

Conceptualising Past, Affirming Observance: The “Textual Images” in the *Exordium Cistercii*

The article deals with the Cistercian narrative entitled Exordium Cistercii, probably composed in the early 1130s. It is well-known that this short narrative provides us with the basic information on the early history of the Cistercian order, and the initial impulses which motivated the group of monks from Molesme Abbey to leave their community and establish a new one, where they could live fully by the Rule of St Benedict. However, the Exordium Cistercii is not just a short and simplified narrative account of the origins of Cîteaux Abbey. Rather, the text carefully selects episodes from the Cistercian past and uses them to historically support and validate the nascent observance. The narrative, thus, conceptualised the image of how the earliest ideals had been conceived and explained the initial impulses standing behind the monastic version that heavily relied on the eremitic standards. The present paper treats these images as ‘textual images’ since they represent narrative reflections on the origins of the Order created by later generations of the Cistercians, rather than historical accounts in the strict sense of the word. The paper analyses how the Cistercians conceptualised their past and which textual images they used to create a functional and spiritual background for their observance. Within this context, special emphasis is placed on the question of which elements of the Cistercian observance were textually pointed out and affirmed as crucial in the formation of a distinct monastic identity.

Keywords: *Exordium Cistercii*, Cistercian observance, textual images, validity of observance, poverty and asceticism, solitude and desert, stability, love

Introduction: towards the collective imagination of the past

The early Cistercian narrative entitled *Exordium Cistercii* provides a brief but rather complex account of the origins of the nascent monastic community of Cîteaux. Already during the first few decades of its existence in the 12th century, this community introduced various institutional novelties into medieval monasticism, including those

concerning the observance of St Benedict's *Rule*.¹ The insistence on the purity of observance and the stricter approach to the *Rule*, meaning the literal following of St Benedict's instructions, possessed a spiritual potential that made the Cistercian version of the *vita religiosa* extremely appealing to those striving for a more perfect life within the security of the monastic walls. The community of Cîteaux gradually evolved into a well-organised alliance of monasteries with their own understanding of monastic discipline, in which asceticism, radical imitation of Christ, self-deprivation, a mystical experience of God, manual work, and the zeal for monastic authenticity conceptually represented the very core of monastic observance. In his edition of the earliest Cistercian sources, Chrysogonus Waddell convincingly demonstrated that the *Exordium Cistercii* had most probably been written by Abbot Raynard in the early years of his government in Cîteaux (1133/34-1150) and that the text had served as a historical introduction to the second redaction of the Order's customary.² The preparation of the

1 For an overview of the Cistercian beginnings in the context of broader monastic movements of the time, with the emphasis on the new organisation forms and novelties in the approach to the *Rule*, see Gert Melville, *The World of Medieval Monasticism – Its History and Forms of Life* (Collegeville Minnesota: Cistercian Publications, 2016), 136-157. Institutional stability (*Ibid*, 136) should be considered the basic feature of the Cistercian organisation, resting on the filiation system in creating new communities (thus introducing a sense of monastic family), the General Chapter (collectively enforcing laws for all) and the visitation system (to correct deviations from the *Rule* and ensure the unanimity of observance). A detailed account of the role of the General Chapter and visitation in the institutional history of the Cistercians (viewed in a comparative perspective concerning other orders): Florent Cygler, *Das Generalkapitel im hohen Mittelalter. Cisterzienser, Prämonstratenser, Kartäuser und Cluniazenser* (Münster–Hamburg–London: LIT Verlag, 2002), 23-118; Jörg Oberste, *Visitation und Ordensorganisation. Formen sozialer Normierung, Kontrolle und Kommunikation bei Cisterziensern, Prämonstratensern und Cluniazensern (12.-frühes 14. Jahrhundert)* (Münster: LIT Verlag, 1996), 57-159. See also Horst Schneider, 'Einleitung,' in Caesarius von Heisterbach, *Dialogus miraculorum / Dialog über die Wunder*, trans. Nikolaus Nösges and Horst Schneider, vol. I (Turnhout: Brepols, 2009), 18-19, where the author adds subsidiarity to the mentioned characteristics of the Cistercians. In this instance, subsidiarity should be understood as the practice of consensual decision-making as well as accentuated equality in the relations between monastic communities. For a shorter account of the basic principles of the Cistercian institutional reforms, discussed within the broader context of the medieval monastic reforms, see Edeltraud Klüeting, *Monasteria semper reformanda. Kloster- und Ordensreformen im Mittelalter* (LIT Verlag: Münster, 2005), 41-46.

2 See Waddell's dual English-Latin edition of the *Exordium Cistercii* in: 'Exordium Cistercii,' in *Narrative and legislative texts from early Cîteaux* (a Latin text in a dual edition with the English translation and notes), ed. Chrysogonus Waddell (Cîteaux: Commentarii Cistercienses, 1999), 399-404 [for the *Exordium Cistercii*, hereinafter: *EC*, with references to chapters, lines, and the pagination of this edition. Waddell's publication is hereinafter referred to as *Narrative and legislative texts*]. In the present paper, this edition has been used for the analysis and as a source of all the quotations and references. For Waddell's hypothesis on the authorship, the time when the *Exordium Cistercii* was written, and its purpose (based on the extensive historical, textual, literary, stylistic and linguistic analysis), see the introductory text to this edition, pages 139-161; also 166, 175, and 398. On pages 139-141, see an overview of presumptions on the origins of the *Exordium Cistercii* before Waddell's edition. More details on the time of emergence of early Cistercian narrative texts and an overview of the most important studies on this topic are available in Elke Goelz, 'Die frühen Quellen zur Geschichte des

customary in which the usages of the ever-growing Cistercian family would be precisely defined and regulated at the level of the whole order created a firm basis for the practical and uniform observance of the *Rule*.³

In her study on the Cistercians, Emilia Jamroziak pointed out that we will never know if the events concerning the origins of Cîteaux had happened exactly in the way they are described in the earliest narrative accounts since they were produced by later generations whose aim was to defend the new monastic ‘experiment’ from the critics.⁴ The same author proposes a more ‘fruitful’ approach – to ‘consider what seemed significant to twelfth-century and later generations of monks in their own past, and what they handed down to their successors, rather than trying to establish a definitive “true” account’.⁵ The role of the *Exordium Cistercii* was, indeed, functional, since it was providing all the members of the Order with an image of how the earliest ideals were conceived, and what initial and conceptual impulses were standing behind their monastic observance. In this paper, these images will be named ‘textual images’ and the expression will be used to emphasise additionally that the *Exordium Cistercii* only deals with the narrative reflections of later generations on the Cistercian origins, rather than with historical accounts in the strict sense of the word. The textual images, which encompassed reflections on the circumstances, motivation, and sequence of events concerning the origins of the monastery of Cîteaux, thus created a context for the emergence of a new, distinct, Cistercian way of practising monasticism. The past was meant not only to inform the brethren about the beginnings of the first community in Cîteaux but also to educate them about the necessary preconditions for a stricter and more authentic *vita communis*. In this way, the explication of the conceptual beginnings through a short narrative reflection – which should be disseminated widely in the Cistercian houses, accompanying the text of the usages – could also be seen as a textual method of establishing cohesion within the complex structure of affiliated monasteries. The *Exordium Cistercii* gave the Cistercian brethren an image of the past which was supposed to be shared collectively, throughout the dispersed communities. In that way, the fundamental ideological background in the process of creating a separate collective identity – the shared visions of and responses to their own history – was enforced. The newly devised observance, a shared imagination of past events, and the novel monastic identity were all necessary elements in the evolution of the order that differed from the ‘old Benedictines’, especially those belonging to the Cluniac congregation. One must

Zisterzienserordens’, in *Norm und Realität. Kontinuität und Wandel der Zisterzienser im Mittelalter*, ed. Franz J. Felten, Werner Rösener (Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2009), 45-64 (on the *Exordium Cistercii* 51-60). In Goelze’s article, on p. 64, see a tabular overview with presumptions (according to most influential authors) regarding the date of composition of the *Exordium Cistercii* and other important early Cistercian sources.

3 Cf. Emilia Jamroziak, *The Cistercian Order in Medieval Europe 1090-1500* (London–New York: Routledge, 2013), 21-22.

4 Jamroziak, *The Cistercian Order*, 13-14, and 23.

5 Jamroziak, *The Cistercian Order*, 14.

not forget that it was dissatisfaction with the classical Benedictine *vita religiosa* that heavily instigated the Cistercian ‘project’ and all those Cistercian attempts to revitalise authentic monasticism stood in opposition to the ‘rational’ (laxer and more moderate) observance of the *Rule* practised by the Cluniacs and ‘Black Monks’ in general.⁶ In the *Exordium Cistercii*, it was necessary to explain the Cistercian novelty and the reasons for the break with the well-established Benedictine way of life and to introduce a new understanding of the coenobitic practice into contemporary monasticism. The task was not an easy one, and the well-designed legitimisation of the foundation of the *Novum Monasterium* (as the Abbey of Cîteaux is addressed in the early sources)⁷ was of vital importance for the evolving order. Within this context, the present study aims to analyse how the Cistercians viewed their own earliest past and which textual images helped them conceptualise the background for their observance. With that in mind, it is necessary to comprehend which impulses were primarily emphasised in the *Exordium Cistercii* as fundamental in devising new forms of religious life – in other words, which elements of their observance the Cistercians imagined as most valuable in both evoking monastic authenticity and affirming a distinct monastic identity.

Textual images

Validation

The basic textual image in the *Exordium Cistercii* that should be discussed concerns the issue of validation of the new observance. The narrative begins with the explication of how a group of monks departed from the Benedictine Abbey of Molesme and established a new monastery in the remote place of Cîteaux (in 1098), where they could observe the *Rule of St Benedict* more strictly and fulfil their spiritual desires.⁸ This departure, however, needed to be very carefully described and legitimised since it was challenging the standard coenobitical stability norms and expectations of a monk, whose ties with the monastery where he had professed his vows were supposed to be

6 The image of difference in observances based on the opposition between the ‘rational’ and the ‘literal’ following of the *Rule* was introduced by Bernard of Clairvaux in his well-known treatise *Apologia ad Guillelmum abbatem*. In it, he specifically claims: ‘... then it must be true that both you [i.e. the Cistercian] and the Cluniac are keeping the Rule, though each in his own way. You keep it more strictly; he, perhaps, keep it more reasonably.’ See: ‘Cistercians and Cluniacs: St Bernard’s Apologia to Abbot William’, trans. Michael Casey, in *The Works of Bernard of Clairvaux*, Volume I: Treatises I (Shannon: Irish University Press, 1970) [hereinafter: *Apologia*], VII, 14: 50-51. The *Apologia* will be more closely analysed in the next chapter of the present paper.

