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## Miracles in monastic culture

Miracles were deeply rooted in medieval monastic culture on several levels. They were part of the tradition, a defence against internal and external threats and an important medium to which to attach different connotations. Within the institutional memory of monastic communities miracles were important markers of meaning. Whilst there is a vast body of evidence for the presence of the concept of miracles, and frequent descriptions of the experience of miracles and their interpretations within the sources associated with the monastic communities, it has not been a subject of any systematic study. Whilst there is historiography devoted to different aspects of miracles in medieval culture – which is discussed in other chapters of the present volume – the relationship between them and the monastic culture tends to be part of the context within other areas of investigation rather than a central question of research.<sup>1</sup>

Within cenobitic monasticism – Benedictine tradition being the main focus of the present work – in the high and late middle ages ideas and practices associated with miracles were both part of the deeply-rooted traditions going back to the Desert Fathers, as well as important part of the accumulated customs linked to the individual institutional histories, localities and connections with the outside world. Benedicta Ward has argued for a certain ambiguity in their presence: “[t]his monastic sense of the interiority of miracle remained as a central theme in medieval

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<sup>1</sup> The best detailed overview of the medieval western monasticism and its historiography see *The Cambridge History of Medieval Monasticism in the Latin West*, A. Beach and Isabelle Cochellin (Cambridge, 2020), 2 vols.

literature”.<sup>2</sup> To wish to perform miracles was dangerously close to pride, and therefore the Desert Fathers were, according to their hagiographies, careful not to wish to appear as miracle-workers to others whilst wishing to alleviate suffering and injustice through miraculous interventions.<sup>3</sup> Fundamentally, miracles provided divine approval of the monks and their action. In the collection 'Ἡ κατ' Αἴγυπτον τῶν μοναχῶν ἱστορία/*Historia monachorum in Aegypto* (Lives of the Desert Fathers) the miracles were essential to establish the holiness of the hermits and monks.<sup>4</sup> In the hagiography of Shenoute (385-465), abbot of a large community of monks and nuns in the desert bordering the Nile Valley on the west, his destruction of pagan temples was aided and validated by miracles.<sup>5</sup>

Miracles needed to be treated with care as their power could be highly disruptive for the monastic communities. Their interpretation could be contested within the community as well as signified particular aspects of connection to and conflict with the external world. Fundamentally, the role of the monks and nuns as intercessors on behalf of others as well as the guardianship of highly-charged holy spaces imbued monastic culture with different aspects of miracle phenomena. For medieval monastic communities miracles were both a theological concept, a theme of reflection and a point of encounter with the divine and with fellow humans.

Whilst the presence of miracles can be easily explored through functionalist approaches – to see what roles the belief in miracles played in the life of monastic

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<sup>2</sup> Benedicta Ward, “Monks and miracles”, in John C. Cavadini (ed.), *Miracles in Jewish and Christian Antiquity: Imagining Truth*, Notre Dame, 1999, 127-37 (p. 132).

<sup>3</sup> Ward, “Monks and miracles”, pp. 130-31.

<sup>4</sup> André-Jean Festugière (ed.), 'Ἡ κατ' Αἴγυπτον τῶν μοναχῶν ἱστορία, Brussels, 1971); Tyrannius Rufinus, *Historia monachorum sive de Vita sanctorum partum*, ed. Eva Schulz-Flügel, Berlin, 1990; Norman Russell (ed.), *Lives of the Desert Fathers*, Kalamazoo, 1980; Benedicta Ward, “Signs and wonders: miracles in the desert tradition”, *Studia Patristica* 18 (1982), 539-42.

<sup>5</sup> Heike Behlmer, ‘Visitors to Shenoute’s monastery’, in David Frankfurter (ed.), *Pilgrimage and Holy Spaces in Late Antique Egypt*, Leiden, 1998, 341-61 (p. 358).

communities – it is somewhat reductionist. The idea of miracle in the monastic context permeated spirituality, ritual, communal and individual practices. It has intersected with the theological debates about the nature of the miraculous and its role in upholding and deepening faith. It was also central to the worldview that monks and nuns shared with the rest of the society. Production and consumption of hagiography, memorialization, intercession and various forms of remembering were all platforms of engagement with miracles. Dealing with crisis, attack or conflict – especially in terms of memorializations of such events – frequently involved miracles as a solution. Monastic communities were habitually guardians of shrines that produced miracles encompassing both members of the community as well as outsiders. Without trying to create some sort of rigid typology of miracles in the texts produced in the monastic context, I shall first discuss the types of texts in which miracles appeared and what that tells us about the monastic culture. Secondly, I will explore the place of the miracles in the life of monastic communities – though texts and material evidence – to show the possibility of understanding “a lived experience” of miracle for monks and nuns on the individual and communal level.

An important dimension in the monastic context is the role of the miracles in the construction of identity – of the community, of the institution and as an important facet of the connection to the outside world. The monastic “ownership” of miracles frequently signified not just presence of strategies but also ideas about the role of monks in relation to the external authorities, the notions of space and their meaning, as well as asserting intercessory powers of monastic communities to a variety of audiences.

