

BEGINNING TO KNOW SAINT BERNARD

REFLECTIONS ON A MANUSCRIPT OF THE FIRST BIOGRAPHY

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THE English Cistercians recently acquired a manuscript, copied in about 1200, of the first Life of St Bernard. It is a good specimen of the way in which the Life was distributed through the Cistercian and other monasteries of Europe in the decades following the saint's death and also shows the kind of difficulty which a small or newly-founded house may have had in setting up and maintaining its scriptorium. The codex is all the more valuable because it is headed by a miniature portrait of the saint executed probably when many who had seen him were still alive. The portrait from the first folio of the codex is reproduced, a little larger than actual size, in this issue. If any are interested in a more technical account of the MS. and its text they may hope to find it in two articles which have been sent to the Cistercians' quarterly *Collectanea*, devoted throughout this year to St Bernard. When the articles were written the author did not foresee that the codex would be lent through the French Embassy to the centenary Art Exhibition at Dijon. He is no longer in the secure position of a research-worker who has held on to his source and can say what he likes.

The portrait, even when seen in its original colours, may seem at first to tell us nothing of St Bernard's appearance. It has to be scrutinised by those who have an eye for detail, and can usefully be compared with others, from the earliest miniatures to better-known paintings of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Then it appears as one of a family or even as an ancestor. It is difficult to believe that the artist had not reflected upon the description given in the text of the Life. The inward beauty of that man, said the secretary and companion who knew him so well, had to show itself outwardly. Yet the whole body was emaciated and frail to the last degree. The incapacity to digest food was described too vividly for translation. Only on the cheeks was the worn-out skin lightly tinged with red. Artists like ours took notice

of this and conscientiously dabbed on the most appropriate colour at their disposal. Whatever natural heat was in that body had been chilled by unending meditation and the pursuit of holy compunction. He could stand but little, was nearly always sitting and hardly ever moved. This seems to refer to the greater part of his monastic life and we hear at an early stage that he could no longer attend the choir office regularly. Yet the calls upon his charity from without were continual. Whenever he was free from them he prayed, read, wrote, taught and comforted his brethren, gave himself up to meditation. The biographer did not want this sustained attention to spiritual things to be thought something ordinary and normal in a Cistercian monk: for he insisted that only by a special grace did meditation never grow tedious, every place would do for it, every hour seemed too short. Going on to read of the saint's outward appearance we find that the hair was light yellow, the beard auburn and sprinkled with white in the later years. Bernard was moderately tall. For the hair and beard the portrait follows the directions as well as the available colours will allow. If a beard was shaved seven times a year as the usages required, or even less frequently for an abbot of frail constitution who had to travel in varying climates, plenty of hair would normally have appeared. The feature which was exaggerated to show a monk was the tonsure. At first our portrait gives the impression that there is a low mitre. Cistercian abbots never in fact had mitre or ring in the twelfth century and St Bernard strongly reprov'd abbots of any kind who hankered after them. The original with its colours shows more clearly than the photograph that there is nothing above the rather high ears and brow but the clean-shaven head surrounded by quite a mass of auburn hair. The surface has been damaged here, but we can see that the artist's equipment did not allow him to distinguish between the yellow of the hair and the auburn of the beard.

If readers have acquired *Bernard de Clairvaux*—a symposium published by the Cistercians' Historical Commission and mentioned elsewhere in this issue—they will have seen as frontispiece another miniature not much later than the one described. It is taken from the beginning of a copy of the

Sermons on the Canticle originating from the Cistercian monastery of Alzelle and now codex 375 in the University Library of Leipzig. It has been better preserved than the Mount Saint Bernard portrait, is larger and shows all details more clearly. Yet every feature hitherto described is there. A careful scrutiny of the two reveals that the nose is slightly hooked at the end. The artist, following the text of the Life, has been so careful to dab light red on the cheeks that the effect is rather absurd. On both portraits there is the halo behind the head. This would suggest a time later than the canonisation of 1174, even if the script and other considerations did not make this certain. On the Mount Saint Bernard portrait a hand is raised with the forefinger pointing to heaven, not to bless but to teach. The Alzelle conveys a similar idea for the free hand holds a book, presumably the Bible. MSB gives a standing, Alzelle a sitting position. There appear the sides and legs of a slightly ornate faldstool. This is just as in St Bernard's seal, made in 1151 and kept at the Rouen Museum. Oval in shape, it is surrounded by the words *Sigillum Bernardi Abbatis Clarevall*. It encloses the saint's effigy, but this makes no pretence of being a portrait.