7 Including the *Exordium Cistercii*. See EC II, 5, 401: *Quo facto, Novum Monasterium novi patris sollicitudine et industria in brevi non mediocriter, Deo cooperante, in sancta conversatione profecit, opinione claruit, rebus necessariis crevit.*

8 ECI, 1-9: 399-401.

ever-lasting.⁹ All the more, the group of monks that left their abbey was led by Abbot Robert himself,¹⁰ indicating serious disagreements in the community of Molesme regarding observance. The explanation of the motivation for leaving Molesme Abbey was skilfully presented in the *Exordium Cistercii* in terms of the dichotomy between materialism and spirituality. Molesme Abbey is sketched as a virtuous place where observance was eventually corrupted by economic growth. Firstly, the abbey was described as a monastery of ‘the most celebrated renown, and remarkable for monastic observance’, a place which became so ‘illustrious by the gifts of his [God’s] grace’, and ‘ennobled ... with illustrious men’.¹¹ And then, the introductory remarks on Molesme Abbey end with the statement that the community was enriched not only with virtues but also with possessions, a notion which now creates a textual bridge towards the explanatory passage concerning the monks’ motivation for leaving their monastery. The initial appraisal of Molesme Abbey is followed by the effective statement that the ‘association of possessions with virtues is not usually long-lasting’. It was exactly when Abbot Robert and his companions became aware of this that they decided to occupy themselves with ‘heavenly pursuits’ exclusively, and not ‘to be entangled in earthly affairs’.¹² Here, two extremely powerful implications can be easily traced at a meta-textual level. The first one concerns contemporary Benedictine monasticism; the Cistercian textual break with the concept of ‘possessing’ was an implicit attack on the Benedictine landowning practice. Landowning directly implied involvement in the worldly affairs and the acceptance of principles of economic management to which the nobility and diocesan institutions were accustomed. The parallels with secular structures were visible in various spheres of monastic life, e.g. in the issue of tithe-owning. Giles Constable pointed out that ‘most monks in Europe owned and administrated tithes as if they were a secular revenue’, and that Cluny Abbey was deriving ‘not less than a tenth of its income from tithes’ in the first half of the 12th century.¹³ At this point, the narration of

9 More details about the issue of stability is provided in the further text of the present paper.

10 It should be noted that the life of Abbot Robert (ca. 1028–1111) was heavily marked by the idea of the strict following of the *Rule*. Already as the Abbot of Saint-Michel de Tonnerre, he tried to enforce strict observance, while later he led a group of hermits in Collan near Tonnerre, with whom he founded the Abbey of Molesme. There he again tried to apply strict discipline and observance, but with the increase in donations, Molesme Abbey expanded economically, thus departing from Robert’s original concepts and ideas. The departure from Molesme Abbey came as Robert’s new effort to promulgate and apply a more ascetic and disciplined life, with greater emphasis on manual work. A shorter account of Robert is provided in Thomas Merton, ‘Saint Robert of Molesme, 1028 to 1111’, *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 46/3 (2011), 273-276 and Melville, *The World of Medieval Monasticism*, 139.

11 *ECI*, 3: 399.

12 *ECI*, 4: 399-400.

13 Giles Constable, *The Abbey of Cluny – A Collection of Essays to Mark the Eleven-Hundredth Anniversary of its Foundation* (Berlin-Münster: LIT Verlag, 2010), 437 (first quotation), and 441 (second quotation).

the *Exordium Cistercii* aims at conceptualising a new and different monastic identity, which, despite the Benedictine origins, clearly departs from its contemporary practices.

The novelty, however, needed to be legitimised. Thus, the second powerful implication of the narration about the spiritual–temporal dichotomy concerns the attempt to vindicate the Cistercian monastic version on grounds of both a purer monastic experience and authentic Christian spirituality. The *Exordium Cistercii* focusses on the spiritual background of observance to inform readers (i.e. the Cistercian brethren) about the need to interiorise the fundamental monastic principle of radical spiritual conversion. The ‘total conversion’ of a monk was personal transformation leading to complete subordination to God’s will, and the acceptance of a new system of norms governing the monastic community. The basic implication of the monastic conversion programme was the renunciation of the external world and a radical break with all the worldly affairs (material goods in the first place), to achieve a virtuous life.¹⁴ Since the *Exordium Cistercii* explicitly points to the incompatibility between the concept of owning and spiritual (i.e. a more perfect) life concerned exclusively with heavenly affairs, it is clear that the narration is built on the same grounds as the monastic conversion programme of self-perfection. Thus, the narrative anchors its argumentation in basic monastic spirituality, providing its audience with the best possible justification for the course of events that follows immediately in the narration (the break with the vow of stability). This kind of argumentation possessed an extremely large emotional and devotional potential. When professing vows, monks were (conceptually) renouncing one world and becoming re-baptised in another,¹⁵ so the description of the departure based on the moving away from corrupted observance and starting anew to lead a purer spiritual life could be easily accepted mentally and emotionally by the men searching

14 An elaborate account of personal conversion in the 12th-century monasticism: Anonymus, ‘Epistola cujusdam de doctrina vitae agenda seu de regimine cordis, oris et operis’, in *Patrologia Latina* [hereinafter: *PL*] vol. 184: col. 1185-1190. For more on the concept of total conversion in monastic communities in scholarly literature, see Gert Melville, ‘Der Mönch als Rebell gegen gesetzte Ordnung und religiöse Tugend. Beobachtungen zu Quellen des 12. und 13. Jahrhunderts’, in *De ordine vitae. Zu Normvorstellungen, Organisationsformen und Schriftgebrauch in mittelalterlichen Ordenswesen*, ed. Gert Melville (Münster: LIT Verlag, 1996), 167 (more details on the *conversio totalis* programme on pp. 167-168) and: Gert Melville, ‘Singularitas’ and Community: About a Relationship of Contradiction and Complement in Medieval Convents’, in *Potency of the Common: Intercultural Perspectives about Community and Individuality*, eds. Gert Melville, Carlos Ruta (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2016), 196-198. A short description of personal conversion in the context of the departure from Molesme Abbey is provided in Gert Melville, ‘Die Zisterzienser und der Umbruch des Mönchtums im 11. und 12. Jahrhundert’, in *Norm und Realität. Kontinuität und Wandel der Zisterzienser im Mittelalter*, ed. Franz J. Felten, Werner Rösener (Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2009), 39.

15 In his tract *De praecepto et dispensatione*, Bernard of Clairvaux provides a view of monastic life as a second baptism. See: ‘Monastic obligations and abbatial authority: St Bernard’s book on precept and dispensation’, trans. Conrad Greenia, in *The Works of Bernard of Clairvaux*, Volume I: Treatises I (Shannon: Irish University Press, 1970), XVII, 54: 144-145. Cf. Jörg Sonntag, *Klosterleben im Spiegel des Zeichenhaften. Symbolisches Denken und Handeln hochmittelalterlicher Mönche zwischen Dauer und Wandel, Regel und Gewohnheit* (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2008), 154.

for perfection. Besides, the Cistercian emphasis on the ‘heavenly pursuits’, which cannot be attached to any of the material or earthly categories, was also a way to provide the new observance with the purest Christian background, authenticated by Christ’s instructions. The line in the *Exordium Cistercii* referring to the ‘heavenly pursuits’ is Christocentric, since it emanates from Christ’s model of a perfect life: ‘If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me’ (Mt 19.21).¹⁶ These words of Christ, whom the professed monks should follow unconditionally, clearly structure the course of events in the process of becoming perfect. It is possible to reach perfection and enjoy the heavenly treasures (in the *Exordium Cistercii* the ‘heavenly pursuits’) by following in His footsteps, but only after abandoning all earthly possessions. This spiritual axiom must have had a special meaning in conceptualising monastic observance since at the core of a monk’s profession was the idea of the search for divine and pure perfection by constantly following the Saviour’s example and learning from it.¹⁷ *Ergo*, at a conceptual level, the purity of monastic observance could only be accomplished if each member of the community fully interiorised Christ’s instructions concerning earthly possessions. At this point, it should be emphasised that the Cistercian community functioned as a ‘textual community’, meaning that ‘monks right across the Order read the same texts that shaped their common understanding’.¹⁸ In other words, the Cistercians insisted on the uniformity of liturgical and other books,¹⁹ which were supposed to create not only functional ‘harmony’ (at the level of liturgy and organisation) but also a community whose members would share the vision of the Order’s purpose and identity. Brian

16 The English references from the Scripture are quoted according to the New Revised Standard Version Bible, which was published by the National Council of the Churches of Christ in 1989.

17 This idea is clearly expressed in the Prologue of the *Rule of St Benedict*. The monastery is described as the ‘school of the Lord’s service’, implying the idea of constant spiritual training completely devoted to God. See *Benedicti Regula*, ed. Rudolf Hanslik, in *Corpus scriptorum ecclesiasticorum Latinorum*, vol. 75 (Wien: Hölder-Pichler-Tempsky, 1960) [hereinafter: *RB*], Prolog, 45: 8. The best possible example and role model for participants of this ‘school’ is Christ (who is represented by the Abbot to whom all the brethren owe absolute obedience – see more in *RB*, c. V, 1-19: 35-38). In the Cistercian order, the idea that the monastery serves as the place where one becomes ‘Christ-like’ (i.e. reaches spiritual perfection by imitating Christ) is very clearly expressed in Bernard of Clairvaux’s tract *De praecepto et dispensatione*. In it, Bernard claims: ‘... for it [the monastic life] restores the divine image in the human soul and makes us Christlike...’. In ‘Monastic obligations’, XVII, 54: 144. Furthermore, the Benedictine treatise *Tractatus de professione monachorum* accentuates the question of will in the process of becoming perfect. It presents the idea that a monk becomes perfect by completely subjecting to God’s will, following Christ’s example. See ‘Tractatus de professione monachorum’, in *De antiquis ecclesiae ritibus*, tomus secundus, ed. Edmund Martene (Antuerpiae, 1736), col. 483-484, and the whole tract: 469-496 (The same tract in a dual, Latin-English edition is available in *Three Treatises From Bec on the Nature of Monastic Life*, ed. Giles Constable, transl. Bernard S. Smith (University of Toronto Press, 2008), 29-106).