### **Remembering miracles**

The foundation narratives, a story of the foundation of a monastery, and various forms of recording of later history is often a context within which a variety of miracles can be

recorded – these relate to the fortunes of the abbey, its patron saint, and other important figures in its history. Miracles can function in the foundation narratives and in chronicles within Benedictine and Cistercian traditions in different ways. Rhetorically, they often provide a turning point in a particular story, a resolution to a crisis and a solution to a situation that cannot be resolved by ordinary means. In the chronicle narratives, miracles often signal elements that are deemed to be of particular value to the community and/or the chronicler, emphasising particular “lines” of development and sanctifying various elements of the institutional history. Frequently they are associated with specific individuals as well as a deep past that essentialized the “golden past” and “perfect origins”. In the Cistercian chronicles, miraculous *exempla* were frequently inserted in order to give more profound meaning to a series of events. It helped to create “learning from history” for the community and individual monks.<sup>6</sup> The idea of the abbot-saint goes back to the Desert Fathers’ tradition and was often reused in exempla and preaching. The abbots capable of performing miracles were a fairly frequent theme in the Cistercian narratives and such stories were often about divine assistance in difficulties or bringing down those who oppressed monks. In itself these stories were not new but formed part of established imagery. In the *Historia Foundationis* of Byland and Jervaulx Abbeys, Abbot John of Jervaulx (1149/50-c.1185), the founding leader of the community, travelling with a group of monks got lost in the woods. It was a terrible situation. “While they stood like this for a long time, at a loss what to do, they despaired of their lives, and each one with great distress of heart appealed to and challenged the other to help”.<sup>7</sup> The abbot

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<sup>6</sup> Elizabeth Freeman, *Narratives of a New Order: Cistercian Historical Writing in England, 1150-1220*, Turnhout, 2002, pp. 163-65.

<sup>7</sup> Janet Burton, *The Foundation History of the Abbeys of Byland and Jervaulx*, York, 2006, p. 58.

recommended that they should perform the canonical hours and gospel lections. Seeking solution in observance and liturgical obligation is what brings miraculous conclusion to this crisis. The monks were rescued by the miraculous appearance of the Virgin Mary and Christ who showed them the right path:

they followed him [Christ who appeared in the forest] along hard and difficult paths, but they were not harmed. For small white birds without number, like sparrows, of a radiance that cannot be imagined, alighted on the branch that he carried in his hand, and there they sang repeatedly the entire hymn, “Bless the Lord all the works of the Lord”. This hymn so restored them that they experienced no hardship on their journey.<sup>8</sup>

The dialogue between the monks and the holy figures was not only about finding the way out of oppression but also signalled validation of their monastic endeavour and the fellow Cistercian foundations in Rievaulx and Byland in the same region.<sup>9</sup> The miracle in this narrative operated on several levels. It is a resolution of the dangerous situation, a lesson about the importance of proper liturgical observance, an allegorical explanation of the monastic life as a journey of following Christ as well as remembering the founding abbot of Jervaulx as a holy figure. In short – miracles in the foundation narratives were an essential element of the idealised past that can be held up to the present.

In narrative terms, miracles were also frequently evoked in the monastic chronicles in an unspecific way to assert the validity of monastic vocation and the whole institution. In the introduction to the second part of “The Henryków Book”, written by an anonymous monk from this Silesian abbey c. 1310, the section that described

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<sup>8</sup> Burton, *The Foundation History*, p. 59.

<sup>9</sup> Burton, *The Foundation History*, pp. xxxiii-xxxv, 58-59.

the foundation and arrival of the original group of monks (who came from the mother house in Lubiąż) ends with the following statement:

Oh copious mercy of divine goodness, which has in the beginning taken care to bring hither such reverend fathers, powerful in virtue, happily speaking the Word of God, so as to sustain in this place a pediment of so famous an observance [as the Cistercian Order], and whom a humble and glad obedience in Christ propelled to this: that, with God's cooperation, signs and miracles have truly followed that obedience! About the holiness and the reverence of such and so distinguished men, I decline to write more, out of humble fear that the indignity of the writer may not disfigure the dignity of the saints.<sup>10</sup>

Having a miracle-working abbot in the early history of the monastic community had multiple implications. Such figures validated the spiritual and redemptive power of the community, embodied holiness within the monastic space, were ultimate role-models for the later abbots and a focus of the cult – both internally and externally. Moreover, it was usually the early abbots who were cast in such role, frequently, within the first fifty years or so of the institutional existence and thus adding an important element to what was considered to be “the roots”. After holding the office of the prior, Jocelin was elected abbot of Melrose on 22 April 1170. One of the most important of his acts in this office was the translation of the body of Abbot Waltheof (d. 1159) from a simple grave inside the chapter house of Melrose to a fine marble shrine at the entrance to the chapter house.<sup>11</sup> His body was found incorrupt in full vestments. After the

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<sup>10</sup> Piotr Górecki (ed.), *A Local Society in Transition: the Henryków Book and Related Documents*, Toronto, 2007, p. 148.

<sup>11</sup> “Chronicle of Melrose”, in Joseph Stevenson (transl.) *Church Historians of England* (London, 1885), vol. 4 (1), pp. 133-34.

translation “all who were present raised their voices and said ‘Truly this was a man of God’.”<sup>12</sup> The second time when the tomb was opened, which was in 1206, the re-discovery of the incorrupt body was followed by the commissioning of a hagiographical text from Jocelin of Furness that reinforced the holiness of Abbot Waltheof with visions and miracles.<sup>13</sup> However, as Helen Birkett has argued, the posthumous healing miracles in his *vita* indicate a growing uneasiness about access to the shrine within the claustral space by the lay people seeking miracles during the abbacy of William. In Jocelin’s text Abbot William is portrayed negatively – through a series of allusions – as a harsh abbot that tried to suppress the cult of his predecessor and treated those coming to Melrose to seek healing miracles as a nuisance. But the miraculous healings were also granted to the monks of Melrose who were allowed prolonged contact with the saint’s tomb.<sup>14</sup>

The next time that Waltheof’s tomb was opened occurred in 1240 during the rebuilding of the chapter house when the remains of the abbots buried there were moved “with great solemnity” to the eastern part of the building. Waltheof’s shrine was not moved, but opened. His body was no longer incorrupt and reduced to dust. However, this episode provided a further opportunity for miracles because

these who were present carried off a few of the smaller bones, and the residue remained in peace. One of those who was a witness of this was a knight of good reputation, called William, the son of the earl, the nephew of our lord the king. By his enterprise he secured one of the teeth, by which (as he afterwards stated) many sick persons were cured.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> “The Chronicle of Melrose”, p. 134.