Dress and insignia are too interesting to be disregarded. The figure on the seal is covered by the folds of a monastic cowl. But the two miniatures show St Bernard vested in a chasuble which, when left to hang, would have had the shape of a bell. No maniple appears. In MSB the orphrey, which forms a cross on the front, is of gold colour, as also the stole and footwear. The chasuble itself is blue, such as was used in Cistercian churches and elsewhere. Choice of colour on any day may well have been a matter of local usage or even of personal taste. Not even the Roman rite defined colours for days or seasons in the twelfth century: the Cistercian not until the seventeenth. St Bernard would never have departed from his Order's regulations so far as to wear vestments decorated with gold in his own church. The artist was simply making the most effective use of the few colours at his disposal and had no idea of giving historical instruction to twentieth-century students. Anyhow, a travelling abbot would have worn such ornate vestments as his guests might

provide. Some chasubles worn by St Bernard are still preserved and one may be seen this year at the Dijon exhibition.

The Alzelle illuminator had no gold, little else but red and yellow, variously combined and diluted. The chasuble is rose-coloured with a yellow orphrey.

Whether we look to the miniatures or to the seal we find no insignia proper to an abbot but the crozier, unless we also include the faldstool. The crozier always has the same form. The straight staff, coloured successively light and dark on the MSB, is headed by a round knob and from this arises the crook, in both miniatures ending in a trefoil.

It may be asked whether all this discussion stands in any relation to the heading of this article. Attention to the earliest representations of St Bernard carries us some way towards knowing him, is at least a beginning. Those scribes and illuminators were providing, perhaps, for child-like minds which would give first and longest attention to the picture. The biographer says characteristically that nothing which he can record will give us such a knowledge of St Bernard as the man's own writings. But he says too that the sermons read from a book (of these sermons the works very largely consist) can never give us anything but a poor idea of Bernard as he was to the listener. We cannot even be sure that we have the words actually spoken, for much was delivered on the inspiration of the moment, afterwards written down and polished up perhaps by someone else. In the sermons, treatises and letters, there is the always recurring question how much is due to a secretary. The letters are of the greatest value, but any one letter only shows how Bernard expressed himself in a particular context, how he dealt with one special problem. The Life then has a value quite its own.

Our critical spirit mistrusts medieval Lives. But the record here has quite an exceptional character. We owe most to Geoffrey of Auxerre, the saint's secretary and companion in the later years. First Geoffrey made scattered and rough notes on St Bernard's origin and youth, on miracles and other events at later stages. We see clearly just how far these were used in the biography. Those who turn for this to the last volume of Mabillon's *Opera Sancti Bernardi*, or to Migne P. L. 185, should remember that of the seven

books found under *Vita Prima* only the first five are the original work, also that the Life was meant to be handed on to us without those passages of a longer recension which are printed inside square brackets. The work was begun in the saint's own lifetime and without his knowledge. The monks of Clairvaux may well have felt that, to be above suspicion, the account must come from someone outside. William of St Thierry, though by this time a Cistercian monk of Signy, undertook the task, but, as he had expected, died before St Bernard. The next was Arnald, abbot of a black monastery named Bonneval. There is some indication, though no certainty, that he had become a monk of Clairvaux. When this second author died after doing only a little of the work, Geoffrey must have realised that the quickest and perhaps the only way to get something done was to do it himself. So he put into order his early rough notes, wrote three more books including the account of St Bernard's death and burial, then edited all that had been written as one work. We have extant some of Geoffrey's autograph, with his first alterations, as it was before the whole received the *Imprimatur* of an assembly of bishops and abbots in 1155.

