man quickly overcame any negative attitudes in the vicinity. His visible displays of asceticism, his devotion to prayer and meditation and his virtuous life soon provided sufficient proof that he was a man of God, and as such must have the gift of working miracles.

Nevertheless, incidents of hermits restoring life are rare. Miracles involving cures of disease or infirmity are far more prevalent and in this hermits followed the trends of saints in general.<sup>494</sup> In England, the *Vitae* of Godric of Finchale and Wulfric of Haselbury offer numerous examples of cures performed while the hermits were still alive. Godric's cure of a cripple by rubbing the boy's red and swollen legs with his hands was typical of his acts of healing, whilst Wulfric had a reputation for curing the blind, the mute and the insomniac.<sup>495</sup> An incident involving Wulfric and a young monk demonstrates the conflict of interpretation between the trust of the devout believer and the scepticism of the modern mind. According to John of Ford,

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<sup>491</sup> *Vita Godrici*, p. 132-5.

<sup>492</sup> *Vita Godrici*, pp. 132, n. 3.

<sup>493</sup> *Vita Godrici*, pp. 74-5.

<sup>494</sup> Finucane, *Miracles and Pilgrims*, pp. 59 and 69, claims that nine-tenths of all posthumous miracles were cures.

<sup>495</sup> *Vita Godrici*, pp. 245-6; *Vita Wulfrici*, pp. 28-30, 95-6 and Ch 50 for the cure of 16 blind persons. By citing these examples, I do not wish to imply that either hermit was unable or unwilling to perform a wide range of other miracles, but these appear to be some of their more common cures.

Richard, a monk of Ford and the boy's superior, told Wulfric that the youth was 'much troubled by insomnia' which, the author suggests, was brought about through the trials and hardships of the religious profession. Wulfric advised Richard to ask each of the monks to say the Lord's Prayer for the youth three times and then he would be cured. It seems that Richard expected more from the hermit and asked why Wulfric did not pray for the boy himself, to which Wulfric replied, '*Ego solus obtinere id potero a Domino meo; nendum omnes vos?*'<sup>496</sup> and the cure was effective immediately. Modern psychology might take the view that Wulfric was able to assess the boy's emotional state and instinctively knew the remedy, but the accepted explanation at the time was that God had answered the prayers of the monks through the mediation of this saintly man and had performed a miracle.

Christina of Markyate's only miraculous cure was that of a girl from Canterbury who was afflicted by the falling sickness,<sup>497</sup> while the only known example from Robert of Knaresborough was the healing of Ivo's broken tibia.<sup>498</sup> Similar observations can be found among the hermits of France, although the author of Stephen of Obazine's *Vita* is the only one who provides accounts of his subject's miraculous activities in detail, as in the report of the woman suffering from a severe fever who followed behind Stephen as he travelled back to Limoges. Her cure was achieved when Stephen placed his hands on her head and prayed.<sup>499</sup> Afflictions which could not be explained, such as fits or madness, were seen as possession by the devil or other evil spirits. Hermits were known to be well equipped to treat these maladies since they constantly confronted their own demons and evil spirits in the form of temptations and hallucinations within the confines of their solitary dwellings.<sup>500</sup> In an age when medical knowledge was

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<sup>496</sup> *Vita Wulfrici*, p. 46.

<sup>497</sup> Talbot, *Christina*, pp. 118-20.

<sup>498</sup> *Metrical Life*, p. 59.

<sup>499</sup> *Vita Stephani*, pp. 155-6.

<sup>500</sup> For two of the many battles hermits had with demons, see *Metrical Life*, p. 63 which tells how Robert of Knaresborough quelled the flames of Sir Gerrard (the Devil) with holy water, and *Vita Anastasii*, PL 149: 430 when Anastasius extinguished the devil and his fire with the sign of the cross.

limited and access to a doctor expensive, the hermit who was able to care for the physical and mental welfare of his neighbours would undoubtedly develop a close relationship with them, not just with the sufferers and their families, but also with the wider community. If the hermit had the gift of healing he was, without doubt, favoured by God and worked with His blessing. In an uncertain world, the presence of a healer in their midst must have given the local population a greater sense of security which in itself would reinforce the ties which bound the hermit and society together.

Such ties were also strengthened through the reciprocal sharing of food, a social activity in itself, which has been briefly explored by Susan Ridyard and Dominic Alexander. Ridyard points to the bond which could be established between a hermit and his visitors through the invitation to share ‘earthly hospitality’ alongside his ‘spiritual refreshment’ with the promise, Ridyard suggests, of divine aid to come.<sup>501</sup> Alexander’s discussion is primarily concerned with the wider implications of the ‘eremitical diet’ but acknowledges the importance which hagiographers placed on the provision of food in the bonding process.<sup>502</sup> Miraculous provision of food, especially at a time of great famine, would of course raise the divine status of the hermit to an unassailable level within the local community.

In the Lodèvois region of France, the hermit Pons de Léras took upon himself the burden of feeding the starving hoards which gathered in his wilderness. The author of the *Tractatus* describes how a crowd of poor people gathered at Pons’ dwelling at Sylvanès: “the enormous multitude surrounded the house just like an army”<sup>503</sup>. The brothers, on seeing “such a great throng of troubled and shaken poor people” despaired, for they knew that they could not sustain such a huge crowd. Pons responded with a speech intended to raise the morale of his brethren, reminding them of the Biblical accounts of the miraculous provision of food. He advised them to

<sup>501</sup> Ridyard, ‘Functions of a Twelfth-Century Recluse’, p. 244.

<sup>502</sup> Alexander, ‘Hermits’, pp. 209-210.

<sup>503</sup> Hugo Francigena, ‘Tractatus de conversione Pontii de Laracio et exordii Salvaniensis monasterii’, ed. by Beverly M. Kienzle, *Sacris erudiri* 34 (1993), 296, lines 326-8, ‘...congregata est pauperum multitudo, gens magna, qui obsederunt domum in circuitu tanquam exercitus...’.

sell any possessions they had, using the proceeds for alms and persuaded them to put their trust in the Lord. Their faith was rewarded when the lord Arnaud du Pont opened his storehouses and from just a few grains of wheat milled, jars overflowing with flour were produced whilst small loaves were transformed into large ones, and from just a few of these, large baskets were filled. The bread even multiplied as it was being distributed and grew under the teeth of those who consumed it.<sup>504</sup> Without doubt, the story has gained in the telling and certainly does imitate the Biblical stories of the manna in the wilderness, and of Christ feeding the five thousand, but it also shows how the crowds in their despair had automatically turned to Pons and his small group of eremitic followers for help, placing trust in him that, as a servant of God, he could perform a miracle. The account does not end there, however, for on the feast of the birth of St John the Baptist, Pons prepared a meal for “all the people”<sup>505</sup> When they were fully fed, he “ordered all of them to go to their own places”, and as they went, they proclaimed that the dwelling of Pons and his brethren was ‘*nothing other than the house of the Lord*’ (Genesis 28:17).<sup>506</sup> It was only a short time after this, the author tells us, that “the place (Sylvanès) rose in authority and grew so much, not only in things but in religious persons and possessions”.<sup>507</sup> The story is typical of the hagiographical genre in that it leaves many questions unanswered. For example it is not clear whether the poor who had gathered were from the immediate surrounding area only - in which case, it is difficult to envisage the ‘multitude’ which the author implies - or whether the famine was so great and widespread that people had been drawn to Sylvanès from great distances. If it was the latter, then Pons’ reputation as a holy man must have become common knowledge throughout a large geographical area very soon after his arrival. Neither is it clear why Pons decided to prepare a further meal on the feast of St John the Baptist. As the people were ordered to return to their “own places” (*loca sua*) afterwards, did this signify the end of the famine? Whatever the reason, his

<sup>504</sup> Francigena, ‘Tractatus’, pp. 296-8, lines 334-393.