18 Jamroziak, *The Cistercian Order*, 25.

19 The uniformity of liturgical books was demanded by the General Chapter. See ‘The Instituta generalis capituli apud Cistercium’, in *Narrative and legislative texts* [hereinafter: *Instituta*] III, 2: 444.

Stock demonstrated on the example of Bernard of Clairvaux's sermons that those texts were an excellent example of the creation of a textual community, which also 'gave a definitive stylistic imprint to feelings, perceptions, and practical ideas that were the antithesis of the scholastic, informational or objectifying approach'.²⁰ Thus, the formation of the Cistercian textual community implied not only inner cohesion and shared experience of the *vita religiosa* but also the creation of a distinctive discourse system in which 'hermeneutics functioned by means of a dialectical swing between the text and experience'.²¹ The *Exordium Cistercii* served as a tool for creating the textual community in which all the members would share the same vision of the past. By extrapolating several key events in the early history of the Order, the narrative was supposed to instigate a kind of conceptualised story which would support historically the collective interiorisation of those elements of the Cistercian observance which had become its demarcating features by the 1130s. Apart from that, in the *Exordium Cistercii*, one finds the 'dialectical swing between the text and experience' mentioned by Brian Stock.²² It is evident in the explanation of the motivation for leaving the monastery of Molesme. The group around Abbot Robert based their decision on the wish to pursue heavenly affairs, i.e. to experience pure spirituality, completely detached from the material world of corruption.

It is thus clear that the initial motivation for leaving the monastery was explained in spiritual rather than in legal terms. The legal arguments, omitted in the first part of the *Exordium Cistercii*, will, however, be enforced to some extent in its second part.²³ There, the *Exordium Cistercii* validates the nascent monastic version through ecclesiastical and lay authorities. The text narrates how the founders of the New Monastery began with the 'project' of transforming a desert place into the abbey, relying on the advice and authority of prominent prelates: the Archbishop of Lyon, Papal Legate Hugh, and Bishop of Chalon Walter.²⁴ They also acquired the permission of Duke of Burgundy Odo,²⁵ which was an important notion since it was textually affirming lay protection and integration into the local structures.²⁶ The extensive narration regarding

20 Brian Stock, *The Implications of Literacy. Written Language and Models of Interpretation in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1983), 405.

21 Stock, *The Implications of Literacy*, 405.

22 Stock, *The Implications of Literacy*, 405.

23 *EC* II, 2-4: 401.

24 *EC* II, 2: 401.

25 *EC* II, 2: 401.

26 Even though the idea of strict detachment from the outer world will be strongly incorporated into the Cistercian visions of the monastic practice, the White Monks did not dismiss all the forms of relations with the lay world. This primarily relates to the issues of protection and the process of the foundation of monasteries. Laymen regularly acted as founders and protectors, just as was usual with Benedictine monasticism in the previous times, and 'the founder was an indispensable element in the process [of the foundation of a Cistercian abbey], whether laymen and women – kings, queens, princes, and nobles – or high-ranking prelates'. Jamroziak, *The Cistercian Order*, 50-51, and also 92-123. By inserting a reference to the lay approval, the *Exordium Cistercii* was not just explaining

the process of legal validation of observance is omitted here, as a simple reference to the authoritative figures sufficed. The approach to the legitimisation of the earliest history will change during the Cistercian work on the redaction of usages in the mid-1140s. A new and more sophisticated narrative on the beginnings of Cîteaux was produced at the time. This narrative, known as the *Exordium parvum*, would provide the brethren not only with a more extensive explanation concerning the origins of the Order but also with full texts of various charters issued by high ecclesiastical dignitaries that helped approve and protect the new monastic observance.²⁷ The *Exordium Parvum* thus contains three letters by Archbishop and Papal legate Hugh, two letters by Bishop of Chalon Walter, a letter by Pope Urban II (1088–1099), a letter from Cardinals John and Benedict to Pope Paschal II (1099–1118), and the most important letter, the so-called ‘Roman Privilege’ by Pope Paschal II, confirming and protecting the Cistercian observance.²⁸ On the other hand, the *Exordium Cistercii* – serving primarily as a short account with a basic overview of key events in the earliest history of the Cistercians – considers the mere mentioning of the prelates involved to be authoritative enough to support the validity of the newly established community. In other words, even though

how the *Novum Monasterium* came into being but was also implicitly providing a background for the practice of lay involvement into the foundation of abbeys, which was crucial in the coming into existence of both Benedictine monasteries and the network of Cistercian monasteries. For more on the development of Benedictine monasteries and monastic reforms within the broader social context, see Klaus Schreiner, *Gemeinsam leben. Spiritualität, Lebens- und Verfassungsformen klösterlicher Gemeinschaften in Kirche und Gesellschaft des Mittelalters* (Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2013), 1-61, 153-204 (for more about the famous Abbey of Hirsau), esp. 175-202. More on the relations between secular society and monastic communities (on the example of Flanders) is available in Steven Vanderputten, ‘Monks, Knights, and the Enactment of Competing Social Realities in Eleventh- and Early-Twelfth-Century Flanders’, *Speculum* 84 (2009): 582-612; and more elaborately in Steven Vanderputten, *Reform, conflict, and the Shaping of Corporate Identities. Collected Studies on Benedictine Monasticism 1050–1150* (Wien-Zürich-Berlin-Münster: LIT Verlag, 2013). It should be noted that the author provides a close analysis of nuances in the relations between lay protectors and Benedictine monasteries, emphasising that – despite the efforts of lords to control the religious foundations, which was an evident trend in early medieval Europe – at the peak of the Middle Ages, monastic communities were developing much more autonomously than it has been presumed in historiography (p. XXVI). This conclusion is based on the situation in Flanders; however, the author’s conclusion demonstrates the complexities in the relations between lay and religious structures. In the case of the *Novum Monasterium*, lay intervention and protection seemed to be a part of the founding process; all the more, it was interpolated in the *Exordium Cistercii* to integrate it into the collective memory of the nascent order.

27 See ‘Exordium Parvum’ in *Narrative and legislative texts* [hereafter: *EP*], I-XVIII, 417-440.

28 Letters of Archbishop and Papal legate Hugh: *EP* II, 1-5: 419-420 (confirmation of the Cistercian observance); VII, 1-15: 424-426 (in this letter, the Archbishop deals with the question of the relations between the Molesme and Cîteaux Abbey); XII, 1-8:430-431 (the new confirmation). The letter of Pope Urban II: *EP* VI, 1-7: 423-424 (the Pope also deals with the relations between the two abbeys). The letter from Cardinals John and Benedict to Pope Paschal pleading for a recognition of the Cistercian practice as true monastic observance: *EP* XI, 1-5: 429-430; letters by Bishop of Chalon Walter: *EP* VIII, 1-5: 426-427 (a commendatory letter to the Bishop of Langres); *EP* XIII, 1-5: 431-432 (a confirmation and a plea to the Pope to confirm the Cistercians). The ‘Roman Privilege’: *EP* XIV, 1-11:432-434.

the narration of the *Exordium Cistercii* remains scant in information about the course of events concerning the confirmation of the Cistercian practice, the text provides a spiritual background with an adequate canonical framework through the office of high ecclesiastical dignitaries. Besides, the confirmation by ecclesiastical authorities was crucial not only for validating the new form of monasticism but also for the issues of organisation and internal care for souls. After referring to the authority instances, the *Exordium Cistercii* narrates that Abbot Robert acquired the pastoral staff from Chalon bishopric.²⁹ This was an extremely important interpolation since it constituted a textual confirmation that organisation forms and internal affairs were structured in agreement with ordinary authorities from the beginnings, thus additionally approving the new observance at the diocesan level.

Alongside the basic preconditions for the evolution of the Cistercian community, namely canonical and secular confirmation, it was necessary to define strictly the relations between the New Monastery and Molesme Abbey. The *Exordium Cistercii* gives us a concise report regarding these sensitive relations: first, the monks of Molesme Abbey demanded from the Church authorities that Abbot Robert come back to their monastery. Pope Urban II and Bishop of Chalon Walter approved their request, resulting in the return of Abbot Robert to his previous abbey shortly after establishing the new community of Cîteaux.³⁰ In this passage, the reference to ecclesiastical authorities is more than a simple interpolation providing the reader with information about early Cistercian history. It rather served a more utilitarian purpose, namely to reveal to its audience that the awkward situation of the Abbot's departure finally resulted in a canonically approved arrangement. This textual background is then followed by a reference to a specific agreement between the two communities, defining that neither of them would admit a monk of the other to the monastery if the monk was not provided with a commendatory letter according to the *Rule*.³¹ This agreement now fully complied with the monastic law, and – as the *Exordium Cistercii* narrates – was stipulated and confirmed by the apostolic authority as well.³² Thus, it seems clear that as much as the narrative begins with spiritual impulses, it continues with a legal settlement and canonical approval. In this way, the narration creates a well-organised noetic system providing its audience with a mental image of the Cistercians being embedded in both devotional and legal orthodoxy from their beginnings.

29 *EC* II, 2: 401.

30 *EC* II, 3: 401. Discussed more elaborately in *EP* V, 1-3: 422-423; VI, 1-7: 423-424; VII, 1-15: 424-426. From the *Exordium parvum*, it is clear that an important role in arranging the relations between the two abbeys was played by Archbishop Hugh, who issued a decree regulating the matter. *EP* VII, 7-11: 424-425.

31 *EC* II, 4: 401. See more in the *Rule: Cabeat autem abbas, ne aliquando de alio noto monasterio monachum ad habitandum suscipiat sine consensu abbatis eius aut literas commendaticias ... RB* c. LXI, 13: 143. Cf. *EP* VII, 9: 424-425.

32 *EC* II, 4: 401.

