

# The Person and the Place—

## VI: Exile at Aebelholt

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William was born into a noble family about 1105. His uncle was abbot Hugh IV of St Germain des Prés in Paris, and the boy was sent to the abbey to be educated.<sup>1</sup> Here the young William noted the life of the monks, how they sang and prayed and sat reading in the cloister, but he remained undecided about a monastic vocation. He made no objections when his family obtained for him a prebend in the collegiate church of Sts Peter and Paul and St Geneviève, though he soon found that the worldliness of his fellow canons contrasted unfavourably with the regular life. The canons returned his dislike. An unsuccessful attempt was made to trick him into entering a monastery. In the end, however, William remained a secular canon until he was forty-three, by Mediaeval standards an advanced age.

In 1148 pope Eugenius came to Paris and after a pontifical ceremony at St Geneviève, there was a brawl between the servants of the canons and those of the pope. As a result of this unseemly affair it was decided to expel the secular canons from the church and introduce Augustinians from the abbey of St Victor. The step may have been in contemplation for some time. William, returning from a business journey, was astonished to find a religious community established in his church. After a conversation with the new abbot he decided to remain at St Geneviève, and adopt the Rule of St Augustine. In this casual way he entered the ranks of the regular clergy.

At forty-three many persons in the Middle Ages thought themselves to be on the brink of the grave. Yet though William had to struggle to the end of his life against his shyness and fits of depression, he now appeared as a man of action, and rapidly became one of the foremost members of the new community. He defended his brethren against the charge of having made away with the relics of St Geneviève, whose shrine was in their abbey church. When the king of France, claiming that theirs was a royal foundation, asserted the right to confirm the

<sup>1</sup>*Sancti Willelmi Abbatis Vita et Miracula, Vitae Sanctorum Danorum* (Copenhagen, 1908-12), ed. M.C. Gertz, pp. 300-69.

obedientaries of the abbey in their offices, it was William who stood out as a champion of their canonical rights. Meanwhile St Geneviève was acquiring a reputation as a school and some time before 1155 had among its students the young Dane Absalon, son of Asser Rig.

Denmark had been officially Christian since about 960. But the progress of the Church had been slowed down by the poverty and comparative isolation of the country. The renaissance of Christian scholarship and art and the effect of the various reforming movements were not felt in the North for a considerable time. Moreover from 1131 to 1157 there were constant wars between rival claimants to the Danish throne. A more hopeful era for the Church began in 1139, when Eskil became archbishop of Lund. A man of international standing, Eskil was a friend of St Bernard and of the later pope Alexander III. He became a patron of the Cistercians, whose order he introduced into Denmark, and he encouraged young Danish clerks to study in Paris. Absalon had almost certainly gone there with his blessing. The young student was a member of one of the most powerful landowning families on the island of Sjaelland. From his earliest youth he had been a close friend of prince Valdemar, and after his return to Denmark around 1155 the two men threw in their lot together. In 1157 Valdemar became sole ruler of Denmark. In 1158, through his influence, Absalon became bishop of Roskilde, and, as the king's close friend, one of the most influential men in the country.

Archbishop Eskil, Bishop Absalon, and King Valdemar were all concerned, in various ways, to break the isolation of the Danish church and raise the standards of its clergy. Archbishop Eskil founded Cistercian monasteries, helped to bring the knights of St John of Jerusalem into the country, and planned a Danish Charterhouse. The canons regular were closely associated with church reform and Bishop Absalon saw a chance of introducing them into his diocese. On the small island of Eskilsoe in the Isefjord, there was a collegiate church which had fallen on evil days. The bishop wanted to reform it, and it occurred to him that his friend William, canon of St Geneviève, would be the right man to do the work and introduce the Rule of St Augustine. An embassy was sent to Paris and permission was given for William's departure. He arrived in Denmark with three companions about 1165-6. He was now about sixty years old.