<sup>505</sup> Francigena, ‘Tractatus’, p. 298, line 401. Presumably, by “*omni populo*” the author meant the huge crowd of poor people which had gathered at the start of the famine.

<sup>506</sup> Francigena, ‘Tractatus’, p. 298, lines 402-4.

<sup>507</sup> Francigena, ‘Tractatus’, p. 298, lines 405-6, ‘...*tantum locus praefecit et excrevit, non tantum rebus sed etiam religiosis personis et possessionibus...*’.

act served to symbolise and reinforce Pons' role as the miraculous provider and secured his elevated standing in the local community. The tales of the returning travellers would undoubtedly have proclaimed his fame as a man of God throughout the Lodèvois (and possibly beyond) and his own actions guaranteed his credibility among the ordinary men and women with whom he came into regular contact. That Sylvanès rose in authority and expanded to the point where it was “suitable for having an order and constructing an abbey”<sup>508</sup> would appear to confirm these claims.

The Life of Stephen of Obazine also offers an account of miraculous famine relief which bears a resemblance to that of Pons. When a similar food crisis devastated his region, he put pressure on local entrepreneurs to release food stocks and personally travelled around neighbouring areas to gather what provisions he could.<sup>509</sup> Once back at the monastery, the grain, beans and wine mysteriously multiplied, sufficiently, the author estimated, to feed more than ten thousand.<sup>510</sup> As in the story of Pons, the author of Stephen's Life was keen to emphasise his miraculous provision.<sup>511</sup> This demonstrates again that ordinary people had faith in Stephen and his disciples that they would be able to provide for them. It seems that hermits in the wilderness offered a greater promise of relief from hunger than reliance on the citizens of the towns.<sup>512</sup> England's experience of famine at this time was not on the same scale, providing little opportunity for similar miracles of such magnitude. Nevertheless, food was still a means by which hermits bonded with their neighbours. John of Ford describes Wulfric's willingness to share his food with those who visited him - as when William of Ford and Robert of St Albans passed by - and the cures he was able to perform from a distance by sending blessed bread to the infirm.<sup>513</sup> Despite his reputation for a churlish and prickly exterior, Godric, in his later years, also welcomed

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<sup>508</sup> *Francigena*, ‘Tractatus’, p. 298, lines 402-3.

<sup>509</sup> *Francigena*, ‘Tractatus’, p. 297, lines 377-8, which adds that Pons had also set out on a little ass to become ‘*mendicis mendicus*’ and to seek help from the rulers of the people.

<sup>510</sup> *Francigena*, ‘Tractatus’, p. 143.

<sup>511</sup> *Vita Stephani*, pp. 133-145.

<sup>512</sup> *Vita Stephani*, pp. 139-141 and 143, which gives examples of Stephen's miraculous provision and explains how he was active in this both from his sickbed and from beyond the grave.

<sup>513</sup> *Vita Wulfrici*, pp. 99-100 and 54.

visitors and through his gift of prophecy was able to warn of forthcoming crop failure and hardship.

Through their healing powers and other miracles hermits were able to develop close bonds with their local communities but they were not always portrayed as compassionate healers and guardians. The intriguing story of Wulfric and Drogo de Munci, a servant of Henry I, provides an illustration of this. De Munci, hearing about Wulfric's alleged wealth and possessions, proposed that Henry should investigate. Having made this suggestion, he immediately suffered a fit and was overtaken with paralysis which was only relieved when Henry I, at the queen's suggestion, visited Wulfric and sought a cure for his servant.<sup>514</sup> Through this reported act of retaliation, was the author of the *Life* applauding Wulfric for unselfishly attempting to safeguard the financial service he provided for the local community, or was he seeking to point out that hermits were able to exert control over people and events by the use of their divine powers just as Wulfric supposedly took revenge against his adversary Drogo de Munci? A further aspect of Wulfric's character was demonstrated when the cellarer of Montacute Priory stole some of the hermit's provisions. John of Ford tells how Wulfric wished that God would relieve the cellarer of his food, and the poor monk drowned that night.<sup>515</sup> Likewise, the author of the *Life of Stephen of Obazine* suggests that Stephen and his companions were avenged when the house of the Canons Regular at Lyons was consumed by fire during the night, the canons having earlier that day refused to welcome the travelling hermits and sent them away with insults. While the author leaves the cause of this fire open to the reader's interpretation,<sup>516</sup> he is more forthright in making the connection between the sudden death of Eble, the abbot of

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<sup>514</sup> *Vita Wulfrici*, pp. 63-5. This story is intriguing because it implies that Wulfric was operating as a banker. There were strict regulations in force concerning who could exchange coin and the geographical extent within which they could operate. Neither is this an occupation which would normally be associated with a hermit, who would have renounced the world and all its earthly trappings.

<sup>515</sup> *Vita Wulfrici*, pp. 61-2, and Holdsworth, 'Hermits', pp. 59-60, who categorises these incidents as curses rather than straightforward miracles, but regardless of the classification, they still demonstrate the special interaction the hermit had with other people.

<sup>516</sup> *Vita Stephani*, p. 80. According to Head, *Hagiography*, pp. 158-9, fires were interpreted as a sign of divine punishment.

Tulle, and an earlier violent quarrel with Stephen during which Stephen warned him not to make further threats as he did not know what might befall him the next day.<sup>517</sup> All those who had witnessed this quarrel were astonished that the words of the man of God had been so quickly realised and that he had so rapidly been avenged.

When such tales of retribution spread, it was to be hoped that the populace would instantly realise that to threaten or place obstacles in the path of one of the Lord's servants would incur His wrath. That was the hagiographer's precise intention and most stories of this kind are qualified in the *Vitae* with a statement alleging that God's justice had been executed. The suggestion of divine intervention served a twofold purpose – it enhanced the reputation of the hermit as God's representative on earth and, at the same time, generated fear among the faithful at the way in which such power could be used. Furthermore, these tales suggested that hermits were in control of the varying circumstances of their lives. In so far as hagiography was utilised as a teaching tool, by enhancing the sanctity of the individual hermit these miracle stories could be employed to demonstrate how to lead a good and virtuous life and how to exercise control over the behaviour and *mores* of society. Once a hermit's divine powers had been made manifest, his, or her influences on any other religious and social spheres were easily accepted.