<sup>13</sup> Helen Birkett, *The Saints’ Lives of Jocelin of Furness: Hagiography, Patronage and Ecclesiastical Politics*, Woodbridge, 2010, p. 201.

<sup>14</sup> Birkett, *The Saints’ Lives*, pp. 205-06.

<sup>15</sup> “Chronicle of Melrose”, pp. 182-83; Birkett, *The Saints’ Lives*, pp. 215-16.



The transfer of relics between the lay world and the monastic one is most frequently documented because they were gifts from patrons, benefactors and friends to the monasteries. Here is a very good example of the movement in the opposite direction that is centred on the experience of miracles.

That desire to experience miracles on the part of the lay people brings to the fore the questions of space and access and negotiating of the monastic-lay interface. For the Benedictine communities, guardianship of relics was a strong part of their custom and practices. Churches of numerous early-medieval communities of black monks were pilgrimage destinations in their own right. The monks were guardians of the shrines, produced hagiographies and kept records of the miracles. The recording of the miracles by the monks was also a way of asserting the validity of the cult they were guarding. It is very striking in the case of the disputed location of St Benedict of Nursia's relics between Monte Cassino and Fleury Abbey. The collection, one of the largest surviving of this kind, records miracles performed by Benedict for Fleury and its dependant houses. Its oldest book was composed in the late 860s and the last section, in the first quarter of the twelfth century. It affirms the role of Benedict as patron and protector of Fleury Abbey. Not just the monks, but also the serfs living on the land belonging to the abbey, were the subject of protective miracles as *familia sancti Benedicti*.<sup>16</sup> In their role of fathers and protectors of their communities, saintly abbots also performed healing miracles that ensured that essential economic well-being of their abbeys. Stephen of Obazine (d. 1154), venerated by his community as a saint according to his twelfth-century life, bestowed various miracles on the members of the Obazine community. Among them was also a "young brother", perhaps a lay

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<sup>16</sup> Anselme Davril, 'Un monastère et son patron. Saint Benoît, patron et protecteur de l'abbaye de Fleury', *Cahiers de recherches médiévales et humanistes* 8 (2001), 43-55 (p. 4).

brother, who was involved in a heavy physical work and as a result he developed a hernia that prevented him from working further and caused anguish. After praying, he lay prostrated on the floor in front of the saint's tomb. Stephen communicated with the afflicted member of the community and promised healing. After a while he appeared to him in another vision and the cure was completed. The anonymous hagiographer added that that as a result "the brother, who for a long time was pale and looked like one about to die, now is strong and active; he carries out his work very vigorously".<sup>17</sup>

Robert of Newminster, a former monk of Fountains and the founding abbot of Newminster Abbey, was venerated as a saint by his community. His *vita* refers to the fact that after many miracles occurred at his tomb in the chapter house it was moved to the monastic church where it continued to produce miracles.<sup>18</sup> In some cases, the miracles that monks were subject to were included in a canonization dossier. This was the case with Dominican Thomas Aquinas who died in 1274 during a stopover at Cistercian Fossanova Abbey where he was buried and venerated. A lay brother from the abbey Manuel de Piperno testified in 1321 that his paralysed arm was made well again in 1321 after he promised Thomas Aquinas 20 *solidi* yearly on his feast if the miracle was granted.<sup>19</sup> Many of the saints whose cults were supported by the monastic communities were not just its former members or important visitors and supporters of the communities, such as discussed above, but also other figures who were vested with an obligation to protect their "communities". The connection was sometimes historical and sometimes more tenuous, but recording their miracles was central to the

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<sup>17</sup> Hugh Feiss, Maureen M. O'Brien, and Ronald Pepin (eds.), *The Lives of Monastic Reformers, 1: Robert of La Chaise-Dieu and Stephen of Obazine*, Collegeville, 2010, pp. 239-40.

<sup>18</sup> Paul. Grosjean (ed.), "Vita Sancti Roberti Novi Monasterii in Anglia Abbatis", *Analecta Bollandina* 56 (1938), 334-60 (p. 356).

<sup>19</sup> Marika Räsänen, *Thomas Aquinas's Relics as Focus for Conflict and Cult in the Late Middle Ages*, Amsterdam, 2017, pp. 96-97.

institutional identity. The miracles of the saints whose cult were centred on monastic houses were frequently both a typical manifestation of the efficacy of the shrine – that is healings of pilgrims coming to it – but also acts of protection over “their” communities. Very striking examples of such figures were St Alban or St Cuthbert. A large collection of miracles compiled in St Albans, perhaps by Thomas Walsingham between c. 1390 and c. 1415, added a large number of new stories to those collected in the previous century. Among the miracles that allegedly happened in 1380 was a miraculous intervention of St Alban who saved monastic bells from a lightning strike.<sup>20</sup> The *Chronica Maiora* of Thomas Walsingham incorporates some of the miracle stories that present St Alban as a defender saint protecting the monastic community with his miracles. In the description of the Peasants Revolt, St Alban is credited with precluding the inhabitants of the town who attacked the gatehouse of the abbey from destroying the charters belonging to the abbey.<sup>21</sup> In a much earlier collection of miracles of St Cuthbert by the already mentioned Reginald (second half of the twelfth century), one of the miracles directly claimed the efficacy of Durham’s saint over that of Thomas of Canterbury when a Norwegian boy was given a choice of pilgrimage destination and having selected Durham he was cured by St Cuthbert.<sup>22</sup>