Poverty and asceticism

The second textual image presented in the *Exordium Cistercii* concerns the role and the effects of poverty in the Cistercian observance. The *Exordium Cistercii* textually introduces the importance of poverty when discussing the issue of fulfilling the monastic vows and realisation of the virtuous life. Referring to the group of monks that departed from Molesme Abbey, it states that those ‘lovers of the virtues’ started to contemplate more about poverty, that ‘fruitful mother of a virile stock’, when they decided to lead a more spiritual life and to properly observe the *Rule* they had professed.³³ By using the textual image of a community conceived out of poverty, the *Exordium Cistercii* offers not only a narrative introducing the story of legitimate spiritual beginnings but also a text which helped to define the characteristics of the newly-formulated observance, distinct from the ‘old Benedictines’. The Cistercian understanding that deeply interiorises poverty enables a monk to occupy himself with the ‘heavenly pursuits’. Besides, poverty as a basic precondition for leading an authentic religious life in a community complied with the eremitic conceptualisation of the *vita religiosa*. In the 11th century, monasticism was heavily marked by the eremitic movements whose adherents had an urge to renew the life of the early Church, as described in the Acts: ‘All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need’. (Acts 2.44-45).³⁴ The idea of imitating the *vita apostolica*, understood as communal life in absolute and voluntary poverty, had produced various congregations in which eremitic asceticism and communal coenobitism were combined.³⁵ It has already been emphasised in historiography that the origins of the Cistercian organisation and spirituality are very closely linked to, and were influenced by, these eremitic-coenobitic congregations and their lifestyle.³⁶ The Camaldoli community and the Carthusian movement should be especially

33 *EC I*, 5: 400. More details on the stylistics and contents of this paragraph are available in Chrysogonus Waddell, ‘The *Exordium Cistercii*, Lucan, and Mother Poverty’, *Cîteaux* 33 (1982): 379-388.

34 For more details on the influence of this line from the Acts, as well as of other Biblical passages, on contemporary monasticism and spirituality and religious life in general, see Giles Constable, *The Reformation of the Twelfth Century* (Cambridge University Press, 1996), 125-126.

35 For more details on this topic, see Melville, *The World of Medieval Monasticism*, 89-124, where the author gives an overview of the new religious movements based on poverty and imitation of the apostolic life, and the contextualisation of their emergence. On pages 90-91, the author points out the very essence of these movements: ‘The new understanding of eremitical life, however, had as its starting point not training in a well-ordered monastery, but the way of life of the Desert Fathers. That way of life was interpreted as an immediate retreat from all worldly affairs (these now seen as something to be despised) and as a new discovery of self in a place undisturbed by earthly concerns (the „desert“). ... Valid among them [the eremitic groups] were only the word and the actions of the leader, along with his admonitions, based on revealed texts such as gospels, the Acts of the Apostles, or the lives of the Desert Fathers.’

36 See: Bede K. Lackner, *The Eleventh-Century Background of Cîteaux* (Spencer, MA: Cistercian Publications, 1972); Melville, ‘Die Zisterzienser und der Umbruch des Mönchtums’, 23-43; Jamrozak, *The Cistercian Order*, 5-9; Melville, *The World of Medieval Monasticism*, 136-141. E. Klueting speaks of ‘the form of life between eremitism and monasticism’ (‘... Lebensform zwischen Eremitentum und Mönchtum...’). Klueting, *Monasteria*, 41.

emphasised, as they combined strict poverty and solitary life of extreme austerity with the communal Divine Office.³⁷ One of the clearest indicators of the Cistercian affinity to contemporary asceticism, solitude, and physical withdrawal from worldly structures is the famous *Epistola aurea*, composed by William of St Thierry. This spiritual treatise indicates that, by the mid-12th century, the Cistercian inclination towards asceticism remained firmly integrated into their views on the monastic practice. It praises the Carthusian way of monastic life and suggests to their novices how to progress spiritually and reach perfection. William sees in the Carthusian life the renewed asceticism of the desert fathers, i.e. authentic monasticism.³⁸ He extensively reflects on the solitary life in a cell (within the monastery) and concludes that, within a cell, one becomes closer to heavens. The cell is a perfect environment for more exalted deeds;³⁹ life in a cell allows the practising of true piety, which implies constantly thinking about God,⁴⁰ and contemplation with the purpose of adhering to the immutable good.⁴¹ The Cistercians accepted asceticism and the ideal of extreme poverty as markers of the communal identity, but only in addition to the traditional coenobitic attachment to the *Rule*. It is evident from the *Exordium Cistercii* that the Cistercians shared the modern eremitic sense of the religious vocation, and the textual images used in the opening paragraphs of this narrative remain close to the eremitic visions and practices, and characteristics of the *vita religiosa*: the inspiration of the leader as the driving force, absolute poverty resulting in a virtuous life, renunciation of the world and life in solitude. On the other hand, the keeping of St Benedict's *Rule* – with ascetic elements now more firmly integrated – was textually affirmed as the only possible spiritual framework for reaching perfection and the virtuous life. All the more, Gert Melville pointed out that it was exactly the strong attachment to the traditional monastic law, rather than living according to 'their own law', that demarcated the Cistercians from the eremitic movements of the day.⁴² The group of monks around Abbot Robert was moved by the impulse to observe the *Rule of St Benedict* in a purer way, not by the wish to abandon it or to

37 Cf. Jamroziak, *The Cistercian Order*, 6-7.

38 See more in 'Guigonis prioris quinti Majoris Carthusiae Epistola seu tractatus ad fratres de Monte Dei', in *PL* vol. 184, lib. I, c. I, 1-3, col. 309-310. (Note that the edition misattributes the tract to the Carthusian prior Guigo. The true author is the Cistercian monk William, a member of Signy Abbey from 1135 to his death in 1148). William had been the Abbot of the Benedictine Abbey of St Thierry before joining the Cistercian order (hence the attribution 'a/de Sancto Theodorico'; he was an abbot there from 1121 to 1135). As a Cistercian, he dedicated himself to the writing of spiritual mystical treatises, the *Epistle to (Carthusian) brothers of Mont-Dieu* being the most famous. Hereinafter, the term *Epistola aurea* will be used, since this tract is mostly known under this title. For more on the spiritual writings of William of St Thierry, see collective volume F. Tyler Sergent – Aage Rydstrom-Poulsen – Marsha L. Dutton (eds), *Unity of Spirit. Studies on William of Saint-Thierry in Honor of E. Rozanne Elder* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical press, 2015).

39 *Epistola aurea*, lib. I, c. IV, 10, col. 313-314.

40 *Epistola aurea*, lib. I, c. IV, 9, col. 313.

41 *Epistola aurea*, lib. II, c. III, 19, col. 350.

42 Melville, 'Die Zisterzienser und der Umbruch des Mönchtums', 39.

abnegate obedience to the *Rule*. Thus, after legitimising the Cistercian beginnings on the purest and Christocentric spiritual grounds, the *Exordium Cistercii* provided its audience with the explanation of basic features of the new observance – the one which rested on the idea that, what evolved from the *vita apostolica*, St Benedict's precepts, and eremitic poverty was not a novelty but renewed and authentic monasticism.

The emphasis on apostolic poverty as the role model was not invented by the author of the *Exordium Cistercii*, Abbot Raynard. This becomes clear when looking into the treatise *Apologia ad Guillelmum Abbatem*, written already in 1125 by the most famous and influential Cistercian, Bernard of Clairvaux.⁴³ The shorter excursion to Bernard's tract, which preceded the *Exordium Cistercii* by nearly a decade, is instructive since the author deals extensively with appropriate monastic observances.⁴⁴ Bernard first defends himself from the accusations that he is not fond of non-Cistercian monasticism – to explain his understanding of the *vita religiosa*, he presents a view of the Church in which there is enough room for every form of monastic observance.⁴⁵ He emphasises that there should be no doubt that the Church's unity implies plurality since unity consists in the 'singleness of love'.⁴⁶ After explaining his views on the plurality of monastic observances and favourably referring to the 'old Benedictines', he now feels confident enough to address the various faults which could be encountered in their monasteries. Bernard refers, usually ironically so, to the excesses in monastic life and deviations from the *Rule* in various fields: diet, clothing, ornaments and architecture, negligence of the *Rule* by the superiors.⁴⁷ When reading his critiques, it becomes clear that he resents the Cluniacs primarily for their departure from the moderate monastic life, simplicity, and poverty. What must be accentuated here is Bernard's idea of departure, i.e. moving away from the original and most authentic monasticism of the desert fathers.⁴⁸ The reference to pre-Benedictine monasticism is also found in his description of how some monks stay in the infirmary even without being ill, just to receive better food and bedding. Here Bernard cries aloud: 'Is this the way Macarius lived? Is it Basil's teaching or Anthony's command? Did the Fathers in Egypt adopt such a manner of life?'⁴⁹ This was Bernard's way to emphasise that in the first and authentic monasticism there was more care for the spiritual, rather than physical or material needs. He especially

43 A full reference to the quoted edition is available in Footnote 6.

44 More details on the motivation, addressees, general context and historiography of the *Apologia* can be found in Conrad Rudolph, 'The Scholarship on Bernard of Clairvaux's *Apologia*', *Cîteaux* fasc. 1-4 (1989): 69-111.

45 He recalls Christ's words: 'In my Father's house there are many dwelling places' (Jn 14.2), and continues with the observation that 'Just as there are many rooms in a single house, so there are many different orders in the one Church', *Apologia* IV, 8: 43.

46 *Apologia* IV, 8: 43.

47 See in *Apologia* VIII-XII, 16-31: 52-69.

48 Bernard explicitly states: 'Oh, how far away we have moved from Anthony and his contemporaries!', *Apologia* IX, 19: 54.

49 *Apologia* IX, 23: 58.

claims that the desert fathers were receiving ‘spiritual nourishment from each other’, so that – Bernard now empowers his projection of true monasticism – they often ‘spent the whole day with fasting stomachs, but their minds were feasted’.⁵⁰ It is clear that, by pointing to various faults in monastic life, Bernard implies how true observance should function. In other words, using the narrative method of rebuking, he primarily wishes to devise a framework in which his confreres could appropriately observe the *Rule*, without making the mistakes pointed out in the *Apologia*. However, to sketch more precisely what should be avoided in pure observance, it was not enough just to point out the faults, but to introduce the role models of true faith. Those were the desert fathers, who lived in absolute poverty and simplicity. All the more, it was exactly this kind of life that enabled them to interiorise true love and thus get closer to Christ.⁵¹ Furthermore, Bernard proceeds with a reference to the apostolic life, emphasising the poverty of the apostles and the exclusively need-based distribution of goods in their community,⁵² thus confirming the conceptual link between the Cistercian observance and the eremitic movements of the day.