The application of the miraculous as a controlling force in society was neither new nor restricted to the activities of hermits. Its impact is attested in the wider context of saints and their cults. Custodians of relics often used their holy treasures to obtain desired outcomes - a favourable decision during a dispute, or influence over a local area and its inhabitants. Koziol has shown how the monks of Lobbes used the relics of St Ursmer to resolve feuds and restore peace in Flanders by organising a *delatio* (procession) during which the saint's relics were transported from town to town, performing many miracles along the route. News of the saint's power preceding the arrival of his/her relics created an atmosphere of anxious

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<sup>517</sup> *Vita Stephani*, p. 157.

expectation which the monks were able to exploit to their advantage.<sup>518</sup> By the ritual use of relics to denote a saint's pleasure or displeasure at the actions of protagonists' disputes, the monks could manipulate the situation to obtain the result they wished. As with the hermit, fear of holy vengeance brought swift and amicable settlement.<sup>519</sup> Thomas Head, in his study of hagiography and saints' cults in the Orléanais, describes how saints could be used to bring about favourable decisions by their divine intervention from beyond the grave. The reported storms and flashes of light emanating from St Benedict's resting place at Fleury were considered sufficient evidence that the saint wished to remain there and not be removed to Monte Cassino, thus settling the renowned eighth-century dispute between these two foundations.<sup>520</sup> Head acknowledges the *delatio* as an influence in many matters of local dispute or adversity, citing in particular problems over property, fundraising, ending epidemics and enforcing the Peace of God.<sup>521</sup> He further demonstrates how special relationships developed between the saint (the patron) and his *familia* (the local population) as a result of the miraculous signs and wonders performed through the relics. Prayers and devotions also helped to create a favourable relationship between patron and *familia*, whilst neglect by his family could result in a saint's chastisement or worse. In this way, the Church could often enforce stability over areas which had loose government structures and where power vacuums existed.

As with the deceased saint reclining in the monastic or cathedral shrine, so the hermit living in the forest at the edge of urban life was seen as much a mediator of the Holy will, and his or her powers were deemed just as great. While the majority of the miracles of most saints were performed posthumously (at least it was the posthumous ones which were recorded, usually to support a canonisation claim), those of hermits were part of

<sup>518</sup> Geoffrey Koziol, 'Monks, Feuds and the Making of Peace in Eleventh-Century Flanders', in *The Peace of God: Social Violence and Religious Response in France around the year 1000*, ed. by Thomas Head and Richard Landes (New York: Cornell University Press, 1992), pp. 239-258.

<sup>519</sup> Koziol, pp. 245-7 and 250-1, in which Koziol describes two incidents.

<sup>520</sup> Head, *Hagiography*, pp. 140-3.

<sup>521</sup> Head, *Hagiography*, pp. 172-181. See also Richard W. Southern, *The Making of the Middle Ages* (London: Pimlico, 1993), pp. 122-33 on the significance of relics, miracles and the power wielded through them.

everyday life. Most *Vitae* record miracles which took place during a hermit's lifetime, whilst very few hermits appear to have had extensive miracle collections made of their supernatural activity from beyond the grave.<sup>522</sup> Nevertheless, some authors have mentioned miracles which were worked at certain tombs, and these references indicate that cults and their associated pilgrimages did in some cases occur, evidence that their *familiae* continued to interact with them after death and preserve the bonds which had been developed during life. Overall, however, the scarcity of information on posthumous activity implies that hermits' cults did in the main remain extremely small and localised, with Godric of Finchale being the one exception.

Memories of individual hermits were sometimes kept alive through the aims and ambitions of others; use of the name of a highly respected holy man, and his miraculous deeds in a later work on another subject, could substantiate a story which could not otherwise be verified. Osbert of Clare's *Vita beati Edwardi Regis Anglorum* is a prime example.<sup>523</sup> In the *Vita* Osbert includes an account explaining how King Edward chose the site of Thorney for the re-building of Westminster Abbey. A hermit called Wulsi (d. circa 1111) while enclosed in a subterranean cave at Evesham,<sup>524</sup> had a vision in which St Peter told him where the new abbey should be built, a site already blessed by divine miracles which St Peter declared he would consecrate with his own hands. He then instructed the hermit to commit to writing all that he had heard and have it delivered to the royal court.<sup>525</sup>

In spite of this momentous occurrence, the existence of a hermit by the name of Wulsi is neither acknowledged in the earlier *Vitae Edwardi Regis*

<sup>522</sup> Godric of Finchale seems to be the only exception with 244 posthumous miracles recorded. See Finucane, *Miracles and Pilgrims*, pp. 126-7.

<sup>523</sup> Osbert of Clare, *Vita beati Edwardi Regis Anglorum*, in 'La vie de S Edouard le Confesseur par Osbert de Clare' ed. by Marc Bloch, *Analecta Bollandiana* 41 (1923), 5-131.

<sup>524</sup> Osbert of Clare, p. 81, '...in specu subterraneo mancipatus erat obsequiis...'. Compare with Aelred, *Vita S Edwardi Regis*, PL 195: 752, '...qui specu subterraneo multis annis inclusus...'.<sup>525</sup>

<sup>525</sup> Aelred, PL 195: 752-754.

nor by any of the contemporary chroniclers except by Ingulph in his *Chronicle of the Abbey of Croyland*.<sup>526</sup> Wulsi, according to Ingulph, was a “young man of most remarkable devoutness and of very high birth” and must have joined this Benedictine abbey a few years prior to 1036 where he lived among the brethren as a recluse “for many years”.<sup>527</sup> It is not surprising that Ingulph should wish to mention one who was associated with his own abbey and who was well respected for his exceptional holiness. Yet neither Ingulph nor any of the continuators of his chronicle tells the story of Wulsi’s vision. It may have been that because Wulsi had moved to his cave at Evesham by the time he experienced his vision news of it did not reach Ingulph and the monks of Croyland. Peter of Blois, one of the *Chronicle’s* continuators, makes further reference to Wulsi’s life, though, again no mention of his vision.<sup>528</sup> (In fact, neither of them mentions any other miracles or prophecies in connection with this hermit.) Had the story become common knowledge by the time of Peter’s writing, it is unlikely that he would have missed the opportunity of mentioning such a miraculous experience by a former monk of his abbey, which had, by implication, a significant influence on the decision of a saintly king like Edward the Confessor. Osbert of Clare, therefore, appears to have been the first to record the story of the vision when writing his life of Edward, which was completed by 1138, possibly a little less than a century after the vision supposedly took place.<sup>529</sup>

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<sup>526</sup> According to *The Life of King Edward who rests at Westminster*, ed. by Frank Barlow, Nelson’s Medieval Texts (London, Thomas Nelson, 1962), pp. xxv-xxx, the Anonymous *Vita*, the earliest Life of King Edward, was completed no later than 1067. Neither Sulcard’s *Prologus de Construccione Westmonasterii* nor William of Malmesbury’s *Gesta Regum Anglorum*, written respectively in c. 1080 and 1124-5, mention Wulsi or the legend of his vision, neither do other chroniclers writing prior to Osbert’s Life of St Edward, such as Florence of Worcester and Roger of Wendover.

<sup>527</sup> Ingulph, *Chronicle of the Abbey of Croyland with the Continuation by Peter of Blois and anonymous writers*, trans. by Henry T. Riley (London: H G Bohn, 1854), p. 117. According to Ingulph/Peter of Blois, Wulsi lived as a recluse for 75 years. If he died in Evesham c. 1111, it would mean that he joined Croyland around 1036. However, he probably did not begin his solitary existence immediately and, therefore, his arrival at the abbey may have been some years earlier.

<sup>528</sup> Ingulph, pp. 252-6.