For Cistercians, the protective role of Virgin Mary was very frequently reiterated in miracle stories, both in relation to individual monks as well as whole communities. It culminates in the famous image of Cistercians sheltering under Mary’s cloak included

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<sup>20</sup> James G. Clark, “The St Albans Monks and the Cult of St Alban: the Late Medieval Texts”, in Martin Henig and Philip Lindley (eds.), *Alban and St Albans: Roman and Medieval Archaeology, Art and Architecture*, Leeds, 2001, 218-30 (p. 222); BL Ms Cotton Claudius E IV, f. 69r.

<sup>21</sup> John Taylor and Wendy R. Childs (eds.), Leslie Watkiss (trans.), *The St Albans Chronicle: the Chronica maiora of Thomas Walsingham*, Oxford, 2002-11, pp.

<sup>22</sup> Dominic Marnier, *St Cuthbert: his life and cult in medieval Durham* (Toronto, 2000), p. 33; *Reginaldi monachi Dunelmensis libellus de admirandis beati Cuthberti virtutibus*, J. Raine (ed.) surtees Society vol. 1 (Durham: 1835), , chapter. 62, pp. 248-254.

by Caesarius of Heisterbach (see below) in the epilogue to his chapter devoted to Marian miracles bestowed on Cistercian monks and nuns.<sup>24</sup>

### **Living with miracles**

The texts that monks and nuns have read and heard in refectory readings provided not only a stock imagery of miracles, and numerous example of supernatural intervention, but also the theological thinking that underlined the concept of miracle – especially *Vitae Patrum*, and *Dialogues* of Gregory the Great. Collections of miracles were kept at shrines, but they were also gathered as volumes of edifying reading and sources for preaching exempla. Collections of miracles as edifying stories were frequently assembled in monasteries since the second half of the eleventh century and in the twelfth and thirteenth century. The collections combine local traditions with popular stories that were known across many regions. Marian miracles were particularly popular in this format. In Austria such collections with rich and extremely complex tradition were shared across different communities, from the Benedictine communities of Admont and Melk to the Cistercian houses of Zwettl and Heiligenkreuz.<sup>25</sup> The desire to ensure that miraculous events were preserved for future generations by writing them down was behind, as Mirko Breitenstein argues, “numerous collections of Marian miracles of the High and Late Middle Ages or the Cistercian miracle books that came into being in the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, in which the factual precision of the miracles accounts was also used for

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<sup>24</sup> Gabriela Signori, “‘Totius ordinis nostril patrona et advocate’: Maria als Haus- und Ordensheilige der Zisterzienser”, in Claudia Opitz, Hedwig Röckelein, Gabriela Signori, and Guy P. Marchal (eds.), *Maria in der Welt: Marienverehrung im Kontext der Sozialgeschichte 10.-18. Jahrhundert*, Zürich, 1993, 253-77 (p. 258).

<sup>25</sup> Christina Lutter, *Zwischen Hof und Kloster. Kulturelle Gemeinschaften im mittelalterlichen Österreich* (Wien, 2010), pp. 78-79.

historiographic purposes”.<sup>26</sup> The oldest collection of miracles “Liber visionum et miraculorum” was created c. 1175 in Clairvaux and it was soon followed by another collection attributed to Goswin of Clairvaux. Herbert of Clairvaux’s “De Miraculis libri tres” (1178), Engelhard of Langheim’s book of exempla (1188), Konrad of Eberbach’s “Exordium magnum” (1190 and 1200), the anonymous Beaupré collection (around 1200), and the miracle book from Himmerod. The early collections from Clairvaux, as Gabriela Signori has argued, containing various miracles involving the Virgin Mary and monks, set the ground for the centrality of Mary’s cult in Cistercian communities.<sup>27</sup> They played a role in preaching, training of novices and the theological training of the monks. Whilst the monastic, especially Cistercian, collections contained ideas about the history of the order and individual communities, stories of transgressions made explicit statements about the role of observance as a cornerstone of monastic life, as well as theological ideas about the nature of miracles and their place in the world.<sup>28</sup> Among the texts that engaged with miracles as central to monastic culture on several levels is the much-studied *Dialogus Miraculorum* by Caesarius of Heisterbach (d. c. 1240). Its richness in terms of information on the lived experiences of monastic life, the place of nuns in the Cistercian order, spirituality as well as ideas about heresy, boundaries of transgression, and its socio-political context has been much explored.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Mirko Breitenstein, “Miracles”, in Gert Melville and Martial Staub (eds.), *Brill’s Encyclopedia of the Middle Ages*, Leiden, 2017, vol. 1, pp. 463-68 (p. 467).

<sup>27</sup> Signori, “Totius ordinis”, pp. 256-57.

<sup>28</sup> Breitenstein, “Miracles”, p. 467.

