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“The Friend Who Trusted Himself to You”: Networks of Recommendation among the Central Medieval Religious Elite

Keywords

Trust, Friendship, Ego Networks, Letters

Abstract

Eleventh- and twelfth-century letters of recommendation are indicators of elite religious networks in Western Europe. While reference letters are a relatively transhistorical resource, those surviving from the Middle Ages are often overlooked. This article considers a network dataset derived from over one hundred central medieval letters of recommendation, which reveals a complex set of consciously created ego networks, used to create and advance careers. Visualizations of these networks, although derived from highly edited letter collections, offer a window into the elite religious sphere of recommendation and reveal not one dense network but a series of distinct, overlapping ones. The article explores the benefits of recommendation networks and their structures for both the intended beneficiary and those writing and receiving the letters. Some individuals used the letters to influence educational trends. In contrast, others received and recommended those who would be useful for specific tasks and still others only recommended people they knew well. Despite these contextual differences, the themes of reputation and exclusion permeate across all the revealed networks. Offering fresh perspectives on the networks of individuals such as St Anselm, St Bernard of Clairvaux and St Thomas Becket and considering the social consequences of reliance on networking, the article demonstrates the value of network visualizations to the study of medieval epistolography.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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1. Introduction

In a letter written around 1145 to Galcher, a monk of Clairvaux, Nicholas of Clairvaux discusses the role of trust in friendship.¹ Noting that one should reserve the highest levels of trust for God alone, Nicholas writes that he trusts the recipient as highly as one man can trust another, refers to himself as “the friend who trusted himself to you” or “the friend who confided in you” and notes that he is “glad to have done so”.² Towards the end of the letter, Nicholas takes the time to remember the letter’s “carrier”, with a recommendation for him as “a lad educated for his age”.³ The letter contains references to trust in the letter’s recipient, the beneficiary and in God, showing the multiple types of trust and the beneficiaries of it that can be revealed in a single letter. It is one of many letters of recommendation that demonstrate the power of trust and friendship in conscious network building within medieval elite religious communities.

This article explores trust and friendship through letters of recommendation sent between members of elite religious networks in the late eleventh and twelfth centuries. A close reading of the sources is essential to understand the different styles of the authors and trace the origins of network creation. In addition, the networks revealed through the surviving letters require a more structural form of analysis, that of abstract visualization, which allows us to explore and compare how individuals could make and break their careers through just a few missives. Through case studies on the networks of St Anselm of Canterbury, Nicholas of Clairvaux and John of Salisbury, this article will demonstrate the value of combining close reading of texts with network visualization.

The themes of reputation and exclusion thread through all the revealed networks. This research considers first how Anselm built a good reputation through his powerful connections and rose to one of the most prominent positions in the religious hierarchy. It then explores how Nicholas overcame an attempted exclusion by one of the most renowned figures of the time. We shall also consider the damage to St Thomas Becket’s reputation and, therefore, those of his closest supporters including John of Salisbury. Similarly, exclusion played a part in each network. In the case of Anselm, this takes the form of a singular incident of exclusion based on a poorly researched and written letter, and an implied exclusion in the lack of many women in his network of recommendation.

¹ Nicholas of Clairvaux, *The Letter Collections of Nicholas of Clairvaux*, ed., trans. Lena Wahlgren-Smith (Oxford: University Press, 2018), pp. 196-201.

² “illius amici qui se tibi credidit et gaudet credidisse”, *Ibid*, p. 200.

³ “Puerum autem presentium latorem, litteratum pro etate”, *Ibid*, p. 201.

The case study on Nicholas reveals that some attempts at exclusion were unsuccessful, given that the elite religious community was not one network, but a series of often unrelated ones. Finally, the article explores how John of Salisbury was excluded from ecclesiastical networks in England due to his association with Becket. Taken together, the findings from this study offer insights into the creation and maintenance of elite religious networks. Network visualization allows us to detect career-building strategies and intentionality in ways that other, more anecdotal methods, cannot.