<sup>529</sup> It is not possible to date the occurrence of the vision precisely as we cannot tell when the building of the new Abbey commenced. Barlow suggests it was prior to 1060 as Edward had granted an estate to Westminster in that year. See Frank Barlow, *Edward the Confessor* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1979), p. 229 n. 3. Bernhard W. Scholz, ‘Sulcard of Westminster: *Prologus de construccione Westmonasterii*’, *Traditio* 20 (1964), 70, implies

The significance of this information is that it is highly probable that Osbert invented the story, which was clearly designed to support Edward's decision to build the new Westminster Abbey at Thorney and his wish to dedicate it to St Peter. As prior, Osbert may have discovered that documentary evidence to substantiate Edward's grant of land and other privileges to Westminster's community was either non-existent or would not stand the scrutiny of twelfth-century conventions. Alternatively, with the revival of the cult of Edward the Confessor, he may have seized the opportunity to reinforce Westminster's rights and promote its rank and status. According to Frank Barlow, Osbert was "a man who espoused causes"<sup>530</sup> and, since he was responsible for the protracted campaign for the canonisation of Edward, reinforcement of the king's reputation by St Peter through Wulsi the hermit would certainly have lent credibility to the campaign. Who would have argued against the will of St Peter and, by extension, God? As Barlow observes, 'if he (Edward) was a saint, his charters would have unassailable authority; and if his sanctity was recognised, pilgrims to his tomb would increase not only the monastery's fame but also its revenue.'<sup>531</sup>

As part of the campaign for canonisation, the original *Vita Edwardi Regis* was revised. Between 1100 and 1124 the account of Edward's miracles was expanded and other stories were added, including the description of Wulsi and his vision of St Peter. Both Barlow and Marc Bloch suggest that this was the work of Osbert and it does appear highly probable from their descriptions of his character and intentions.<sup>532</sup> By 1138 he had completed his new *Vita beati Edwardi regis Anglorum* containing both the miracle collection and the Wulsi story, a work more in the hagiographical tradition than the earlier Anonymous *Vita* of 1067. Given Osbert's objectives, it becomes clear why he should want to include an account of the hermit's vision. Firstly it endorsed the grant of land at Thorney to Westminster. St Peter had personally selected the site, miracles had already been performed

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the vision may have taken place between 1050 and 1055, arguing from the date of a first delegation Edward sent to Rome and the date of the death of one of those delegates.

<sup>530</sup> Barlow, *Edward the Confessor*, p. 272.

<sup>531</sup> Barlow, *Edward the Confessor*, p. 273.

<sup>532</sup> Conversely, neither Barlow nor Bloch offers any concrete evidence that Osbert did create these stories.

there and, according to the vision, Peter would consecrate the building with his own hands. Secondly, it added support to the call for the king's canonisation. If the *Vita* was to be used as documentary evidence for this, Osbert had to produce a work worthy of a saint. The inclusion of a story involving a vision of St Peter - to whom Edward was especially devoted - brought to the King's attention by a hermit of renowned asceticism and virtue, could only serve to augment an image of the piety and sanctity of the monarch.<sup>533</sup>

Osbert does not have a very sound reputation for integrity, having produced a number of unconvincing forgeries of charters and other written material in connection with Edward's life.<sup>534</sup> Assuming that Osbert did invent the story, why should he choose Wulsi as the visionary? A possible explanation might be that Osbert was writing the life of an Anglo-Saxon king and Wulsi was an Anglo-Saxon hermit. More significantly, Wulsi was an Anglo-Saxon of noble birth, allegedly a relative of Leofric, Earl of Mercia, who was a loyal member of King Edward's council until his death in 1057. Wulsi's background, one of privilege and rank, was linked to Edward through his service to his kinsman, which would have granted him a certain status among his peers even after he had forsaken 'the vanities of this world'.<sup>535</sup> At a time when 'things English began to come back into fashion',<sup>536</sup> Osbert could not have chosen a more suitable individual to substantiate his claim: one of lasting repute, imbued with noble English blood.

Although the suspicion that Osbert did invent the vision is strong, it does not rule out the possibility that the story may have had its roots in an oral tradition which had been passed down with embellishments along the way.

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<sup>533</sup> Wulsi had a reputation for his extreme austerity and was highly regarded, both as a recluse among the monks of Croyland and as a solitary living in his cave at Evesham. Both Ingulph and Peter of Blois reveal his popularity as a mentor and an adviser, 'by the resort of people to Croyland, who frequently came to consult him on their affairs, and daily disquieted the peace of his soul', Peter of Blois, *Continuation*, p. 252.

<sup>534</sup> Barlow, *Edward the Confessor*, p. 273.

<sup>535</sup> Peter of Blois, *Continuation*, p. 252.

<sup>536</sup> Barlow, *Edward the Confessor*, 265.

After all, Wulsi, despite the glowing accounts of his ascetic life, had not been canonised and there does not appear to have been any attempt to do so, suggesting that there may have been some basis for the story in oral tradition which was still extant in Osbert's time and in that of Aelred of Rievaulx twenty years later. Whatever the origins, Aelred of Rievaulx was to repeat the story in his reworking of Osbert's *Vita* when Lawrence, abbot of Westminster, required a new Life after canonisation was finally achieved in 1161 and turned to his kinsman, the honoured and respected abbot of Rievaulx, to undertake the task. He did not reject or question Osbert's account of Wulsi and the vision, and as Aelred's *Vita sancti Edwardi Regis* became the standard Latin Life for the remainder of the middle ages, the memory of the hermit Wulsi as a great visionary was kept alive.<sup>537</sup> If the vision of Wulsi was a fabrication, Osbert's decision to use the story of a hermit rather than a saint demonstrates the credibility which such holy men or women could bring to stories of dubious origin and reveals how their influence could continue after death to support and further the ambitions and aspirations of others. In this, Osbert was no different from the monks of Lobbes and their use of the reputation of St Ursmer.

The Wulsi story provides a good illustration of the other divine powers for which hermits, as well as saints, were renowned, those of visions and prophecy. Most *Vitae* record at least one incident of one of these, although for many hermits visions or voices were frequent and commonly concerned with their own spirituality; a vision of Christ, the Virgin or a saint was interpreted as confirmation of the merit of their chosen way of life.<sup>538</sup> Hermits frequently foresaw the timing and manner of their own deaths, even, rather arrogantly, predicting the squabbles which were to ensue over the ownership and location of their relics.<sup>539</sup> Others were guided along their

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<sup>537</sup> Aelred, *Vita S Edwardi*, PL 195: 752-754.

<sup>538</sup> See *Vita Godrici*, pp. 117-8 for the apparitions of the Virgin and Mary Magdalene which appeared before Godric while he prayed at his altar, assuring him that the Virgin had taken him into her protection. John the Baptist frequently appeared to Godric, Christ once, and on a further occasion he held a long conversation with St Peter, *ibid.* pp. 126 and 343, 222.