<sup>29</sup> For recent publications on the *Dialogus* that explore different aspects of the text see for example: William Purkis, “Memories of the preaching for the Fifth Crusade in Caesarius of Heisterbach’s *Dialogus miraculorum*”, in Megan Cassidy-Welch and Anne E. Lester (eds.), *Crusades and Memory. Rethinking Past and Present*, London, 2014, pp. 329-45; Juanita Feros Ruys, “Sensitive spirits: changing depictions of demonic emotions in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries”, *Digital Philology* 1 (2012), 184-209; Victoria Smirnova, “Le *Dialogus miraculorum* de Césaire de Heisterbach: le dialogue comme axe d’écriture et de lecture”, in Marie Anne Polo de Beaulieu (ed.), *Formes dialoguées dans la littérature exemplaire du Moyen Age*, Paris, 2012, 195-218; Mirko Breitenstein, “‘Ins Gespräch gebracht’: der Dialog als Prinzip monastischer Unterweisung”, in Steven Vanderputten (ed.), *Understanding*

The *Dialogus* built on the existing tradition of Cistercian exempla collections and, in turn, it had significant influence beyond the communities of white monks. It was extensively re-used by the Dominicans, who famously took over the image of the Virgin Mary sheltering monks and nuns under her mantel in heaven.<sup>30</sup> The experience of miracles and visions in them were made deliberately anonymised and universalised to address all the monks and nuns to teach a moral lesson when incorporated in a sermon.<sup>31</sup>

*Dialogus Miraculorum* is a particularly fine example of the rich genre of miracle collections produced and used by the Cistercian communities. Brian Patrick McGuire was the first to explain these texts in the context of monastic practice and culture. He examined the oral and textual transmission in and among the monastic communities and even a very deliberate policy of transmission of stories that was embedded in Cistercian culture. The central point of “distribution” was the General Chapter with the aim of “providing a lesson for all monks”.<sup>32</sup> An important aspect of the construction of *Dialogus Miraculorum* is a strong evidence for the role of oral culture in monastic

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*Monastic Practice of Oral Communication (Western Europe, Tenth-Thirteenth Centuries)*, Turnhout, 2011, pp. 205-29; Marek Tamm, “Communicating crusade. Livonian mission and the Cistercian network in the thirteenth century”, *Ajalooline Ajakiri* 3-4 (2010), 341-72; Catherine Rider, “Agreements to return from the afterlife in late medieval exempla”, *Studies in Church History* 45 (2009), 174-83.

<sup>30</sup> Sonja Reisner, “Konkurrenz auf dem ‘geistigen Markt’. Dominikanische Wunder- und Mirakelberichte des 13. Jahrhunderts im Licht neuer motivgeschichtlicher Forschungen”, in Heidemarie Sprech and Ralph Andraschek-Holzer (eds.), *Bettelorden in Mitteleuropa: Geschichte, Kunst, Spiritualität*, St Pölten, 2008, pp. 663-81; Sonja Reisner, “‘Sub tuum praesidium configimus’: Zur Instrumentalisierung von Visionen und Wunderberichten in der dominikanischen Ordenshistoriographie am Beispiel Schutzmantelmadonna”, *Acta Antiqua Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 43 (2003), 393-405; Andrea Winkler, “Building the imagined community: Dominican *exempla* and theological knowledge”, *Quidditas* 19 (1998), 197-226; Elisa Brilli, “The making of a new Auctoritas: *The Dialogus miraculorum* read and rewritten by the Dominican Arnold of Liège”, in V. Smirnova, M. A. Polo de Beaulieu and J. Berlioz (eds.), *The Art of Cistercian Persuasion in the Middle Ages and Beyond*, Leiden, 2015, 163-82.

<sup>31</sup> Stefano Mula, “Twelfth- and thirteenth-century Cistercian exempla collections: role, diffusion, and evolution”, *History Compass* 8:8 (2010), 903-12 (p. 906).

<sup>32</sup> Brian Patrick McGuire, “Written sources and Cistercian inspiration in Caesarius of Heisterbach”, *Analecta Cisterciensia* 35 (1979), 227-82 (pp. 280-81).

communities. It means that the key experience of miracles by the monks and nuns was to hear stories about them, being told about experiences of others, their visions and interventions of saints in the individual and communal life. Religious experience was, as McGuire argued, influenced by the content of the stories that monks and nuns told each other.<sup>33</sup> Miracles were not only something that was recorded in the collections, an intrinsic part of the hagiographic reading, but also part of communal interactions. Remembering these miracles was a vehicle to “actualise the past on the emotional level” – as explained by Victoria Smirnova – to create the sense of belonging to the monastic community across time and space.<sup>34</sup>

Whilst discussing the ways in which monastic communities framed their experience of miracles, it is important to consider how it was played out in the actual physical spaces. Miracles that had only monastic audiences, happened in the spaces restricted to the members of the community or in the spaces that were also accessible to the outsiders. This was sometimes an issue of contention – who was allowed to be the audience. The dynamics of the community or its relationship with the outside world changed as a result of the miraculous event, which could also undermine or strengthen the authority of the abbot.

Benedictine churches as spaces of miracles are particularly well exemplified by several English cathedrals that had monastic (Benedictine) chapters. Durham was the custodian of the shrine of St Cuthbert and the efforts of the community to promote the cult have been much studied. A twelfth-century collection of miracles of St Cuthbert recording cases from 875 to 1170s – by Reginald of Durham, who was a monk there,

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<sup>33</sup> McGuire, “Written sources”, p. 241.