With the *Apologia* in mind, it is clear that the textual images in the *Exordium Cistercii* were part of the much larger Cistercian efforts to affirm the observance based on poverty, apostolic life and authentic monasticism of the desert fathers. Serving as the introduction to the Cistercian usages and as a medium for the collective imagination of the past, the *Exordium Cistercii* was historically supporting the already promulgated literary propaganda of the new observance. In the *Apologia*, the insistence on a return to the desert fathers and apostolic life in absolute poverty was evoked not only to present the best possible *exempla* but also to differentiate the authentic (i.e. adequate) observances from deviated ones. As in the *Apologia*, in the *Exordium Cistercii*, poverty was also marking a conceptual division between the ‘old Benedictine’ and the Cistercian observance. The group around Abbot Robert decided to leave their monastery and substitute it for another one only after thinking over poverty,⁵³ and – as noted earlier – after realising that ‘worldly possessions’ (of Molesme Abbey) and ‘heavenly pursuits’ (of the founders of Cîteaux) are in insurmountable opposition. This textual image was then additionally ‘reinforced’ with a reference to the quality of life in Molesme Abbey, which further demarcates the two observances – those ‘lovers of the virtue’ were aware of the fact that they could stay and live in their monastery (of Molesme) in a ‘holy and respectable manner’ but this was not satisfying their inner urges and their wish to observe the *Rule* appropriately (meaning literally).⁵⁴ Finally, after mutually discussing intimate desires, they decided to leave their monastic community in order to keep the

50 *Apologia* IX, 19: 55.

51 By living in poverty and simplicity, they could perfect themselves spiritually and realise what love is: ‘... this is true love, to tend carefully the souls for love of whom Christ died’, *Apologia* IX, 19: 55.

52 He is referring to Acts 4.35: ‘... and it was distributed to each as any had need’. See *Apologia* X, 24: 59-60.

53 *ECI*, 5: 400.

54 *ECI*, 5: 400.

Rule properly and live in accordance with their vows.⁵⁵ Here, the author of the *Exordium Cistercii* uses a counter-thesis in his narration. The departure from the monastic community to which the monks belonged is not a transgression of the vow of stability. Rather, the real error would be to stay in a place where vows cannot be fulfilled completely. At this point, another tract of Bernard of Clairvaux should be taken into account. In his treatise *De praecepto et dispensatione*, Bernard does not approve of any act of leaving the monastery, but he does not judge or completely disapprove of a change of the location as long as it is grounded in conscience.⁵⁶ And even though a direct reference to conscience is omitted in the *Exordium Cistercii*, this narrative provides a textual image that could be considered much in accordance with Bernard's concept. The inner desire to lead a more perfect life (described in the *Exordium Cistercii*) and the reference to conscience as the only acceptable impulse for leaving the monastery (in *De praecepto et dispensatione*) are in evident concordance. Those two concepts together form a very strong ideological background for the nascent observance, which was presented as conceived in the purest personal spirituality and the zeal for perfection by living in poverty. In this context, poverty had a pivotal role not only in structuring a legitimate past but also in creating a better framework for the realisation of the most intimate spiritual desires of an individual. Poverty, presented as a 'fruitful mother of a virile stock', was meant to generate and safeguard the virtue, thus providing all those embracing it with the (spiritual) fruits. Consequently, all the 'lovers of the virtue' who followed their abbot into the solitude of Cîteaux, being instigated by inner compulsion (i.e. by their conscience), were seekers for a more virtuous life, which is – after all – one of the main goals of the professed life in the monastery.

And while the first part of the *Exordium Cistercii* provides the best possible explanation and justification for leaving the monastery and renouncing the vow of stability in Molesme Abbey, the second part of the narrative informs us that members of the Cîteaux community professed stability under Abbot Robert in their new place.⁵⁷ The reference to the bond of stability in the newly-established community had a purpose of textually confirming that the foundation of the new abbey (still a work in progress at the time) was based on the traditional monastic grounds, characteristic for communities under St Benedict's *Rule*.⁵⁸ In other words, it was the clearest Cistercian

55 Here, the *Exordium Cistercii* enriches the textual image by interpolating a reference to a Psalm. It is stated that the group around Robert departed from Molesme Abbey to fulfil the line: 'I will pay you my vows, those that my lips [have] uttered' (Psalm 66.13-14), i.e. to keep the professed vows. *EC I*, 6: 400.

56 Bernard states: 'Certainly it was safer to follow your conscience, in spite of the scandal, in what you considered to be better, than to stay in your first place and profession against your conscience; although you could do that too if you could convince your conscience'. In 'Monastic obligations', XVI, 49-50: 142-143. Note that Bernard suggests that one could also try to convince conscience not to leave, thus encouraging the brethren not to break the vow of stability.

57 *EC II*, 2: 401.

58 For more on the importance and spiritual implications of stability (*stabilitas loci*) in Benedictine monasticism, see e.g. *Tractatus de professione monachorum*, col. 486-487.

confirmation of their attachment to classical coenobitism.⁵⁹ And secondly, there is no doubt that the bond of stability had a special meaning for both the first Cîteaux brethren and for the next generation of its monks since it was an additional way of ensuring validity to the new observance. By professing the vow of stability in the new place, the monks of Cîteaux were demonstrating their willingness to proceed with the endeavour they had conceived in their minds – i.e. to observe the *Rule* appropriately. The broken attachment to Molesme Abbey (in which – according to Cîteaux brothers – only moderate observance could be practised)⁶⁰ was now replaced with the stability attachment to the perfect place where they could truly live in accordance with their profession.⁶¹ In this way, the *Exordium Cistercii* introduced its audience to the conceptual system in which fervour for perfection and strict commitment to the *Rule* were well-balanced and interconnected, and promoted as the historical starting points from which the Cistercian observance had evolved.

Another powerful textual image in the *Exordium Cistercii*, which fully complies with Bernard's views expressed in the *Apologia*, is the zeal for solitude and the concept of total exclusion from worldly structures. Exactly these *topoi* – the solitude and the desert – were generally highly appreciated in the monastic writings of the day. They created 'the potent mythology of the monastic reform' in the 12th century, by creating closer associations to the early ascetic (desert) fathers, and by promoting places where one could face himself in tranquillity and combat his own inner demons.⁶² The Cistercians were definitely important promoters of these images, and the *Exordium Cistercii* is one of the clearest examples. The textual image of solitude is presented in the passage concerning the course of events after the group of monks departed from Molesme Abbey. It is stated that those men had gone through many difficulties, which all those willing to live in Christ need to experience, but finally, they succeeded and found the place where they could practise monastic life in all its purity.⁶³ They 'arrived at Cîteaux', the place which was 'at that time a place of horror and of vast solitude', so these men 'held the place as truly prepared for them by God'.⁶⁴ In the description of the arrival at

59 It should be emphasised that the *Exordium parvum* contains the text of the formula for the renewal of the stability profession, inserted as an *addendum* to the narration at the beginnings of the *Novum Monasterium: Illam professionem quam feci in presentia vestra in Molismensi monasterio, eandem professionem et stabilitateem confirmo coram Deo et sanctis eius in manu vestra me servaturum in hoc loco qui vocatur Novum Monasterium, sub obedientia vestra et successorum vestrorum vobis regulariter substituendorum*. In *EP Addendum*: 420.

60 Cf. *ECI*, 5: 400.

61 *ECI*, 6: 400. For more on the issue of location changing and stability in early Cistercian history, see Melville, 'Die Zisterzienser und der Umbruch des Mönchtums', 30-39 (esp. 39 where the author points out that the Cistercian change of place was not understood as a change of the life form but as the creation of a new and adequate framework for monks' self-perfection).

62 Cf. Constable, *The Reformation of the Twelfth Century*, 136.

63 *ECI*, 8: 400.

64 *ECI*, 8: 400: ... *tandem desiderio potiti Cistercium devenerunt, locum tunc scilicet horroris et vastae solitudinis*.

Cîteaux, the idea of a radical detachment from the world was put in the forefront, to be used as the representative and fundamental marker of the Cistercian identity. The inclusion of this image in the historical account of the beginnings of the *Novum Monasterium* demonstrates the idea that the Cistercian observance is distinct from the 'old Benedictines', not only by completely rejecting worldly possessions but also by a closer attachment to the ideas of radical austerity practised in solitude by members of the eremitic movements. Scholars have already emphasised that the idea of the 'desert' (i.e. the place far removed from human settlement) as an ideal Cistercian place was created only in the second and third generation of the Cistercians, who then projected this view on the earliest period, justifying the observance which was devised in the meantime.⁶⁵ The *Exordium Cistercii* played an important role in the creation of this image since it enhanced the impression of Cîteaux as a solitary place. This uncultivated and isolated place was now additionally described as the *locus horroris et vastae solitudinis*, with the obvious purpose of creating the image of a new 'desert', where true faith (observance) can be practised authentically. In other words, the textual image of a desert needed to assure the mental acceptance of Cîteaux as the most adequate place for observance based on continuous contemplative training. The essential feature of Cistercian spirituality was deep contemplation, which was supposed to result in absolute humility and obedience (implying the renouncement of own will),⁶⁶ as well as the interiorisation and full acceptance of one's uselessness (in accordance with the *Rule*).⁶⁷ This would lead to overcoming the self in order to become one with God⁶⁸ and giving unselfish

65 Benedicta Ward, 'The Desert Myth – Reflections on the Desert Ideal in Early Cistercian Monasticism', in *One Yet Two: Monastic Tradition East and West*, ed. M. Basil Pennington (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian Publications, 1976), 183-199. Ward's concept takes into account Constable, *The Reformation of the Twelfth Century*, 136, and Footnote 41. Jamrozak also refers to Ward's conclusion in Jamrozak, *The Cistercian Order*, 18-19.

66 See e.g. Bernardus Claraevallensis Abbas, 'De gradibus humilitatis et superbiae tractatus', in *PL* vol. 182: lib. I, c. I-IX, 1-27: col. 941-958.