<sup>539</sup> *Vita Bartholomei*, p. 318, tells us that Bartholomew of Farne had a vision forewarning him that his death would occur in nine years. Wulfric predicted the squabble which ensued between Montacute and Ford over possession of his body, *Vita Wulfrici*, p. 126, Robert of Knaresborough prophesied concerning the attempts of Fontevraud to take his body away,

eremitical paths as a result of visions which led to life-changing decisions. Bartholomew of Farne, having led a riotous life in his youth, experienced a series of visions in which Christ, Mary, the apostle Peter, and John the Evangelist appeared to him. Although by no means a sudden conversion, it eventually led him to the monastery at Durham where further appearances by St Cuthbert guided him to Farne and the path towards eremitism.<sup>540</sup> Not all visions, however, were so benign, nor did they all stem from divine inspiration. For William Firmat it was an apparition of the devil in the form of a bear which inspired him to distribute all his goods to the poor and withdraw to solitude in the region of Tours.<sup>541</sup> Christian of Aumône suffered demonic apparitions all his life, *daemonum invidiam usque ad senectam perpessus est*, and, convinced that the voice he heard was the 'lying tongue of the serpent', would inflict all kinds of punishment on his body in the hope of resisting temptation.<sup>542</sup> These visions were closely associated with the inner conflicts which solitaries frequently experienced between the temptations of the temporal world and their desires for purification in preparation for the heavenly life to come.

As well as a guiding influence in their own lives, visions and prophesying offered yet another means by which hermits maintained their interaction with the communities around them. Through this gift – perhaps of emotional sensitivity - they were able to offer advice to those seeking guidance by forewarning the direction which particular events would take and counselling caution over specific actions. In this way hermits gained repute among all levels of society, from the highest in the land to the local peasantry. Wulfric's prophecies concerning the fates of Henry I and King

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*Metrical Life*, p. 68 and Robert of Arbrissel appears intuitively to have desired a swift return to Fontevraud to avoid any dispute over his resting place.

<sup>540</sup> *Vita Bartholomei*, pp. 299-300.

<sup>541</sup> Compare with Godric who, in searching for a suitable site for his hermitage, saw a large wolf which he was convinced was the devil attempting to distract him from his eremitical path.

<sup>542</sup> Leclercq, 'La vie de Christian', p. 15. The incidents of Christian's inner voices suggest a state which, in modern terms, would be likened to schizophrenia. See also Leclercq's later edition for a more complete text, *Vita Christiani Monachi*, ed. by Jean Leclercq, in 'Le texte complet de la vie de Christian de l'Aumône', *Analecta Bollandiana* 71 (1953), 21-52 (p. 30). Although not experienced to quite the same dramatic effect, Godric also had frequent demonic visions which took many forms, one in particular being a devil called Corinbrand who vomited flames.

Stephen have been discussed elsewhere in this study<sup>543</sup> but as a result of such foresight he was able to warn his patron, William fitzWalter, about imminent political events (most notably Stephen's accession to the throne in 1135 and his capture at Lincoln in 1141) which enabled fitzWalter to consider more carefully his own position.<sup>544</sup> Godric, who captured the interest of three contemporary monarchs as well as Pope Alexander III, prophesied the martyrdom of Thomas Becket but, like Wulfric, also harnessed his prophetic powers for the benefit of those in his own community. When visited by 'vir quidam fidei religione devotus,' Godric withheld his blessing until he extracted a promise from the astonished man that he would cease beating his wife,<sup>545</sup> demonstrating how the hermit's prescience restored some domestic harmony to this particular household. In similar fashion, Henry of Coquet was instrumental in salving the conscience of a monk whom he had 'seen' drunk at a certain time and in a certain place. Confronted with this detailed information, the monk made a full confession and was thus able to receive relief of his burden of guilt.<sup>546</sup>

The solitary perhaps most associated with the gift of pre-vision and prophecy is Christina of Markyate. The text of her Life records a total of forty-two 'visions or auditory experiences' of which approximately two-thirds were experienced by Christina herself, the remaining third being attributed to people connected with her. Christopher Holdsworth states that this represents one vision for each side of the twenty-two folios of the original manuscript.<sup>547</sup> This is a remarkably high number compared with other *Vitae* and might suggest that the author of her Life placed exceptional emphasis on this. While her supernatural experiences primarily concerned her own spirituality and devotions, she was also able to guide those close to her. Having experienced a vision of Alvered, a deceased monk who had once lived at St Albans under the rule of Abbot Geoffrey, she sent a messenger to the abbot to warn him not to proceed with a particular plan

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<sup>543</sup> *Vita Wulfrici*, p. lx-lxii.

<sup>544</sup> *Vita Wulfrici*, pp. 116-8.

<sup>545</sup> *Vita Godrici*, p. 291.

<sup>546</sup> *De Sancto Henrico*, p. 24.

<sup>547</sup> Christopher Holdsworth, 'Christina of Markyate', in *Medieval Women*, SCH Subsidia 1, ed. by Derek Baker (Oxford: Blackwell, 1978), p. 198.

because it was beset with danger. The abbot chose to ignore this warning, advising her ‘not to put her trust in dreams,’ though he was ‘*admiratus... virginis esse revelata que solo tantum corde conceperat.*’<sup>548</sup> The author of Christina’s Life tells us that ‘when she received the haughty abbot’s message she had recourse to her usual remedies, pleading with God in fastings, watchings and prayers’ in the hope that the abbot would be diverted from his scheme. The following night Geoffrey experienced his own vision in the form of ‘several black and terrifying figures’ which attacked and tormented him. They only stopped once he had agreed not to continue on his ‘evil bent’ and to obey Christina’s messages promptly in future. The next day, the abbot, ‘not unmindful of his punishment’, hurried to Christina and thanked her. Furthermore, ‘he promised to avoid everything unlawful, to fulfil her commands, and to help her convent in the future,’ while in return all he sought was her intercession with God.<sup>549</sup>

This incident is particularly revealing about the place occupied by visions and prophecies in the medieval psyche. Christina, not yet well known to Abbot Geoffrey, was able to exert sufficient influence over him to persuade him from his course. Despite the abbot being her spiritual superior and Christina, as a female, occupying what was generally considered inferior social rank, as an *ancilla Christi* who experienced prophetic visions she occupied a position which could command a degree of authority over any rank. Yet hermits were not automatically accepted as holy men or women and often had to work for their respect and recognition. Despite the picture offered by Finucane, Ward and others, of faithful pilgrims making their supplications before shrines, there was also a great deal of scepticism within society regarding the powers wielded by supposedly holy men and women and it was only through the media of miracles, visions and prophecies that they were able to prove themselves genuine.<sup>550</sup> Abbot Geoffrey was not

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<sup>548</sup> Talbot, *Christina*, p. 136.

<sup>549</sup> Talbot, *Christina*, pp. 134-8.

<sup>550</sup> Pilgrimages and cults focused on the dead, who may well have proved themselves during life, or, if not, a timely *Vita* and a miracle or two would soon rectify any doubts over their powers. Living hermits had to prove themselves through their virtues and divine attributes by signs and actions in their daily lives. Also, and possibly of greater significance, scepticism could be fuelled by the negative aspects of eremitism, such as that

immediately convinced of the need to take notice of Christina. His own conscience concerning the conduct of his life, triggered by Christina's message, may have induced his own vision in which he suffered such torments. That the weals on his body from his beatings were real may have finally prompted his acceptance of Christina as a woman of exceptional powers.

