

# The Memory of a Saint:

## managing the legacy of St Bernard of Clairvaux

**Georgina Fitzgibbon**  
explores the literary  
life and afterlives of a  
medieval saint

When Bernard of Clairvaux died in 1153, the Cistercian Order was faced with a problem. The self-proclaimed 'chimera of his age' had enjoyed an unusual and varied monastic career, as abbot of the Cistercian monastery of Clairvaux and papal confidante, making him remarkably well-known for a monk. At the funeral the presiding abbot of Cîteaux was so worried by the flocks of pilgrims drawn by Bernard's reputation that he begged the body to stop performing miracles and drawing crowds.

A Cistercian exempla collection (short stories used for sermons and teaching novices) from the late twelfth to early thirteenth century describes the scene at the funeral:

Seeing the enormous problem caused by the swelling crowds and surmising from what was happening what might occur in the future, he [the abbot of Cîteaux] began to worry greatly. For if, due to an increase in miracles, an intolerably large multitude would continue to gather, monastic discipline would be destroyed by the unruly nature of such crowds, and this place would slacken in the zeal of its holy piety.<sup>1</sup>

The description of the funeral continued, stating that 'after consultations, he [the abbot of Cîteaux] reverently approached [Bernard's body] and forbade it on the basis of the virtue of obedience to perform any further miracles.'<sup>2</sup> Conrad of Eberbach, the account's author, does not define what he understood as 'public' in the context of Bernard's miracles, but the assumption must be that any miracles performed in front of a group, or whose performance may draw a crowd and thus lead to disruption in the monastery, were public and thus undesirable.

This was only the beginning of an issue which would plague the monastery for years to come: how to manage the afterlife of a man whose legacy was crucial for the fledgling Order, but whose reputation had spread so far beyond the monastery.

### Who was Bernard of Clairvaux?

Bernard of Fontaine-les-Dijon was born around 1090. His family were members of the nobility of Burgundy. Educated at Châtillon-sur-Seine by the secular canons, Bernard seemed destined for a life in the Church. Rather than enter the famous Benedictine house at Cluny, he chose to join the Cistercians, a new austere reform order, at the struggling foundation of Cîteaux in Burgundy. Convincing around 30 of his friends and relatives to join with him, his entrance into the community revived its fortunes. Soon, he was chosen to lead a new foundation at Clairvaux, where he remained abbot until his death.

Bernard was also well known outside of his Order. Throughout his life he corresponded with popes, archbishops and kings, and around 500 of his letters survive. Many of his other works are also extant (and are available in modern translations), such as the *Sermons on the Song*

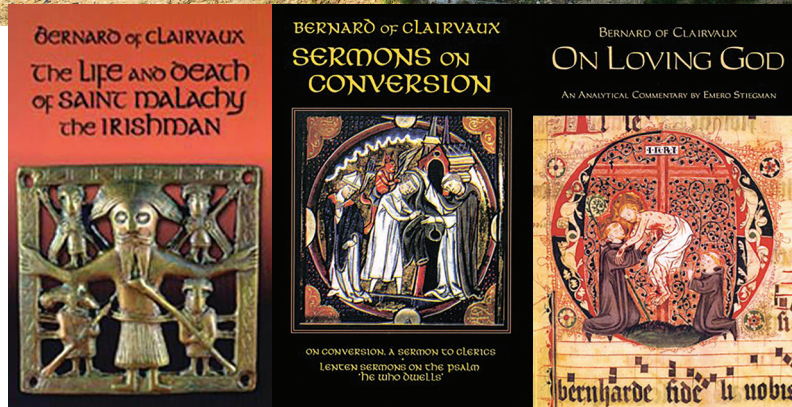


Stained glass window c. 1508, originally from Cistercian abbey Mariawald, representing Saint Bernard of Clairvaux with his parents Aleth (Aleidis) and Tescelin (Tesselinus)  
The Picture Art Collection / Alamy Stock Photo





The ruins of Vauclair Abbey, a Cistercian monastery founded in 1134 by Saint Bernard of Clairvaux  
Hemis / Alamy Stock Photo



of Songs, *The Life and Death of Saint Malachy*, and *On Loving God*.<sup>3</sup> His influence was felt across the Roman Catholic church.