67 *RB* c. VII, 49: 48. And in Bernardus, 'De gradibus humilitatis et superbiae', I, 2: col. 942.

68 See e.g. Bernardus Claraevallensis Abbas, 'De diligendo Deo liber seu tractatus', in *PL* vol. 182, I-XV, 1-39: col. 973-1000; an especially indicative part: X, 27: col. 990, summarising the effects of contemplative practice: *Te enim quodammodo perdere, tanquam qui non sis, et omnino non sentire teipsum et a teipso exinaniri, et pene annullari, coelestis est conversatio, non humanae affectionis*. Also, X, 28: col. 991 (where the author explicates the results of spiritual unification with God): *O amor sanctus et castus! O dulcis et suavis affectio! O pura et defaecata intentio voluntatis! Eo certe defaecator et purior, quo in ea de proprio nil jam admistum relinquitur: eo suavior et dulcior, quo totum divinum est quod sentitur. Sic affici, deificari est. Quomodo stilla aquae modica, multo infusa vino, deficere a se tota videtur, num et saporem vini induit et colorem; et quomodo ferrum ignitum et candens, igni simillimum fit, pristina propriaque forma exutum; et quomodo solis luce perfusus aer in eandem transformatur luminis claritatem, adeo ut non tam illuminatus, quam ipsum lumen esse videatur: sic omnem tunc in sanctis humanam affectionem quodam ineffabili modo necesse erit a semetipsa liquescere, atque in Dei penitus transfundi voluntatem. Alioquin quomodo omnia in omnibus erit Deus, si in homine de homine quidquam supererit? Manebit quidem substantia, sed in alia forma, alia gloria, aliaque potentia*. A detailed account of Bernard of Clairvaux's theology, which was the basis for Cistercian spirituality in Michaela Diers, *Bernhard von Clairvaux. Elitäre Frömmigkeit und begnadetes Wirken* (Münster: Aschendorff Verlag: 1991).

and unconditional brotherly love to all the other members of the community,⁶⁹ etc. Therefore, the only appropriate environment could be the one providing tranquillity and solitude. The visions of Cîteaux expressed in the *Exordium Cistercii*, built on the contemporary *topoi* system, soon became the basis on which more elaborate projections of the past would be created as well. Thus, the image of Cîteaux as the new desert and the perfect physical place to practise monasticism in peace and silence would be perpetuated in the *Exordium parvum*. In this narrative, Cîteaux was depicted as a place ensuring tranquillity and more quietness to the community members on several occasions.⁷⁰ The succeeding narratives will produce an even more complex picture. Thus, the *Exordium magnum*, composed at the end of the 12th and beginning of the 13th century, presents the foundation of the Cîteaux monastery and Cistercian history within broader monastic history, starting with the apostolic times and the desert fathers.⁷¹ In fact, the history of the Cistercians is here presented as a part of the linear history of Christianity, while the historical visions of a new (renewed) desert, initially promoted with the *Exordium Cistercii*, were now superseded by the ‘supra-narrative’ in which the concept of straight-forward evolution beginning in the deserts of the East was formulated.⁷² The logic is clear – the solitude and the new desert (practised by the Cistercians) were now not only an adequate framework for contemplative training but also a natural state of the Cistercian monks; the concepts representing their primordial blueprint and the core of observance.

Apart from being a medium for creating the collective imagination of the earliest past, which would generate more elaborate narratives in the course of the century, the textual images in the *Exordium Cistercii* were conceptually supporting broader institutional efforts of the Cistercians. The image of Cîteaux as a ‘new desert’, expressed in the *Exordium Cistercii*, corresponded to the normative efforts to institutionalise seclusion as the basic characteristic of the Cistercian observance. This can be seen in the decisions of the General Chapter, which introduced the principle of founding monasteries far from the populated areas. The idea was most probably promulgated during the abbacy of Stephen Harding in Cîteaux (d. 1134),⁷³ and incorporated in both editions of the usages; first in

69 See e.g. tracts on love and friendship by the Cistercian Abbot Aelred of Rievaulx: ‘Beati Aelredi Abbatis Rievallis De spirituali amicitia liber’, *PL* vol. 195, lib. I-III: col. 659-702; ‘Beati Aelredi Abbatis Rievallis Speculum charitatis’, *PL* vol. 195, lib. I-III: col. 561-620. For more on unselfish love in the theology of the most influential Cistercian, Bernard of Clairvaux, see Diers, *Bernhard von Clairvaux*, 137-140.

70 *EP* II, 4: 419; *EP* XI, 4: 429-430; *EP* XIII, 5: 432; *EP* XIV, 5: 432.

71 See *The Great Beginning of Cîteaux, a Narrative of the Beginning of the Cistercian Order. The Exordium Magnum of Conrad of Eberbach*, ed. E. Rozanne Elder, transl. Benedicta Ward, Paul Savage (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2012).

72 Cf. Jamroziak, *The Cistercian order*, 23: ‘In short, the *Exordium Magnum Cisterciense*, extolling the Cistercian movement, was thus described as the embodiment of the true and original spirit of monastic life, constituting an impressive attempt to legitimise the success of the Order in historical terms’.

73 Cf. Chrysogonus Waddell, *Narrative and legislative texts*, 398.

the edition of ca. 1133/34-1136/7;⁷⁴ and then in the edition of around mid-1140s.⁷⁵ By presenting Cîteaux as a 'place of horror and of vast solitude', the *Exordium Cistercii* offered a plausible historical context for the Order's legislative activities. However, as pointed out earlier, the *Exordium Cistercii* overcomes the basic purpose of informing about the past (at least about the past as was understood by the Order in the 1130s) and provides its audience with a spiritual background in which the new observance was conceived. This is also visible in the passage concerning the discovery of Cîteaux, describing that the group of monks experienced troubles, which was nothing uncommon since all those willing to accept Christ are destined to suffer. This almost martyr-like reference has its spiritual importance since it implies the necessity to get closer to Christ through deep compassion with Him and His sacrifice. However, there is little doubt that it also aims at strengthening the image of Cîteaux founders as unfaltering men, compelled to execute what is necessary for the ultimate benefit of their souls. All the more, those founders are named 'soldiers of Christ' (*militēs Christi*) in the next line,⁷⁶ which was not only a stylistic addition to the presented image but also a powerful conceptual reference accentuating the willingness of the founders to engage in the spiritual combat for salvation. Apart from that, the idea that the 'place of horror', which was prepared for those 'soldiers' by God Himself, was a locality in complete accord with the strict purpose they had already conceived in mind,⁷⁷ indicates a stronger Cistercian accent on penitential life within coenobitic monasticism, the concept which also correlated with ascetic movements of the time.⁷⁸

Progress

And finally, the *Exordium Cistercii* narrates the course of events under Abbot Robert's successors Alberic and Stephen (Harding).⁷⁹ Alberic is depicted as an 'observant and holy man', implying his readiness to continue with the programme of stricter observance, which was conceived under his predecessor.⁸⁰ This textual image is enhanced

74 *In civitatibus, castellis, villis, nulla nostra construenda esse coenobia*. See 'Capitula', in *Narrative and legislative texts*, IX, 3: 408.

75 *In civitatibus, castellis, villis, nulla nostra construenda sunt coenobia, sed in locis a conversatione hominum semotis* (sic!). *Instituta* I, 1-2: 458. See also Canivez' edition, where this decision of the General Chapter was dated in 1134. *Statuta Capitulum Generalium Ordinis Cisterciensis ab anno 1116 ad annum 1786*, tomus I, ed. Josephus Maria Canivez (Louvain, 1933), 13.

76 *EC* I, 9: 400. The same reference to the *militēs Christi* was integrated into the *Exordium parvum* as well. There, the image of monks being soldiers of Christ is additionally strengthened – the *Exordium parvum* imposes an extremely powerful Christ-centric image of *militēs Christi* who are *cum paupere Christo pauperes*. *EP*, XV, 9: 435. In this way, Cistercian monks were conceptually connected to Christ himself even more closely.

77 *EC* I, 9: 400.

78 E.g. in the Camaldoli community. Cf. Melville, *The World of Medieval Monasticism*, 92.

79 An overview of the activities of Robert and his successors, Alberic and Stephen Harding is available in Jean-Baptiste Van Damme, *The Three Founders of Cîteaux: Robert of Molesme, Alberic, Stephen Harding* (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian Publications, 1998).

80 *EC* II, 3: 401.

with the notion that it was ‘through the solicitude and industry’ of the new abbot, that Cîteaux ‘made no little progress’ in spiritual development.⁸¹ The image is empowered with the statement that Alberic’s efforts, which resulted in great advancement in the ‘holy way of life’, were made together with God, i.e. according to His plan.⁸² The ‘holy way of life’ to which the *Exordium Cistercii* refers is, of course, the monastic way; more specifically, the Cistercian observance which was generically combining the Benedictine with the pre-Benedictine monasticism.⁸³ Finally, Alberic is presented as a virtuous man ‘who for nine years had been running ... toward the prize of the upward call’.⁸⁴ In this way, the second abbot of Cîteaux is, *de facto*, textually affirmed as the ‘lover of the virtue’, and at the same time promoted as the role model (in a spiritual sense) for future abbots. The continuity of exemplary abbots is confirmed in the next passage, in which successor to the abbatial position Stephen Harding is depicted as ‘a most ardent lover and most faithful promoter of religious observance, of poverty, and of the discipline of the Rule’.⁸⁵ Thus, Abbot Stephen is an embodiment of crucial Cistercian values, which were promoted in the whole narrative – he is a true promoter of monastic values in general and of both poverty and the strict keeping of St Benedict’s word. In this way, two purposes were achieved. Firstly, the narrative skilfully linked its first part to the second, presenting linearly how the initial impulses were continuously promoted, not only in the beginnings but also after the sensitive period of legal confirmation. Secondly, the specific reference to Abbot Stephen – in which the core principles of poverty and strictness in following the *Rule* were emphasised – served to introduce readers to the story of Cistercian success. By textually modelling the most virtuous abbot who strictly adhered to the *Rule*, the *Exordium Cistercii* shows that Cîteaux Abbey was governed by a man of highest devotion to the Cistercian way in the crucial period of the Order’s growth and organisation. The narrative points out two main issues concerning the abbacy of Stephen Harding, both of which profoundly influenced the Cistercian community. The first one was the expansion of the Order, and the second one was the composition of the *Carta Caritatis*.⁸⁶ The enlargement of the Cistercian family was not immediate. As the *Exordium Cistercii* narrates, the first ‘little flock’ was desperate since they feared that there would be no successors ‘for neighbouring folk, while honouring in them holiness of life, shrank from their austerity’.⁸⁷ In this passage, there is an important notion of austerity, contributing to the full textual affirmation of the strictness of Cistercian life (resulting from the literal keeping of the *Rule*) as the fundamental

81 *EC* II, 5: 401.