From this moment on, abbot Geoffrey visited Christina regularly, 'accepted her advice, consulted her in doubts... bore her reproaches'<sup>551</sup> confirming yet again the control hermits could command over individuals or the communities around them. Visions such as these, particularly when proven by physical scars, were sufficient to win that reputation which would bring the hermit to the attention of the wider community and initiate the familiar stream of supplicants to the cell door, from which the hermit could manage the decisions and actions of others.

This incident also illustrates the symbiotic relationship which could grow between a hermit and his or her socially superior patron. In Christina's case, it happened to be a monastic cleric, but similar arrangements can be identified with secular members of society.<sup>552</sup> Abbot Geoffrey, '*persona...nobilis et potens*,' we are told, had grown haughty from the favours of noble relatives, relying more on his own judgment than that of his monks. He had decided to embark upon some project which the author of the Life claims would annoy his chapter and offend God.<sup>553</sup> Regrettably, we are not informed as to what this project was, only that it was unlawful, evil and 'not without danger'. Christina learning of this from her vision—whether we choose to accept its veracity or prefer to explain her knowledge as emanating from local gossip and acute socio-political intuition—was convinced of the need to prevent it and was ultimately successful in that not only was the Abbot prevented from doing wrong but he was also

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demonstrated by the 'false hermits' operating near Obazine, or the heretic, Henry of Le Mans, a wandering preacher also referred to as a hermit.

<sup>551</sup> Talbot, *Christina*, p. 138.

<sup>552</sup> One example is Wulfric and his patron William fitzWalter.

<sup>553</sup> Talbot, *Christina*, p. 134.

transformed into a pious, conscientious and devout servant of God who constantly sought spiritual respite from the burdens of worldly affairs.<sup>554</sup> Our assumption must be that Geoffrey was saved, not only from personal ruin but also from a spiritual and moral demise. In the process, he acquired a counsellor, mentor and friend who ‘watched over his salvation’ and ‘commended him to God’, a handmaid of Christ who personally interceded on his behalf, so that ‘whether near or far away, [he] could not offend God’.<sup>555</sup> But Christina undoubtedly profited the most from this relationship, for she not only gained a trusted and loyal friend who extolled her virtues, but one who also ‘supported her in worldly matters’, relieved her from ‘material poverty’ and obtained assistance for her and her convent, which enabled her and her little community to survive and flourish. Thus Christina’s reputation as a holy maid, visionary and prophet was assured, not just within her local Hertfordshire community but also throughout England and beyond. Such reciprocal arrangements ensured a continuing relationship between the *vir Dei* or *ancilla Christi* and the world, having gained a reputation as God’s servants, through whom He could intervene in temporal concerns working through *miracula* and *signa*.

Miracles, visions and prophecies were an important aspect of the range of activities in which hermits were frequently engaged. The objectives behind most of their religious and social pursuits are self-explanatory, while the purpose of their miraculous, visionary and prophetic activity is more complex, due to the heavy influence of hagiographical formulae and the requirements of a clerical authorship. Nevertheless, looking beyond the aims of the hagiographer, a logical rationale is visible which explains the significance of this area of their activity. Once a holy man or woman had achieved a recognised status, their semi-divine powers could be harnessed for the benefit of the whole community. Both lay and ecclesiastical representatives recognised the advantage of having a holy man or woman in their midst, particularly one gifted in foretelling the future, or who could assist in time of disaster through the application of divine aid. Their

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<sup>554</sup> Talbot, *Christina*, p. 138.

<sup>555</sup> Talbot, *Christina*, pp. 138 and 140.

presence provided an outlet for the everyday worries and fears of ordinary people, whether it was illness, poor harvest, or a loved one who had gone missing. The hermit's miraculous intervention or the pronouncement of comforting words helped to relieve tensions which might inevitably form in a small community and thus prevent a build-up of resentments which could manifest themselves in more forceful ways.<sup>556</sup> The popularity of supporting a 'local' hermit within, or close to, a community, paralleled that of the saint and his *familia* as discussed above, helping to form a social cohesion and communal identity, and partly explains the disputes sometimes occasioned over ownership of a hermit's relics, particularly where local cults were likely to develop. These holy men or women, serving God through prayer and asceticism, also served their local community as mediators between heaven and earth and as protectors against evil forces, for it was well known that hermits battled with demons and foul beasts, which, with God's help, they were able to overpower.

Miraculous activities enabled the mediator to consolidate his or her bonding with the temporal world, to form the link between God and His faithful. From the point of view of lay society, the hermit who was able to demonstrate these skills offered security, hope and the possibility of individual salvation. Visions and prophecies could assist with making important decisions or life-changing adjustments, as with Godric's wife-beater or Abbot Geoffrey's change of heart, but could also have an influence on political outcomes as monarchs, nobles and high-ranking ecclesiastics paid heed to the insights and predictions of hermits. On a more cynical level, lay as well as ecclesiastic patrons could also see the material benefit to their respective communities of having a holy man in the vicinity. During a hermit's lifetime the frequency of visitors could vary enormously, but as reports of miraculous deeds spread, so did the reputation and status of the hermit, on whose death, the potential for income from pilgrimage and veneration of the relics could not be overlooked. While ecclesiastical patrons were quick to understand the significance of these material benefits,

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<sup>556</sup> This could, of course, operate in the opposite extreme as for example the hermit of York who stirred up anti-Jewish feeling in 1198. Such incidents, however, were exceptional.

the miraculous activities of the hermit could also serve the wider body of the Church through the encouragement of good morals and pious lives.

Hermits, on the whole, encouraged conformity to Church practice and the maintenance of moral values such as justice, fairness, humanity and compassion. To reject a hermit's counsel on such issues could, as we have seen, incur retribution and so the hermit, through his or her divine intervention, was an instrument of ecclesiastical control. It is, however, important to note that despite this elevated role, the Church's acceptance of eremitism was guarded, fearing extremism or possibly heresy, and this occasionally led to tensions between hermits and Church authorities.<sup>557</sup>

So far, this discussion has attempted to rationalise the role of miraculous activity of hermits and its impact on individuals as well as communities; but what purpose might it have from the point of view of the hermit? Ascetic living and rejection of materialism accorded a certain status, but this became an increasingly popular *modus vivendi* during the high middle ages and not all of its practitioners were hermits. Equally significant, and as mentioned earlier in this chapter, it is impossible to claim that all hermits performed miracles or had the gift of prophetic insight, yet it is this aspect of a medieval hermit's life which has received most recognition. Without doubt, the performance of miracles worked in favour of the hermit, according him, or her, an enhanced status within both ecclesiastical and lay communities. As news of accurate prophecies and successful miraculous acts circulated, the sanctity of an individual was compounded, increasing his or her credibility as a servant of God and encouraging ever more faithful supplicants to the cell door. Having achieved this reputation, miracles, visions and prophecies became the *expected* activities. It was accepted without question that these abilities were automatically embodied within the holiness that they displayed in their daily lives. Society generally, with perhaps a few reservations from the Church, imposed an almost unique

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<sup>557</sup> One example is Robert of Arbrissel and Bishop Marbod. Evidence for such tensions, however, is limited, and where they did exist they were usually resolved swiftly and amicably.

status upon these individuals and in return, they fulfilled the duties and responsibilities expected of them.