<sup>34</sup> Victoria Smirnova, ““And nothing will be wasted”: Actualisation of the past in Caesarius of Heisterbach’s *Dialogus Miraculorum*”, in Lucie Doležalová (ed.), *The Making of Memory in the Middle Ages*, Leiden, 2010, 253-65 (p. 258).

firmly placed the cathedral and the shrine at the centre of the cult – as a place where the miracles happen.<sup>35</sup> The same author has been also credited with the “softening” of the “misogynistic” attitudes of the older tradition of the Cuthbert cult, especially the exclusion of women from the cathedral and the cemetery, in order to attract more female pilgrims to Durham. In Reginald’s collection a number of healing miracles of women happened in the area of Galilee Chapel, a section of the building completed in c. 1175 where female pilgrims were allowed.<sup>36</sup>

The understanding of miracles as an “interior sign” rather than an external marvel, as expressed in the early monastic culture of the Late Antiquity, continued to be an important part of the monastic attitude to miracles. Carthusian monk Hugh, who became bishop of Lincoln (d. 1200), and later a saint himself, was an avid collector of relics and famously procured them whilst a guest in other monastic communities by cutting or dislodging small sections. But the collection that Hugh of Lincoln amassed was not an arsenal for securing miracles, rather he wanted them because “by this commemoration of them I increase my reverence for them”.<sup>37</sup>

The guardianship of relics and miracle-producing images by monastic communities was also frequently a focus of miracles – experiencing, remembering and maintaining the cult. A Dominican observant nunnery in Unterlinden (Rhineland) was a major centre of reform and its spirituality. The community owned a miraculous depiction of the Virgin Mary – a central image of a triptych – which was a very

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<sup>35</sup> J. Raine (ed.), *Reginaldi monachi Dunelmensis libellus de admirandis beati Cuthberti virtutibus* (Surtees Society, 1), London, 1835; V. M. Tudor, “The cult of St Cuthbert in the twelfth century: the evidence of Reginald of Durham”, in G. Bonner, D. Rollason, and C. Stancliffe (eds.), *St Cuthbert, his Cult and his Community to AD 1200*, Woodbridge, 1989, 447–67 (p. 449), Sally Crumplin, “Modernizing St Cuthbert: Reginald of Durham’s miracle collection”, *Studies in Church History* 41 (2005), 179-191.

<sup>36</sup> Marner, *St Cuthbert*, pp. 32-33.

<sup>37</sup> D.H. Farmer and D.L. Douie (eds.), *Life of St Hugh of Lincoln*, Oxford, 1961, vol. 1, p. 170; Ward, “Monks and Miracles”, pp. 134-35.



significant element of the community's identity since it was given to the nuns in the mid-thirteenth century. A *Liber miraculorum* related to this image was created in c. 1465. This manuscript depicted the image itself and nuns' interaction with it – it stood in the nuns' gallery - and thus recorded the role which this miracle-working object played in the life of the community. There are several depictions of miracles in the *Liber miraculorum* that occurred due to the powers of the image and they are divided into two groups – miracles from before the cult was established in the nunnery and after the image was placed on the altar. A list of indulgences assigned to it followed that section. The reasons that the *Liber miraculorum* gives for why the nuns elevated the image were intrinsically bound with the community too. A nun who had a paralysed arm touched the image and was instantly cured. The nuns were then instructed by a miraculous voice to establish a small altar dedicated to the Virgin on which to place this panel.<sup>38</sup>

Who experienced miracles within monastic space was closely linked to the issue of access and control. It is a particularly prominent theme in the Cistercian context. The monastic observance of white monks was closely tied with the exclusiveness of the monastic spaces and the separation of the monks and nuns from contact with outsiders. Hospitality was organised in such a way as to minimise the contact of the community with the guests. The pressure that a productive shrine within monastic enclosure could potentially put on a community is famously exemplified by case of Bernard of Clairvaux' posthumous miracles.

The abbot of Cîteaux, who had come to the funeral of the man of God, along with many other abbots of his Order, pondering the rude insistence

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<sup>38</sup> Jeffrey F. Hamburger, *The Visual and the Visionary: Art and Female Spirituality in Late Medieval Germany*, New York, 1998, pp. 280-87.

of the tumultuous crowd of common people, and deducing the future from the present, began to be deeply afraid that, as miracles multiplied, such an intolerable throng of common people would flock together that the discipline of the Order would succumb to their wickedness and the fervour of holy religion in that place would grow cool. So, after taking advice, he went reverently and prohibited him from performing any more miracles, under obedience ... the holy and truly humble spirit of our father was obedient to mortal man even after the death of the flesh. For the miracles that had, at that time, begun to shine forth ceased, so that, from that day on, never was he seen to perform any miracles in public, although he could not fail certain of the faithful, especially the brethren of his Order, who have invoked him for various misfortunes, up to the present day. For it is clear that the abbot of Cîteaux only wished those miracles to stop which might threaten the discipline of the Order through crowds of common people coming together.<sup>40</sup>

The *Exordium Magnum Cisterciense* that became a central source of models and topoi for the Cistercian family, it outlines the issue of miracles as a problem for maintaining strict observance, whilst not undermining the place of miracles – spiritually and theologically for the monks. Conrad of Eberbach reassured his audience that despite a “polite request” by the abbot of Cîteaux to St. Bernard to cease performing miracles, it did not diminish the special intercessory role of the holy abbot for the white monks.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Conrad of Eberbach, *Exordium magnum Cisterciense* 2. 20, pp. 97–98 (PL 185: 448); see Adriaan Bredero, *Bernard of Clairvaux: Between Cult and History*, Grand Rapids, 1996, pp. 65–73; Robert Bartlett, *Why can the dead do such great things? Saints and worshippers from the martyrs to the reformation* (Princeton, 2013), p. 308.