82 *EC* II, 5: 401.

83 Cf. the previous text of the present paper.

84 *EC* II, 6: 401.

85 *EC* II, 7: 401.

86 *EC* II, 8-11: 401-402; *EC* II, 13: 402.

87 *EC* II 8: 401. For more on the issue of the expansion of the Cistercians: Constance Hoffman Berman, *The Cistercian Evolution: The Invention of a Religious Order in Twelfth-Century Europe* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 95-97; Jamrozik, *The Cistercian Order*, 43-91.

characteristic of the new observance, practised in reality. The image of desperate brothers, who are worried about the future of observance, shows us that the harshness of life brought them both the admiration for the neighbouring people (a notion important for full acceptance by local society) and the general unwillingness of people to accept the new form of monastic life in the earliest phase. Furthermore, despite the fear of not leaving a spiritual offspring, the first brothers did not 'soften' their monastic practice; the circumstance which would eventually result in success. The Cistercian growth was described as a demonstration of God's intervention, which changed the hearts of many who became willing to imitate them.⁸⁸ The first result of this divine intervention was the sudden entrance of a larger group of people in the noviciate,⁸⁹ the group that now formed a firm basis for the future increase and development of the Order. The growth continued rapidly, all according to God's plan, so the Cistercian family was continuously accepting new members, 'until, within the space of some twelve years, the joyful mother, counting only those who were fathers of monasteries, could gaze upon twenty sons of her own as well as sons of her sons, like olive plants round about her table'.⁹⁰ It is thus clear that the motifs of divine intervention and history happening according to God's plan stand in the background of the narration. In that way, the narrative conveys an implicit message of triumphant observance, which proves its rightness and moral integrity despite numerous problems. Besides, the clearest demonstration of the victorious character of this kind of observance is the expansion of the Cistercian network (emanating from the divine intervention); the final confirmation that strict adherence to the *Rule of St Benedict* instigates God's favour and grace. Thus, it can be concluded that in this passage, the *Exordium Cistercii* created an extremely functional textual system – it demonstrated that the initial impulses of the first brethren were also practised in reality after the foundation of the New Monastery. It presented the moral story in which the triumphant ending followed the calamities, and it cleverly supported the idea that the strict following of the *Rule* is the best means of instigating divine intervention and the mass conversion of hearts.

88 *EC* II, 9: 401-402.

89 *EC* II, 9-10: 401-402. Here, the *Exordium Cistercii* refers to a group of men entering Cîteaux Abbey, headed by Bernard of Clairvaux. For more details on Bernard's role in the expansion of the Cistercians, see the 'classical' study of Louis J. Lekai, *The Cistercians: Ideals and Reality* (Kent: Kent State University Press, 1977), 33-51. A detailed account is also available in Peter Dinzelbacher, *Bernhard von Clairvaux: Leben und Werk des berühmten Zisterziensers* (Darmstadt: Primus Verlag, 1998).

90 *EC* II, 11: 402. The allegorical reference to a family connection between the monasteries emanates from the system of filiation (in which the founding abbey was a mother-abbey to a founded monastery), which was the basis for the creation of new monasteries. Thus, unlike in the *Exordium Cistercii*, in other Cistercian sources the symbolism is also commonly based on the mother-daughter relations (for example, in the *Instituta* XXXIV, 1-2: 471: *Quod filia per annum semel visitet matrem ecclesiam: Statuit causa humilitatis Cisterciensis conventus sollerti providentia, quatenus semel in anno saltem matrem ecclesiam per abbatem suum, si sanus fuerit, visitet filia*). In this way, the internal organisational structure was creating a sense of a large Cistercian family. Cf. Melville, *The World of Medieval Monasticism*, 146-148.

The process of unstoppable evolution of the Cistercian monastic family was symbolically depicted with the image of sons growing around the joyful mother.⁹¹ The textual image of the Cistercians growing as a family was necessary to introduce readers to the final passage of the *Exordium Cistercii*. In it, the narrative deals with the fundamental document of the Cistercians – the *Carta Caritatis* – which regulates the relations between monasteries.⁹² The reader is informed that Abbot Stephen wanted to prevent the growing and prosperous community from discordance and to preserve the internal cohesion and mutual peace. So, he provided his community with ‘a document of admirable discernment’ and named it the *Charter of Charity* ‘because its every article is redolent of only what pertains to charity’.⁹³ The narrative pointed out that the document had been confirmed by twenty abbots of the Order and ‘safeguarded by the authority of the apostolic seal’, thus providing the text with both the monastic and canonical arguments demonstrating validity.⁹⁴ The core of the *Carta Caritatis* was the feeling of mutual love, which should be deeply integrated into all members of the community. Accordingly, the *Exordium Cistercii* points out that the *Carta Caritatis* was produced to encourage the brothers to pursue nothing ‘save this: *Owe no one anything, but to love one another*’.⁹⁵ Thus, the image of sons growing around the joyful mother is skilfully supplemented with the story of how the *Carta Caritatis* originated; the story in which love was put in the forefront. In this way, the author of the *Exordium Cistercii* leaves the impression that, from the very beginnings, it was exactly love which dominated the relations between monasteries. As the *Exordium Cistercii* narrates, the Cistercian Order was a family, a living organism driven by the feelings of its members. The *Carta Caritatis* was a document that needed to focus those feelings, so the children (monasteries) of the joyful mother (Cîteaux) could be raised in a healthy environment of mutual care and love, and kept together in everlasting peace. Harding’s work on the *Carta Caritatis* represents a marker of the early Cistercian community becoming

91 Cf. previous footnote.

92 The edition used here: ‘*Carta Caritatis prior*’, in *Narrative and legislative texts* [hereinafter: CCprior].

93 EC II, 12-13: 402.

94 EC II, 14: 402. The text of the *Exordium Cistercii*, which ends with this final notion concerning the *Carta Caritatis*, is in manuscripts usually followed by the summarised text of this document (in this form, it is called *Summa Cartae Caritatis*). See the ‘*Summa Cartae Caritatis*’, in *Narrative and legislative texts*, 404-407 (and also C. Waddell’s observations on pp. 162-166). The reference to the confirmation by 20 abbots of the Order also reflects the Cistercian sense of communal government, which was most vividly expressed through the institution of the General Chapter, the assembly conceptually based on equality in inter-abbatial relations. For more details on the General Chapter in the Cistercian Order, see Cygler, *Das Generalkapitel im hohen Mittelalter*, 23-84. The *Exordium Cistercii* refers to the communal counsel and agreement, first in the part dealing with the motivation for leaving Molesme Abbey. It is stated there that the monks around Abbot Robert had been discussing their motivation, and mutually came to the conclusion that they would leave their Abbey. EC I, 6: 400. Here, the departure is – in a certain sense – validated also by the communal will. In the second part of the narrative, the *Exordium Cistercii* again uses the motive of agreement for the purpose of validation, this time to legitimise the fundamental constitution of the Order.

95 EC II, 13: 402.

more mature. The zeal for apostolic poverty and a deeply interiorised need for solitude in which adequate contemplative training could be accomplished were not the final purpose of the monastic practice. Rather, those were the preconditions required to instigate love at both an inter-personal and organisational level. The Cistercian order was built on the idea that it was a community of equals, sharing the mutual feeling of love.⁹⁶ The *Carta Caritatis* specifically states in its Prologue that the document is promulgated to prevent the ‘future shipwreck of their [monk’s] mutual peace’; that ‘monks throughout abbeys in various parts of the world, though separated in body, could be indissolubly knit together in mind’; and that ‘... this decree should be called the *Charter of Charity*, because, averting the burdensome levying of all exactions, its statute pursues only charity and the advantage of souls in things human and divine.’⁹⁷ The *Carta Caritatis* was a clear expression of Stephen Harding’s (and the Cistercians’ around him) wish to formulate a system of inter-personal and inter-abbatial relations based on the ‘contract’ of love.⁹⁸ However, it was not only a document creating an abstract basis for the collective feelings; rather, it provided the brethren with practical instructions concerning the internal and organisational functioning of the Order. It specifies how the visitation of monasteries should function, the nature of relations between mother-abbeys and daughter-abbeys, the demands concerning the unanimity of observance and liturgical books, the functioning of the General Chapters, understanding of the abbatial position, relations between monasteries of different filiations, etc.⁹⁹ In other words, the *Carta Caritatis* is a document of both a conceptual and pragmatic value, informing monks that all the forms of institutional organisation in the Order stem not from the hierarchical demands of the mother-abbey but the deeply interiorised feeling of love among all the brethren.¹⁰⁰ Consequently, the failure to observe the

96 A detailed study on love in the Cistercian community can be found in Mirko Breitenstein, ‘Is there a Cistercian Love? Some Considerations on the Virtue of Charity’, in *Aspects of Charity. Concern for One’s Neighbour in Medieval Vita Religiosa*, ed. Gert Melville (Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2011), 55-98. An overview of the issue of inter-personal relations within the Cistercian community is available in Caroline Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother – Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley-Los Angeles-London: University of California Press, 1984), 59-81. Equality and unanimity leading to brotherly love were promoted as the basic markers of the Cistercian identity and observance at the normative level, as well. It can be seen in the Order’s *Instituta*, where the obligation of all the monasteries to have the same liturgical books and customs is clearly imposed. This kind of unanimity was supposed to enable the brethren to live ‘by one charity, one Rule, and like usages’. *Instituta*, III, 2: 444. Cf. also the chapter *Validation* of the present paper, and Footnote 19.