He was, for example, crucial to the outcome of the papal schism in 1130. The schism had occurred after the death of Pope Honorius II, when disagreements within the Catholic church meant that the election of Pope Innocent II went unrecognised by a majority group of cardinals, who elected Anacletus II as well. Anacletus controlled Rome, while Innocent fled to France, where he found an ally in Bernard, who lobbied the heads of Europe to stand behind Innocent II as the true pope.

Furthermore, at the Second Lateran Council in 1139, Bernard denounced the teachings of Peter Abelard to the Pope. Abelard (1079-1142) was a philosopher and theologian, well-known today for his relationship with Heloise d'Argenteuil. Bernard's main objection was that the application of logic where it was not applicable (namely to religious issues) had led Abelard into heresy. Abelard was briefly excommunicated by Innocent II, before retiring to the abbey of Cluny. There the abbot arranged a reconciliation between Peter and Bernard, allowing the former to live as a scholar rather than a condemned heretic.

Bernard also preached publicly, an activity unusual for a Cistercian. He convinced hundreds of men to take the cross at Vézelay in 1146 and join the Second Crusade. Contemporary accounts describe a crowd so large that a platform had to be erected on a hill outside of the city. So many wanted to enlist that Bernard reportedly had to tear strips off his own robe to make more crosses.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, while traveling around Europe, Bernard's charisma as a recruiter for the Order and his reputation as a miracle-worker spread. It was this fame that led to the crowds of pilgrims at his funeral in 1153.

### Why did the crowds concern the abbot of Cîteaux?

Given the benefits that pilgrimage could bring to a monastic institution, it is worth asking why the Cistercians decided to restrict the audience of Bernard's cult. As a newly formed Order, the Cistercians prided themselves on their strict adherence to the Rule of St Benedict, and isolation from the world. The presence of so many lay pilgrims was a source of anxiety for the abbot of Cîteaux. Rather than the more corporate model of spirituality favoured by the Cluniacs, the Cistercians emphasised the individual relationship with God. Pastoral care for the laity was not their responsibility. Rather, they saw the Church as a moral body, with different groups responsible for different concerns.<sup>5</sup>

Unlike the great pilgrimage cathedrals of the age, therefore, the Cistercian monasteries did not, in general, attempt to draw pilgrims to their shrines. The presence of pilgrims was a distraction. If attending to their guests, the monks were not at prayer or completing their manual labour. It would also have been difficult to maintain silence. Furthermore, there are important connections between Cistercian engagement with the cult of saints in the twelfth century and the development of the Order's corporate identity as a group distinct from the traditional monastic groups that had existed before. In the



twelfth and thirteenth centuries the Cistercian Order found relics to be valuable as pegs for corporate traditions and internal storytelling, but less as attractions for pilgrimage. Indeed, relics were seen by some members of the Order as having limited value for their brethren, the utility of such objects more directed towards less advanced Christians. The Order sought to create a distinctive Cistercian aesthetic relating to relics by seeking to restrict the presence of disruptive pilgrims.

### The Canterbury Model

The decisions of Clairvaux in the management of Bernard's cult can be contrasted with those of Canterbury. The cult of St Thomas Becket at Canterbury Abbey enticed pilgrims. It is difficult to overstate the impact of Becket's murder on hagiographic activity between 1180 and 1220. Robert Bartlett has argued that Becket 'was the standard by which all other saints were measured; and his cult was by far the most visible, marked by great public occasions like the visit of Louis VII of France in 1179 and the spectacular translation of 1220.'<sup>6</sup> Becket's contemporary Roger of Crowland stated: 'Not since the time of the apostles, I say this *pace* all other saints, has the death of one man brought a greater victory or one more profitable to the Church of Christ.'<sup>7</sup>