William soon realised that the canons he was to introduce to the regular life were not fit for it. Their lives hardly differed from those of the islanders around them. On feast days they were in the habit of

inviting the laity to share the celebrations with them. Men and women dined in the refectory, and the banquet was followed by dancing. The next morning, when the bells rang for matins, the canons were too drowsy to take their places in choir. Needless to say, the arrival of the foreigners was unwelcome. Absalon managed to persuade the canons to elect William as their superior, but they soon found that they could not endure the new régime. They first tried to remove William by spreading slander about him. When this failed their methods became more drastic. They tried to sew him in a sack and throw him into the sea, to sell him as a slave to the Wendish pirates, and an attempt was made to stab him. William's three companions returned to France, and he himself went to Absalon to seek permission to do the same. The bishop persuaded him to stay, and William, remembering that 'tribulation worketh patience, and patience experience, and experience hope, and hope maketh not ashamed', returned to his charge.

We do not know how he overcame the opposition in Eskilsoe. Possibly he waited for the old generation to die out or leave. Gradually new and more suitable recruits came. But there were other troubles. There was frequently not enough food for the community, especially as that began to grow. William had to ask for alms from Absalon.<sup>2</sup> There were fires in which the abbey's barns, with the supplies of food, were burned. William felt that Eskilsoe was too exposed, and persuaded Absalon to give the community another site. About 1177 they moved to Aebelholt, near Hilleroed, on the mainland of Sjælland. The site was more sheltered and it was easier for supplies to get there. But William remained unsatisfied and he continued to write begging letters. In 1177 Absalon became archbishop of Lund and primate of Denmark. It was perhaps after his departure from Roskilde that William wrote to him 'now what is it, my father and lord, what is it in us that has displeased your reverence to make you leave your friend among his enemies, without help, without counsel, a stranger and a pilgrim in a foreign land?' The next bishop of Roskilde, Peder Sunesoen, was a former pupil of William's, an Augustinian canon who had studied in Paris with William's encouragement. But William seems to have felt that his new bishop was not generous enough and wrote to the pope that he should be ordered to assign a benefice to the abbey. Another letter was written to Knud, who became king of Denmark in 1182, complaining of the poverty of the abbey and begging for alms.

<sup>2</sup>*Willelmi Abbatis Epistolae, Scriptores rerum Danicarum* (Copenhagen 1772-1878), vi. 1-79.

For all William's complaints, we know that by 1178 his abbey had acquired many rich and varied endowments, which were listed in a papal bull issued to him in that year.<sup>3</sup> A school was attached to the abbey where Bishop Peter Sunesoen, among others, studied. By the time William died there were 25 canons. The abbey was one of the richest in the kingdom. One hundred poor men were fed their daily. William began to build an imposing church, though he never lived to see its completion and the community was still using a wooden building at the time of his death. The influence of so flourishing a community was bound to be wide. A daughter house was established at Kongehelle in Norway (now in Sweden). William encouraged monastic vocations among Danish women. There are letters from him to some royal princesses who had embraced the regular life, and he was in friendly contact with the nuns of Slangerup in Sjælland.

It was natural too, that as time went on he would be called upon to play his part in the ecclesiastical and political life of Denmark. He was appointed papal judge delegate in one of the disputes between Black and White monks, which were such a feature of his time. He wrote to the pope on behalf of the Norwegian bishops exiled by King Sverre. In 1192, when Bishop Valdemar of Slesvig organised a rebellion against King Knud and was consequently imprisoned, William wrote to the pope to explain why the Danish hierarchy supported the king in this matter. In 1196 he protested against the exactions of cardinal Fidentius, the papal legate, who was extorting money from the Danish clergy. Most important of all was his part in arranging the marriage of Ingeborg, sister of King Knud, to Philip Augustus, king of France, in 1193. When, shortly after the solemnisation of the marriage, the French king repudiated his wife, her case was entrusted to William, who had to journey to the Roman Curia to put it to the pope. William contributed tirelessly to the literature of the affair, which had aroused the keenest resentment in Denmark.