Some scholars have recently claimed that the performance of miracles, prophetic visions and the fear curses were indicative of the substantial power which these individuals could wield.<sup>558</sup> The primary sources, however, do not entirely support this interpretation. While it is not denied that hermits could bring influence to bear on decision-making, or threaten those who, in the opinion of the hermit, acted unjustly, they did not always do this through supernatural means. Furthermore, hermits often denied that they possessed any ability to perform miracles, claiming that it was the supplicants' faith in God's powers which brought about the desired solution. Godric denied that he possessed any powers to restore people to life, and Wulfric did not believe that he performed the miracles accredited to him. Geoffrey Grossus tells us that the anchorite Garnier called on Jesus to free a man from a troublesome demon,<sup>559</sup> while Geoffrey of Burton describes how Modwenna advised some herdsmen that God would restore their sheep to them.<sup>560</sup> Closer scrutiny of the hagiography reveals many further examples and confirms that hermits did not perceive this as a power invested in their own persons. On the contrary, the *Vitae* stress that it was God's power acting through the medium of a *vir Dei* or an *ancilla Christi*. This interpretation does fit more easily with the eremitic ideal of the rejection of worldly power in favour of simplicity, humility and obedience and goes some way to explain the paradox of the 'active hermit'.

<sup>558</sup> For examples of this interpretation see Brown, 'The Rise & Function of the Holy Man', pp. 80-101; Mayr-Harting, 'Functions of a Twelfth Century Recluse', pp. 337-352 and Holdsworth, 'Hermits', pp. 55-76.

<sup>559</sup> *Vita Bernardi*, PL 172: 1374-1375.

<sup>560</sup> Geoffrey of Burton, *Life and Miracles of St Modwenna*, p. 69.

## Conclusion

Throughout the central middle ages hermits were a common feature in the landscape, where they were found in the woods, next to parish churches, close by villages and, by the end of the thirteenth century, increasingly appearing within larger urban environments. At the peak of the popularity of the eremitic life it is likely that every community had access to a holy man or woman. It is to the credit of these individuals that in the early years they were able to create a niche for themselves within existing ecclesiastical and social structures, but also adapted swiftly to when brought into the religious mainstream. In France that mainstream involved a transformation from informal and loosely connected groups to formal monastic institutions. By the mid-thirteenth century the lack of references to hermits in the sources suggests that there was no longer an enthusiasm for the eremitic life, or that pressure from the ecclesiastical authorities had encouraged them into a cloistered existence. Either way, the rural communities and villages of France had lost their spiritual advisers, mediators and visionaries: the monks of the new orders were not suitable substitutes for these roles. There is always the possibility that some hermits did continue to live in forested wildernesses and that it was the interests of authors that waned, no longer wishing to promote this form of asceticism. It was also during this period that the popularity of the mendicant orders arose in competition with traditional eremitism. Far from being enclosed and withdrawn from society, the friars were found in urban settings, extremely visible and consciously wishing to associate with communities, and probably overshadowed an ascetic living on the edge of town. In continental Europe, furthermore, heretical groups had come to dominate large areas, especially in the south of France and northern Italy, casting suspicion of anything innovative or even slightly beyond their control into the minds of Church and secular authorities.

In England hermits continued to live the way they always had until the Reformation. While they ceased to attract the attention of hagiographers after the twelfth century, evidence of the existence of hermits, recluses and

anchorites continued in the Rolls, wills, charters and other occasional records. Attempts to bring them into the ecclesiastical fold were more subtle, which allowed hermits the freedom to live in hermitages in the manner they had done for centuries. England saw no new monastic orders evolving from eremitic foundations, and there was little pressure for individuals to join existing ones. The Church to a large extent had always had control over individual ascetics, which was extended in a subtle manner to bring them under the direction of a nearby abbot or bishop. By the thirteenth century, those seeking permanent enclosure in cells, often situated by parish churches or attached to town or city walls, had to undergo a formal ceremony led by a bishop which involved vows similar to those of novitiate monks, and which was a symbolic act of a living burial, of being dead to the outside world. From the numbers estimated by historians such as Clay, Warren and more recently, Jones, the eremitic form of religious life continued in popularity in England until it was denounced by the reformers. English hermits existed harmoniously alongside the mendicant orders and other expressions of lay piety and thus offered a broad choice for anyone wishing to lead a religious life. There were no outbreaks of heresy to alert the authorities to the dangers of individualism or difference until Wycliffe and the Lollards emerged in the fifteenth century.

This research set out to examine the nature of eremitism and the different paths its adherents followed, taking England and France as a comparative case study. While the objectives of hermits everywhere were ultimately the same - the search for perfection through service to God - their paths for pursuing this aim were varied and led to different forms of the eremitic life being practised in the two countries. There were similarities as well, the most notable being that hermits, even the more reclusive, were still very much a part of the world. All were dependent on society in some way, and most interacted with their neighbourhoods through various deeds and roles which were demanded of them by ordinary people. This, seemingly, gave them a divine power, a notion which has attracted historians over recent decades and led them to see hermits as political functionaries (a view subsequently modified) as well as marginal characters, disengaged from

society yet wielding supremacy over it. However, this thesis has presented an alternative root for the power of the hermit. As our knowledge emanates largely from the works of hagiographers with all the prejudices, *topoi*, symbolism and other literary tools of their genre, it is the persuasiveness, even propaganda of these authors which has fuelled the concept of such capability in hermits. Hagiographers had genuine and laudable reasons for creating the images they did and we should applaud them for achieving their goals.



## Appendix I

### *Vitae of hermits, recluses and anchorites of England and France* c. 1050 to c. 1250

#### A. *Vitae of English hermits*

Hermit	Author	Date of <i>Vita</i>
St Bartholomew of Farne (d. 1193)	Geoffrey of Durham	Precise date unknown, but before 1213
Christina of Markyate (d. after 1155)	Unknown	Unknown but possibly mid- to late twelfth century
(St) Godric of Finchale (d. 1170)	Reginald of Durham	Started during Godric's life and concluded soon after his death
Godric of Throckenholt (d. circa 1140)		Late twelfth century
(St) Henry of Coquet (d. 1127)		Unknown
Robert of Knaresborough (d. 1218)	Various unknown	Mid-thirteenth century Latin prose Early fifteenth-century metrical Middle English
(St) Wulfric of Haselbury (d. 1154)	John of Ford	Circa 1184