Both Bernard and Becket were canonised by Pope Alexander III, but from this point their cults diverged. Where Clairvaux attempted to restrict access to the tomb, the monks at Canterbury promoted their cult, manufacturing and dispersing contact relics. Though the monks of Clairvaux collected the water that washed Bernard's body before his funeral and stored it, it was never dispersed to pilgrims in the manner of Becket's cult at Canterbury. There, the blood and water mix was an essential feature of the cult. Pilgrims were encouraged to take vials of 'the water of Becket' home with them. In some cases the blood itself was offered, presumably as small particles to be diluted by the pilgrim when needed.<sup>8</sup> A small reliquary containing the blood and clothing survives in the Metropolitan Museum. It was commissioned by bishop Reginald of Bath for presentation to Margaret, dowager queen of Sicily (d.1183).<sup>9</sup>

Such was the importance of this 'water', and the Canterbury monks' role in its production, that it was depicted in the church's stained glass. The glass in the ambulatory of the cathedral depicts scenes from Benedict of Peterborough's miracle collection, written in around 1171-73. These images suggest that Becket's early cult was more decentralised than assumed; relics and reliquaries were present in local churches, while some were personally owned.<sup>10</sup> The glass in the cathedral's Trinity Chapel (executed between 1185 and 1220) emphasises the role of Christ Church Cathedral Priory's monks, the patrons of the glass, in the mixing process at the tomb.<sup>11</sup> There is no evidence, however, that Clairvaux dispersed relics to smaller shrines or local churches to encourage pilgrimage in the same manner as Canterbury.

### Bernard and Cistercian literature

It is in the hagiography and exempla, however, that we see the most striking dichotomy between Bernard's life and his memorialisation. Despite his political importance and the number of followers he had attracted, these works presented him only as an intercessor for members of his Order.

Preparatory work for Bernard's hagiography began during his lifetime, and by the time the paperwork created for the successful canonisation request was complete, various authors had been involved in shaping Bernard's sanctity. Through these authors, different versions of the saint can be seen, as he was presented as a Cistercian monk, the founder of the daughter-houses of Clairvaux and an important player in Church politics.

The version of St Bernard presented to the monks of Clairvaux emphasised his sanctity through his virtues and

St Thomas Becket enthroned as Archbishop of Canterbury from a Nottingham Alabaster in the Victoria & Albert Museum



appearances in visions. This pastoral version of the saint focused on his role as abbot, where he could dispense advice and discipline.

The limits of his power are highlighted in the *Exordium Magnum*, an exempla collection containing stories about Bernard and other early Cistercians from the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries. This collection includes a description of a Cistercian abbot attempting to exorcise a possessed woman with Bernard's hair. The devil replied:

Hey, little abbot, what are you trying to do? What evil are you concocting against me underneath your habit? You are acting vainly and uselessly. Keep your little Bernard. He won't help you at all.<sup>12</sup>

This speech indicates the prohibition against miracles laid down at the funeral was common knowledge, and that he (the devil) had nothing to fear from 'little Bernard'. The possession of the relics by a Cistercian abbot is consistent with the other exorcisms recorded by Conrad in the *Exordium Magnum*. It is interesting, however, that he attempted to use them to help a laywoman. The silence about the result suggests that a cure did not occur. This implies that the author of this story wanted to present Bernard as valuing obedience to the abbot of Cîteaux above helping lay people who might have turned to him. It also introduces an element of ambiguity into his figure as a popular saint outside of the Order.