97 CCprior Prolog, 3-4: 442.

98 Cf. Melville, *The World of Medieval Monasticism*, 147.

99 CCprior I-XI: 442-450.

100 The monarchical organisation was a characteristic of the Cluniac Order. In it, the cohesion and relations between monasteries depended on the Abbot of Cluny, who was perceived as the abbot of all the monasteries in the congregation. Accordingly, Cluny Abbey was the sole centre of the vertically defined system of government. By emphasising equality between abbeys (who were not a mere extension of the mother-abbey any more, but the children of a ‘joyful mother’), the Cistercians were clearly distancing themselves (and their observance) from the predominant organisation form within the

Rule in the Cistercian way (i.e. in the way contracted by the *Carta Caritatis*) was an act endangering the whole collective and the blessedness of love. In other words, by pointing to love as the fundamental characteristic of the Cistercians, the *Carta Caritatis* created the spiritual-organisational basis for keeping the cohesion within the dispersed monasteries. The *Exordium Cistercii*, as a historical introduction to the beginnings of the Cistercians, echoes exactly the core principles expressed in the *Carta Caritatis*: in the first place, the ideas that this document has a purpose of preventing disorder, that the pursuit of love will provide the brethren with spiritual growth, and that the *Carta Caritatis* is the basis for inner cohesion and organisation system. The narration of the *Exordium Cistercii* was thus merely affirming textually the principles expressed in the *Carta Caritatis*. It can once again be concluded that this narrative had a mediatory role in the process of collective acceptance of the values formulated in the first decades of the Cistercian community. By referring to the importance and the place of love in the Cistercian observance, the narration was creating the best possible closure to the story which started with the personal zeal for perfection. The ending of the linear narrative explicitly demonstrated that the Cistercian observance, conceived in deepest devotional needs and a 'revolt' against the modern Benedictine practice, was formulated to cherish love. The implicit message of the final lines is that living according to the principle of owing only love to one another, is what makes a person a true Cistercian. And even more, by promoting brotherly love and the image of a prosperous family, the *Exordium Cistercii* was contributing to the cohesion among all the members of the large Cistercian organisation, thus creating the background for the monastic system of highest devotional and institutional sustainability.

Conclusion

As a short narrative of early Cistercian history, the *Exordium Cistercii* was supposed to provide its audience (the Cistercian brethren) with an insight into the origins of a new monastic observance, which would eventually triumph and successfully expand across the Christian world. As suggested by Chrysogonus Waddell, the story served as a historical introduction to the redaction of the Cistercian usages which was prepared at the beginning of the 1130s. Thus, it needed to outline a historical background for the monastic observance which – up to the date of composition of the narrative – had been

Benedictine monasticism. For more on the forms of government in the Cluniac congregation, see Constable, *The Abbey of Cluny*, 265-311. For more on the functioning of Cluny Abbey in the 11th and at the beginning of the 12th century, see Armin Kohnle, *Abt Hugo von Cluny (1049-1109)* (Sigmaringen: Jan Thorbecke Verlag, 1993), esp. 35-63 – read more on how Cluny Abbey was governed by Abbot Hugo in the period immediately preceding the 'revolt' of the Molesme monks and in the period of establishing a new monastic observance of the Cistercians. For more on the differences in the conceptualisation of love within the two observance systems (the Cistercian and Cluniac one), see Breitenstein, 'Is there a Cistercian Love?', 67-71.

evolving for three decades and gradually becoming its firm and distinctive framework. To fulfil its purpose, the *Exordium Cistercii* selected several episodes from the earliest history of Cîteaux Abbey and reflected on them in the way which would contribute to the affirmation of the Cistercian monastic practices. Those reflections – or ‘textual images’ – represent the later generations’ view on early Cistercian history, and demonstrate which characteristics were highly appreciated, i.e. on which grounds the distinct Cistercian observance was based. By using textual images, the *Exordium Cistercii* contributed to the creation of the Cistercian ‘textual community’, in which various texts served to create a uniform organisational and emotional community with a shared sensibility and perception of its own identity and past. The narrative promoted several textual images – the first relating to the validity of observance. The *Exordium Cistercii* validated the Cistercian observance on the most authentic spiritual grounds – the ‘revolt’ against the Benedictine practices was instigated by the wish to observe the *Rule of St Benedict* in the purest way, even if it meant a break with the stability obligation. The purest spirituality emanates from the radical following of Christ after abandoning all earthly possessions (cf. Mt 19:21), an axiom implied in the *Exordium Cistercii*, since the initial motivation for leaving Molesme Abbey is described in terms of monks’ compulsion to pursue heavenly affairs. It is thus clear that the validation of the new observance was grounded in the most authentic and Christ-centric spirituality. The spiritual legitimation was, then, supported by ecclesiastical and lay authorities whose protection and approval were integrated into the second part of the narration. Poverty played a crucial role within this kind of conceptualisation of the Cistercian observance. Thus, the second textual image is the one presenting the Cistercians as the offspring of poverty. The image enforces a view of poverty as a ‘fruitful mother of a virile stock’, and a necessary precondition for reaching spiritual perfection, leading a virtuous life, achieving a deepest personal conversion and getting closer to Christ. By emphasising poverty as a crucial characteristic of monastic observance in the *Exordium Cistercii*, the Cistercians were confirming their close connection to and deep affection for the eremitic movements of the day. Within both the eremitic communities and the Cistercians, the renewed asceticism tended to imitate the *vita apostolica*, understood as the life of personal and voluntary poverty within the community. The *Exordium Cistercii* textually affirmed the tendency of the Cistercians to practise the *vita religiosa* under St Benedict’s *Rule* but combined with ascetic life which would enable each individual to enjoy the spiritual benefits of both the coenobitic and eremitic monasticism. This kind of generic correlation between the Benedictine (coenobitic) monasticism and the solitary life of the desert fathers received strong ideological support from the *Exordium Cistercii*. The narrative puts in the forefront the compulsion of the first Cistercians to follow the *Rule* unconditionally, thus affirming their anchors in the Benedictine monastic tradition, and the need to conceive the new observance in absolute poverty and total physical detachment from the outer world. For this purpose, the impressive image of Cîteaux as a *locus horrois et vastae solitudinis* was introduced. It follows the *topoi*

system of the age and conceptualises (with the historical background) the important notion of an adequate place for the foundation of monasteries. Finally, the *Exordium Cistercii* narrates the growth of the community and the success of the Cistercian monastic 'experiment'. The progress is described as occurring in accordance with God's plan and after His intervention. God's fervour was deserved by the early Cistercians since they were actually practising all that was conceived in their minds from the beginnings; i.e. they were living the life of extreme austerity, keeping the *Rule* literally, even upon realising that this unconditional way was diverting many from joining them. Apart from that, an important textual image is integrated into the final part of the narration – the one concerning exemplary abbots who succeeded Abbot Robert and preserved the full integrity of the Order. Perseverance, poverty, and good guidance enabled the Cistercians to grow as a family, an important textual image that was affirming their distinct understanding of the community. It was the ideological support for the concept promulgated by the *Carta Caritatis*, based on the horizontal relations between abbeys, in which the main cohesive 'glue' would not be the hierarchical authority of the mother-abbey, but deeply and collectively interiorised charity among the brethren. The attempt to analyse the narrative such as the *Exordium Cistercii* is, thus, an attempt to achieve a better comprehension of the complexity of the Cistercian community as a whole. By reflecting on some of the crucial markers of Cistercian identity, the narrative tended to support the observance that was rooted in the Benedictine tradition, but heavily influenced by the eleventh- and twelfth-century eremitism and re-conceptualised monasticism. A reference to the Cistercian success occurring according to God's plan and after His intervention is not just a typical medieval literary method of explaining historical occurrences but also an attempt of the Cistercians in the 1130s to educate the brethren about the rightness and necessity to keep the *Rule* unaltered and pure. Apart from that, even the implication that inner compulsion – i.e. spiritual motivation – overreaches the fixed norm, is not a call for abandoning the Benedictine tradition, but to renew it in a more authentic form. The solitude and the desert, on the other hand, were incorporated into the narration to link this renewed tradition to pre-Benedictine monasticism, and to imply that the Cistercian observance is actually not a novelty, but the authentic form of the *vita religiosa*. In this way, the textual images in the *Exordium Cistercii* provided the Cistercian brethren with a whole set of both explicit and implicit (meta-textual) messages, helping them to better grasp the core of the Cistercian version of monastic life, and educating them about the fruitfulness and need to persevere in the indissoluble attachment to the early ideals.

SAŽETAK

**Konceptualizirati prošlost, potvrditi opsluživanje:
'Tekstualne slike' u djelu *Exordium Cistercii***

Članak se bavi cistercitskim narativom poznatim pod naslovom *Exordium Cistercii*, sastavljenim vjerojatno početkom 1130-ih godina. Dobro je poznato da ovaj kraći narativ daje osnovne informacije o ranoj povijesti cistercitskoga reda te o prvotnim impulsima koji su motivirali skupinu monaha iz opatije Molesme na odlazak iz zajednice i osnutak novoga samostana, u kojemu bi živjeli u potpunosti sukladno *Pravilu sv. Benedikta*. Međutim, *Exordium Cistercii* nije samo kraći i pojednostavljeni narativ o počecima opatije Cîteaux; to je također i tekst u kojemu su pomno izabrane epizode iz cistercitske prošlosti trebale povijesno podržati i legitimirati novi oblik monaškoga opsluživanja. Narativ je tako konceptualizirao sliku o načinu na koji su rani ideali bili oblikovani, pojašnjavajući koji su to inicijalni impulsi stajali u začecima nove verzije monaškoga opsluživanja, izrazito oslonjenoga na pustinjaštvo i askezu. Članak smatra ove slike o prošlosti "tekstualnim slikama," s obzirom da one više predstavljaju narativne refleksije druge cistercitske generacije o začecima reda, nego što zrcale povijesnu stvarnost. Ovdje se stoga analizira kako su cisterciti konceptualizirali vlastitu prošlost i koje su tekstualne slike koristili kako bi kreirali funkcionalnu i duhovnu pozadinu svojega opsluživanja. U tome kontekstu, osobit je naglasak stavljen na pitanje: Koji su elementi cistercitskoga opsluživanja tekstualno istaknuti i potvrđeni kao temeljni u oblikovanju distinktivnoga redovničkoga identiteta?

Ključne riječi: *Exordium Cistercii*, cistercitsko opsluživanje, tekstualne slike, valjanost i legitimnost opsluživanja, siromaštvo i askeza, samoća i pustinja, stabilnost, ljubav