<sup>41</sup> E. Rozanne Elder (ed.), and Benedicta Ward and Paul Savage (trans.), *The Great Beginning of Cîteaux: a Narrative of the Beginning of the Cistercian Order: The Exordium Magnum of Conrad of Eberbach*, Collegeville, 2012, pp. 156–59, this has been most recently discussed in Georgina Fitzgibbon, ‘For fear of the multitudes: disruptive pilgrims and

The uncontrollable effects of miracles happening in the monastic space that actually endangered proper monastic observance became a topos in Cistercian chronicles. It appeared in the Melrose case discussed above and resurfaced again in Cistercian Signy Abbey where the burial of a monk particularly known for holiness caused an influx of lay people into the monastic space because they were seeking miracles:

What is this, brother? We do not doubt the sanctity of your life and conduct. Why then these miracles? Do you not see that laymen coming to your tomb disturb the quiet of the monastery? In the name of our lord Jesus Christ, we order you to stop performing miracles. Otherwise, we will bury your body outside the monastery.<sup>49</sup>

The topos of “supressing” miraculous powers in the interest of observance was also used by Caesarius of Heisterbach in his *Dialogus Miraculorum* in a story of a saintly lay brother of Eberbach Abbey whose miracles were attracting a very large number of lay people, which was disturbing the community. In order to protect the observance, the abbot of Eberbach requested the lay brother to stop these miracles, which he duly did.<sup>50</sup>

For the Benedictine monastery of La-Chaise-Dieu, the head of a large Benedictine congregation, the life of Abbot Robert (d. 1067) venerated as a holy miracle-worker, written by Marbod of Rennes (1123) contains a very similar topos.

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appropriate audiences for Cistercian relics in the twelfth century` (unpublished PhD thesis, - University of Birmingham, 2019), pp. 48-66.

<sup>49</sup> Léopold Delisle (ed.), “Chronique de l'abbaye de Signy”, *Bibliothèque de l'Ecole des Chartres* 55 (1894), 644-60 (p. 649). Trans. in Bartlett, *Why can the dead do such great things?*, pp. 336-37.

<sup>50</sup> C.C. Bland and Henry Scott (eds.), *The Dialogue on miracles: Caesarius of Heisterbach (1220-1235)* (London, 1929), vol. 2, pp. 175-6.

In the monastery the clamor and tumult of the sick, who arrived and then recovered their health and left, praising the power of blessed Robert and filling the ears of the inhabitants, was such and so great that only with difficulty could they hear each other and – what was unbearable – they could not render the divine service devoutly.<sup>51</sup>

The request to the saint to cease the miracles that follows the passage is conventional enough. But it also reveals the dynamics of relationship between monastic communities and “their” saints, especially if they were in life members of that community – and continued to be so when they became members of the heavenly court too. There was an intense bond between the communities and ‘their’ saints and the miracles were seen as one of the ways in which communication between them was performed.

So those senior by birth and more fervent in spirit came to the tomb of the blessed man and conversed with him as follows. They said “Lord, father, following your lead we chose the squalor of this deserted place and we entered it gladly so that we might gain pardon for our sins and the grace of the Redeemer. Because of the great number of miracles now, our divine services are growing more deficient; we can neither weep for our sins nor fittingly complete the divine services. We ask, therefore, that your merits would grant us that all these disturbance be laid to rest so that here we may serve Christ the Lord in peace and in the future find forgiveness for our sins”.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Hugh Feiss, Maureen M. O’Brien and Ronald Pepin (eds.), *The Lives of Monastic Reformers, 1: Robert of La Chaise-Dieu and Stephen of Obazine*, Collegeville, MI, 2010, p. 85.

<sup>52</sup> Feiss, O’Brien and Pepin (eds.), *The Lives of Monastic Reformers*, pp. 85-86.

The issue of protection of observance in the face of lay desire to experience miracles was even more pronounced in the case of female houses. This is exemplified by the case of Benedictine Soissons Abbey which possessed a slipper of the Virgin Mary, a powerful healing contact relic. It first emerged during an outbreak of a contagious disease in 1128. While it is not exactly known how the ritual display of this object was organized, its importance for the community of nuns and the locality is documented in the collection of miracles composed by Hugh Farsit after 1143, who was a regular canon at Saint-Jean des Vignes, also in Soisson. It is clear that nuns allowed crowds of lay people, especially during the epidemics, to enter the monastic church and receive blessings administered with the miraculous slipper.<sup>53</sup> The collection of miracles gives some hint as to the tension between allowing access and the obligation to protect the community:

For Abbess Mathilde, who then was governing this place, wearied by the importuning and noise of their assiduous clamor, took up the slipper of the blessed Virgin and processed together with her retinue.<sup>54</sup>

As Anne L. Clark suggest, an attempted bite at the holy object by a women from the locality who was granted healing via the slipper might have prompted the nuns to restrict access to the relic.<sup>55</sup> Being the guardian of relics obliged above all their proper protection. Nuns had to make sure that their observance was not compromised, the relics were properly venerated and not in danger, whilst the great power they contained was properly handled.

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<sup>53</sup> Anne I. Clark, "Guardians of the Sacred: the nuns of Soissons and the slipper of the Virgin Mary", *Church History* 76: 4 (2007), 724-49.

<sup>54</sup> Hugh Farsit, "Libellus de miraculis b. Mariae Virginis in urbe Suessionensi", PL vol. 179, col. 1779; trans. in Clark, "Guardians of the Sacred", p. 729.

<sup>55</sup> Clark, "Guardians of the Sacred", p. 733.

The presence of miracles, as a consequence of the monastic guardianship of relics was also, textually, a powerful tool to assert the validity of various claims, authority and even jurisdiction. Ebrach Abbey in Franconia, centre of a large filiation network and a very prosperous Cistercian monastery, is an excellent case study of how asserting miraculous meanings over events that are not necessarily easily presented in these terms, can be an exercise of monastic authority.