**B. *Vitae* of French hermits**

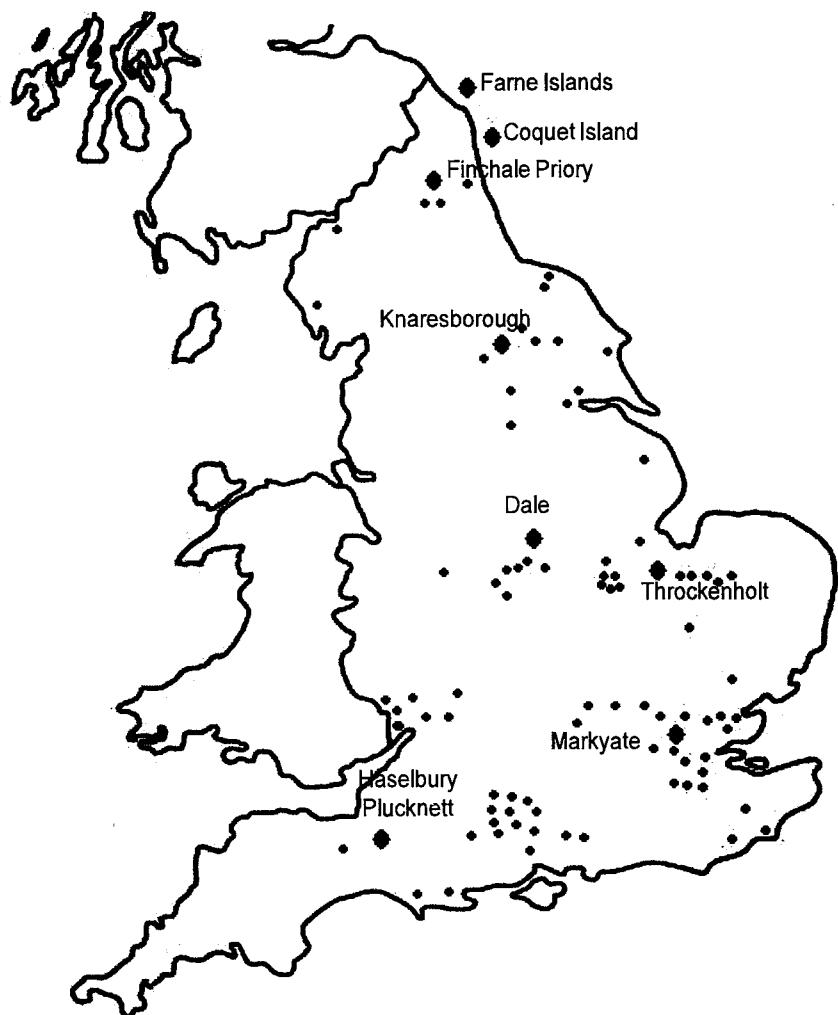
St Adjutor (d. 1131)		
St Aibert of Crespin (d. 1140)	Robert, archdeacon of Ostrevant	
Anastasius of Mont St- Michel (d. 1085)		
Bernard of Tiron (d. 1117)	Geoffrey Grossus	Between 1137 and 1143.
Christian of Aumône (d. 1145)		
Gaucher of Aureil (d. 1125)		
Geoffrey of Chalard (d. 1140)		
Robert of Arbrissel (d. 1116)	Baudry of Bourgeuil Andrew of Fontevraud	Soon after 1116 Ditto
Robert of Chaise-Dieu (d. c. 1067)	Marbod of Rennes	
Stephen of Muret (d. 1124)		
Stephen of Obazine (d. 1159)	Unknown	
St Theobald of Provins (d. 1066)		
Vitalis of Savigny (d. 1122)	Stephen of Fougères	
St William Firmat (d. 1103)	Stephen of Fougères	

**C. Two accounts which are not called *Vitae***

The Baker of Dale	Thomas de Musca	
Pons of Léras (d. post 1146)	Hugh Francigena	Circa 1164



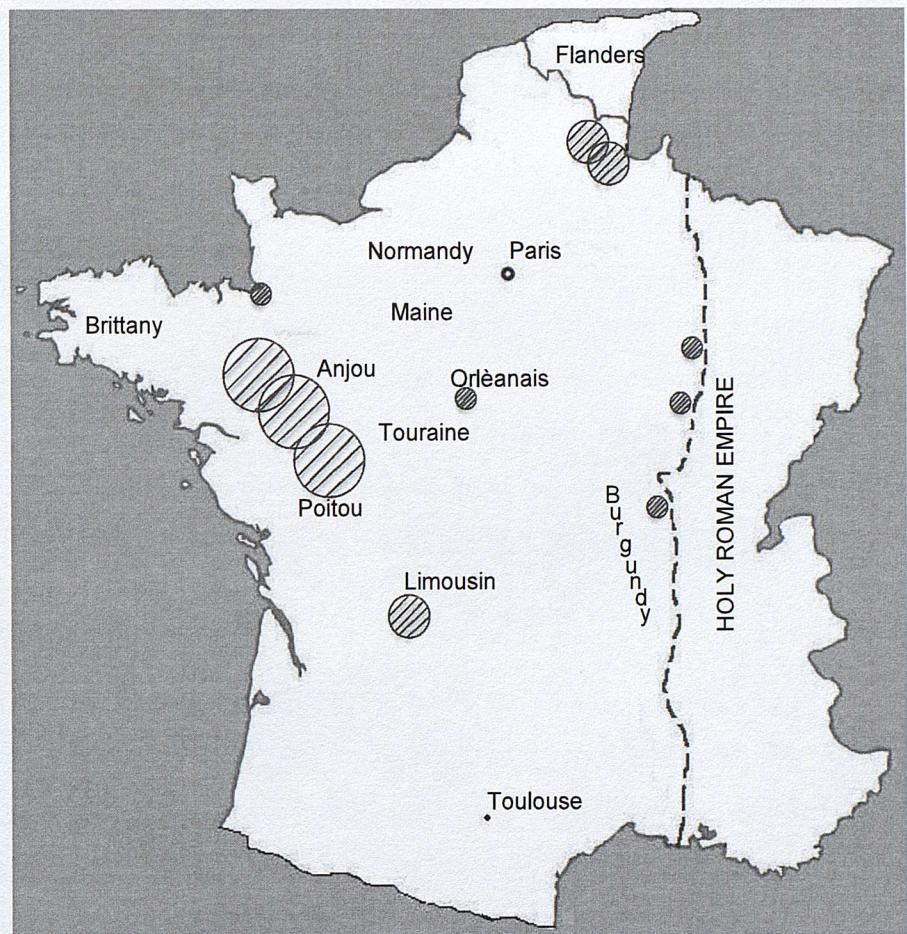
## Appendix II



Map 1 - Hermitages of Twelfth-Century England

- ◆ Main Hermitages referred to in text
- Known Hermit Sites





**Map 2 - Hermit Clusters in France (circa 1090 – circa 1130)**

----- Imperial Border  
Ⓐ Areas of significant Eremitic Activity



### Appendix III - Hermit Database

The database has been produced to assist me with my research and remains as work in progress. The information has been compiled from records I have made when studying both primary and secondary sources as part of my research project.

The attached computer disc contains a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet with details of 217 hermits believed to have lived during the central to late middle ages. In a high percentage of the hermits mentioned, their details are well documented and we know information such as where they were living, their sponsors and whether they were male or female. Where the information is sketchy, further research on these hermits may reveal other patterns of demographics which will help our understanding of the eremitic community at the time.

When you open the spreadsheet you will find the data has been filed primarily by Country of Residence (i.e. England, France, Scotland, Wales and Other) and then alphabetically by name of hermit. It should be noted that some primary sources do not mention a hermit or anchorite by a specific name, only identifying the existence of a hermitage in a locality. If you use the filter buttons you will be able to analyse the detail in different forms. As an example, if you filter using the Country, Century and Male/Female columns, you will see a growing number of known references to females when comparing the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> Century England records.

Hermit Database – England References				
Century	Male	Female	Not Known	Totals
12 <sup>th</sup>	21	13	22	56
13 <sup>th</sup>	24	66	12	102
Totals	45	79	34	158

Hermit Database – England References			
Century	Male	Female	Not Known
12 <sup>th</sup>	38%	23%	39%
13 <sup>th</sup>	24%	65%	12%



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