Compared to the other canonisation letters issued by Alexander III, such as for Thomas Becket, the silence on posthumous miracles as an aspect of Bernard's sanctity is likewise significant. Whereas in his other letters Alexander discussed the posthumous miracles of the candidates as an important aspect of their sanctity, for Bernard the pope was happy to concentrate on the political dimensions of Bernard's career, such as his intervention in the papal schism. In doing so, Alexander simultaneously conformed to Cistercian





models and wishes by minimising the importance of a potential tomb-centred cult at Clairvaux, while highlighting the unusual position of Bernard as a worldly monk. The absence of posthumous miracles is likely due to the Order's anxieties about the presence of pilgrims.

## Conclusion

In Bernard of Clairvaux's posthumous cult we can see the impact of different audiences on the presentation of cults, specifically Bernard's own posthumous cult at Clairvaux. The variations in the portrayal of St Bernard and the intended recipients of his miracles are due to the interests of the audience, and the manner in which stories for such collections were gathered. The literature produced by the saint's cult, then, provides an important insight into attitudes towards St Bernard, and the potential uses of his cult.

In the canonisation documents 'Bernard the founder and politician' prevailed. The statutes relating to the cult show that prior to papal canonisation in 1174, celebration of Bernard's Office for the Dead was limited to the monasteries he had founded. The dissemination

of the *vita* (Bernard's biography) corroborates this earlier, more limited, celebration. In the miracle collections, Bernard is a reassuring figure who encourages individuals to appreciate the value in contemplation and manual labour.

Managing Bernard's complicated legacy and public appeal demonstrates the power of literature, both in his own words (his letters, treatises and sermons) and those of his contemporaries (hagiography and exempla, written to emphasise his saintliness). In the texts connected to the cult of St Bernard of Clairvaux, we can see the impact of the Cistercian Order's attempts to manage the appeal of the saint, while simultaneously promoting him as an intercessor to the brethren. A powerful and charismatic individual in life, Bernard proved equally compelling in death. Throughout the middle ages, his memory remained important to the Order.

## Further reading

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- 2 *Ibid.*, pp. 116-117.
- 3 Other extant works include: *On the steps of humility and pride; the Apology to William of St Thierry; On the conversion of clerics; On grace and free choice; In praise of the new knighthood; Book of precepts and dispensations; On consideration; and On the duties and offices of bishops.*
- 4 Berry, V. G., ed., (1948) *Odo of Deuil, De profectone Ludovici VII in orientem*, Norton Columbia: NY pp. 9-11.
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- 6 R. Bartlett, R., (1993) 'The hagiography of Angevin England', *Thirteenth-Century England*, vol. V, pp. 37-52, p. 40.
- 7 Roger of Crowland, *Quadrilogus*, PL 190, Col. 259.
- 8 Vincent, N., (2001) *The Holy Blood: King Henry III and the Westminster Blood Relic*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, p. 46.
- 9 New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 63.160. Available at: [www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/468600](http://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/468600) (accessed: 5 June 2019); Vincent, N., *The Holy Blood*, p. 145, n. 23. For further discussion of this object, see Hoving, T., (1965) 'A Newly Discovered Reliquary of St. Thomas Becket', *Gesta*, 30-28, 4, figs. 2, 3.
- 10 Koopmans, R., (2015) 'Visions, Reliquaries, and the Image of Becket's Shrine' in the 'Miracle Windows of Canterbury Cathedral', *Gesta*, 54, 37-57, 37.
- 11 Koopmans, R., (2016) "'Water mixed with the blood of Thomas': contact relic manufacture pictured in Canterbury Cathedral's stained glass", *Journal of Medieval History*, 42, pp. 535-558, p. 535.
- 12 'Eia, inquit abbatule, quid vis facere? Quid modo mali contra me sub illa veste tua machinaris? Frustra niteris, in cassum laboras, serva Bernardulum tuum, nec enim proficies quidquam'. *Exordium Magnum Cisterciense* II. 20, Griesser, *Exordium magnum*, II, C.XX p. 117. Translation from B. P. McGuire, B. P., (1991) *The Difficult Saint: Bernard of Clairvaux and his tradition*, Cistercian Publications: Kalamazoo, MI, p. 172.

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