Burgwindheim shrine in the care of Ebrach developed as a place of cult in the second half of the fifteenth century.<sup>56</sup> Its origins were linked to the already existing role of the Cistercian community in the pastoral care of the lay people. During the Corpus Christi procession in the market town of Burgwindheim in 1465, led by the parish priest and monk of Ebrach John Dolder, an event took place that was interpreted as miraculous and thus created the foundation for the subsequent cult. The Cistercian celebrants were flanked by a group of noblemen from the area. After passing through the town the procession moved through a path on the northern outskirts. As it reached the third station, the officiating priest left the monstrance with the sacrament on a small altar. At this point, according to the witnesses present, without the slightest wind, completely without human interference, the monstrance fell on the ground, opened and the host fell out and it was not possible to lift it. This was witnessed by a terrified crowd. The Abbot Burkhard II of Ebrach was immediately informed of what had happened and he ordered eight days of communal prayers and fasting. On the Octave of Corpus Christi, the abbot and the monks of Ebrach proceeded in solemn procession to Burgwindheim. There Abbot Burkhard took the host – another miracle – from the ground and carried it back to the church

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<sup>56</sup> Elke Goez (ed.), *Codex Diplomaticus Ebracensis I: Die Urkunden der Zisterze Ebrach 1127-1306*, Neustadt, 2001), vol. 1, nr 324.

accompanied by the monks and the inhabitants of Burgwindheim. It is most likely that the letter testifying to the miraculous events, written three years later by the noblemen present at the procession, was produced at the expressed request of Ebrach Abbey.<sup>57</sup>

Accidental falls of the Eucharist during the procession have been recorded in various cases, especially in urban context. The accidental dropping of the Eucharist to the ground was technically an act of desecration and normally understood as a bad omen.<sup>58</sup> What happened in Burgwindheim shows how the Cistercian community and especially the abbot were able to take control of the situation and turn its meaning to their own advantage. The emphasis on the complete lack of natural forces (wind or human error) affecting the fall of the monstrance creates the core condition of the miraculous event. The fast intervention of the Cistercian abbot, who was immediately informed about the event, provided an instantaneous control by religious authority and thus control of the meaning too. The expiatory prayers were intended to erase any sense of transgression and establish firm monastic control over the situation. Securing a written account of the miraculous version of the events was also an element of creating a solid structure for the development of the cult and to discourage any contesting versions. Burgwindheim is a case in which Cistercian interest in the cult of Eucharist is present, but also the agency of the abbey in

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<sup>57</sup> Bruno Neudorfer, *Burgwindheim und seine Wallfahrt. Zum 500jährigen Jubiläum des eucharistischen Gnadenortes im Steigerwald 1465-1965*, Bamberg, 1965, pp. 12-15; Bruno Neudorfer, "Zur Entstehung von Wallfahrten und Wallfahrtspatronzinnen im mittelalterlichen Bistum Bamberg", *Bericht des Historischen Vereins für Bamberg* 99 (1963), 1-133 (p. 52); Edgar Krausen, "Zisterziensertum und Wallfahrtskule im Bayerischen Raum", *Analecta Sacri Ordinis Cisterciensis* 12 (1956), 115-29 (p. 123); Staatsarchiv Bamberg, Rep. A 95/, nr 342.

<sup>58</sup> Karoly Goda, "Metamorphoses of Corpus Christi: eucharistic processions and clashes in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Vienna", *Theatrum Historiae* 15 (2014), 9-50, pp. 25-28; Natalia Nowakowska, "Poland and the crusade in the reign of King Jan Olbracht, 1492-1501", in Norman Housley (ed.), *Crusading in the Fifteenth Century: Message and Impact*, New York, 2004, 128-47 (p. 134).

establishing an event as a miracle and subsequent cult in a context that was not entirely straightforward.

## **Conclusions**

Monastic culture, in its Benedictine forms, cannot be fully understood without seeing miracles – in their different forms and functions – as an integral part of the monastic world. It was part of the world-view of the monastic communities and present in many of the texts and images that the monks and nuns interacted with daily. In both the circular time of liturgy and commemorations as well as the linear time of institutional history, miracles were an important validating tool, a desirable and shared experiences as well as a powerful force that needed to be interpreted and thus effectively controlled. The presence of miracles in the monastic precincts created potent spaces, a tool for acculturation for novice monks and nuns and an element of the institutional myths of origins, a marker of early abbots as well as an important link to the outside world. In their strong desire to experience miracles, especially healing miracles, lay people, especially as a large, uncontrollable crowd – as monastic texts such as chronicles often describe them – could endanger observance and had to be controlled by practical means of restricted access and supernatural means of requesting the saint in question to cease their miraculous activities. This points to an important dimension of miracles in the monastic context – as a complex force that both endowed monastic spaces with particular meanings and power as well as a forceful link to the world beyond the walls of the precinct.

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**Keywords:**

Monasticism, Religious Life, British Isles, East Central Europe, Germany, 12<sup>th</sup> century, 13<sup>th</sup> century, 14<sup>th</sup> century, 15<sup>th</sup> century, Benedictines, Cistercians

**Abstract:**

Miracles played an important role in the medieval monasticism both as an element of broadly shared culture as well as specific aspect of monastic experience. Textually, visually and performatively, miracles were part of the tradition going back to the constructed origins of the early monasticism, but also a defence against internal and external threats and part of institutional identity. Miracles experienced, recorded and remembered by monks and nuns were an important medium to which diverse meanings were attached. This chapter focuses on environment of Benedictine and Cistercian communities between the eleventh and fifteenth centuries drawing on the material from Western and East Central Europe.