In his letters William often wrote about the barbarity of Denmark and of his own isolation. No doubt his position was a lonely one. But it seems that he also found it difficult to establish easy relationships with others. No friend could have been more loyal to him than Absalon. Yet William's letters to him, especially after he became archbishop of Lund, strike a nervous note. On one occasion, William writes that he has twice reminded Absalon of the poverty of his monastery, but has

<sup>3</sup>*Diplomata ad monasteria in Eskilsoe et Ebbelholt perinentia, Scriptores rerum Danicarum*, vi, 139.

had no reaction. Can it be that the archbishop is angry with his servant? 'Now I fear and suspect that your fatherly countenance has been changed in our respect . . . Well, supposing, my father, that an evil suggestion has changed, in your eyes, the aspect of your servant. Will you condemn the just with the impious? . . . If the shepherd has sinned, strike the shepherd, so that the sheep be not scattered'. William also had difficulties with Walbert, the Cistercian abbot of Esrom. Several letters testify to the friendship between the two men. 'I speak as one less wise' writes William excitedly, on hearing that Walbert is coming to visit him, 'if no one else is affected by this glorious and joyful event, none the less I shall devoutly give solemn thanks and praise to God on this new occasion for joy. For I am bound to you by the claims of a sincere friendship which is not perceptible to the eye but felt by the purity of the mind'. And when the expected meeting had not taken place—'between us fraternal charity remains unharmed, so that the Son of Strife and Worker of Iniquity cannot find joy in his evil work'. Then a rumour spread that William had been diverting vocations from the Cistercians into his own abbey. There was a scandal about a young man called Philip, who, it was said, was received at Aebelholt largely because of the money offered by his family. Whether abbot Walbert countenanced these rumours is not known, but William was obliged to write a long and painful letter of explanation. 'Because all these things have been the occasion of enmity between us, I ask and humbly entreat you that we should return to peace and concord and that we should follow whatsoever is just, pious, and of good report, late though it is. For friendship is sweeter after a quarrel than it was before there was any difficulty'. Finally there was Peter Sunesoen, whom William had described as *viscera nostra*, but who seems to have disappointed him after his elevation to the See of Roskilde.

No doubt William's longing for his home lay at the root of some of these storms. His biographer remarks that to the end of his life he had a special devotion to St Geneviève. Indeed there is reason to believe that the author of William's *Vita*, who had known him in his old age, was a Frenchman. The biography is very detailed on William's life in Paris and one can picture the abbot recalling to his fellow countryman the old days at St Geneviève. His longing is very apparent in his letters. To one friend at home he speaks of his exile 'where so many disappointments and illusions, so many vain shadows and deceits, assail me'. He chides another friend for not writing and when sending a present to the abbot of his old abbey he asks for news 'so that, if your affairs prosper I

may rejoice, or if, which Heaven forbid, there is trouble, I may mourn with you'. He was never reconciled to living in Denmark. In 1198 he wrote to the pope asking for permission to return to Paris and take his place once more in the chapter of St Geneviève.

The result of the petition is not known. William, after all, ended his life at Aebelholt. On the morning of Easter Sunday 1203 he died, at the age of ninety-eight. Whatever had been his troubles with his community on his arrival in Denmark, he was now surrounded by love. The brethren cared for him in his last days and wept as the body was carried into the church. Absalon, his friend and patron, had died two years before him, but William's place in Denmark was now assured. Pilgrims visited his tomb, miracles were reported and the chapters of Roskilde began to press for his canonisation. The bull raising him to the altars was issued in 1224. In 1238, at an imposing ceremony, his relics were translated to their new place in the church he himself had begun to build. They remained a goal for pilgrims until the Reformation. Perhaps for William the greatest sacrifice had been to serve so faithfully a people he had never grown to love.

## On Visiting the Sick

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Some years ago I spent several days in the surgical ward of a provincial hospital. My coming had, I learnt later, wrought a subtle change in the patients' general behaviour, but I was accepted as one of them, and was pleased to find a camaraderie of quite a remarkable kind among the men, who were of all ages. There were two exceptions to this, but each of these unfriendly characters was eventually won over by the whole ward. There was officially no other Catholic patient, and this perhaps made it easier for each of the men to look on the monk as 'belonging' to him.

It was an enriching experience in many ways. Among much else I learnt something of the complex problem provided by the injunction