In the first book by William we read what he had from outside sources, including Geoffrey's notes. Then we come to the point at which he met Bernard and became his friend. All at once the tone changes and the narrative is vivid. The state of Bernard's health had caused such alarm that he had been relieved of all responsibility at Clairvaux and sent to live in a little hut. Since the man in charge of his health had turned out to be no more than a quack, the abbot was on a diet which would have tested severely any man in perfect health and strength (an experience not of course confined to twelfth-century patients). William probably took the situation in hand. A year's rest and seclusion helped at least to prolong Bernard's life.¹

¹ We read in *The Dublin Review*, 1953, p. 109: 'For a whole year in his early manhood as abbot he was forced to live apart from his monks in a hut because his physical presence was unbearable in choir or at table'. This is in an admirable article by Dom David Knowles. But the first Life gives only the need of convalescence and the insistence of the Bishop of Châlons as reasons for the year in the hut. It seems clear that the writer of the article has confused Book I, chapter 7 (Mabillon's chapter division)

From beginning to end we have to allow for the panegyric style demanded by twelfth-century taste. Thus when in our own time there is published that full biography of Cardinal Hinsley which we await so eagerly we shall not expect to read: 'Comely olive, fruitful vine, flowering palm-tree, cedar multiplied . . . solid gold vessel adorned with every precious stone. . . . In thy presence every assembly shone as in sunlight: when thou didst depart it was shrouded in darkness.' Yet the paragraphs of this kind which popular enthusiasm called for in the first years were much cut down when Geoffrey made a revision some ten years later. The saint's limitations were freely admitted. It was a mistake to ruin his health in the first years of his monastic life. When he became an abbot he did not understand human nature and his preaching was unintelligible to most of his monks. His uncle and eldest brother, themselves in the community, felt that it was their responsibility to manage the young abbot. They told him not to be such a fool when he foretold cures and were even indignant when the cures took place. Geoffrey explains that this was only because they were so anxious that the abbot's humility should not be lost. Finally the uncle, having protested more strongly than ever against the miracles, fell so ill that he had to plead for Bernard's healing hand. From then on we do not hear of the subject's solicitude for their abbot's virtue. This superior of hundreds at Clairvaux, founder every year of new and distant monasteries, was not a temporal administrator. He said himself that he left everything in Gerard's hands and felt lost when Gerard died before him. Clairvaux was planned, enlarged and organised, with great efficiency. But those responsible had to argue with the abbot, to drag him round the regular places and show how it was a matter of urgent necessity, before he would allow them to go forward.

The Life has whole series of those miracles, so troublesome to the modern reader for whom laws of nature are never suspended. But Bernard was perplexed about the miracles and could not make out who was doing them. Geoffrey was almost apologetic in recording them and cut out

with chapter 8, where is explained the saint's absence from choir at a later time.

many in his last revision. Such hundreds were known that it was impossible to present a Life without giving specimens.

The work was not done for the future history research scholar. Chronology is not exact. Though considerable space has to be given to the journeys connected with the schism, little is to be learnt about the intricacies of the schism itself. We do not learn much either about the heretics of Languedoc. Hardly more than a passing mention is given to Peter Abelard or even to the second crusade. For the biographers these were the less important things. They wanted to try to tell us why when Bernard came a schism collapsed, when he opened his mouth heresy was silent, when he was at Clairvaux men flocked thither. They could say little more than that these things happened because he was Bernard. Or rather Bernard by himself did not explain such results any more than he accounted for cures and exorcisms. If any man sought to be poor and unknown it was this one who chose a monastery hitherto shunned and perishing with its founders. Such is the instrument which God sometimes uses. As Bernard said himself when he had cast out a devil: 'Was it surprising? We were two against one!'



ST AELRED AND THE ASSUMPTION

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A NUMBER of things have been written of late on the opinion held by St Aelred on the Assumption of Mary. Since an unknown sermon of the saint, found recently and published by Dr C. H. Talbot, contains a decisive allusion to the point, it may be interesting to resume the discussion and set it against its true background. To those who have studied the sources likely to afford some evidence for the belief, the apparent hesitation of the Cistercians seems surprising, having due regard to their outstanding devotion to our Lady. A remarkable study by Fr E. Wellens of the