1.1 Corpus

While today we might rely on online social networking media for building careers, networking in the Middle Ages required considerable physical movement. Letters of recommendation, once requested and written by the sender, were taken by their beneficiaries to the recipients, often across medieval Europe. They could begin with seemingly unrelated statements and sometimes even continue without mentioning the beneficiary until the last line, or even as a post-script. The letters facilitated discussions of the qualities of friendship and trust and offered a practical way of demonstrating those qualities. The beneficiary could prove their trustworthiness by conveying a letter safely and the senders and recipients could strengthen ties with each other through the process of exchanging favors, although, as we will see, this process could be foiled by forgery.

Letters of recommendation surviving from the Middle Ages are often overlooked, in contrast to extensive scholarship on their ancient, early modern, and modern counterparts.⁴ This study includes over one hundred medieval letters of recommendation written by some of the most notable religious figures of the eleventh and twelfth centuries.⁵

⁴ A recent examination of medieval letters of recommendation can be found in the work of Micol Long: Micol Long, 'Il est jeune, honnête, instruit, accueille-le »: pour une analyse d'ensemble des lettres de recommandation du xiie siècle', *Moyen-âge* CXXVI, no. 2 (2020): 287–98. For letters of recommendation in other historical periods, see, for example: Roger Rees, 'Letters of Recommendation and the Rhetoric of Praise', in *Ancient Letters: Classical and Late Antique Epistolography*, ed. Ruth Morello and A. D. Morrison (Oxford: University Press, 2007); Sebouh David Aslanian, 'The "Quintessential Locus of Brokerage": Letters of Recommendation, Networks, and Mobility in the Life of Thomas Vanandets'i, an Armenian Printer in Amsterdam, 1677-1707', *Journal of World History* 31 (2020): 655–92; Margaret Ferguson, 'The Letter of Recommendation as Strange Work', *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 127, no. 4 (2012): 954–62.

⁵ For the letters used in this study, see: Arnulf of Lisieux, *The Letters of Arnulf of Lisieux*, ed., trans. Frank Barlow (London: Royal Historical Society, 1939); Hildegard of Bingen, *The Personal Correspondence of Hildegard of Bingen*, ed., trans. Joseph L. Baird (Oxford: University Press, 2006); John of Salisbury, *The Letters of John of Salisbury: Volume One: The Early Letters*, ed., trans. W. J. Millor, H. E. Butler, and C. N. L. Brooke (Oxford: University Press, 1986); John of Salisbury. *The*

The letters survive, for the most part, due to their inclusion in curated letter collections which were sometimes made during the life of the writer but could also be formed as a posthumous nod to their epistolary achievements, sometimes soon after the death of the individual and sometimes many years later.

Individuals in eleventh- and twelfth-century elite monastic communities relied on many different types of recommendations, although it is important to recognize that the surviving letters are by no means representative of the entire selection of recommendations being made during the period. My research builds on the work of Micol Long, who suggested categorizing the letters based on the type of beneficiary being recommended, a focus less closely tied to issues of preservation than other forms of analysis.⁶ The four suggested categories are as follows:

- A - Recommending those requesting specific training and education
- B - Recommending people undertaking journeys such as pilgrimages
- C - Asking for aid for the poor and exiles
- D - Recommending people for their skills and experience

From my encounters with the source material, I have added two further categories. The first highlights the power of a recommendation for those in need as a result of their own actions. The second is somewhat exceptional, since the beneficiaries within it could also belong to other categories, but it is useful as a distinct category to highlight the role of continued support in networks of recommendation.

Letters of John of Salisbury, Volume Two: The Later Letters (1163-1180), ed., trans. Harold Edgeworth Butler, W. J. Millor, and Christopher Brooke (Oxford: University Press, 2003); Thomas Becket, *The Correspondence of Thomas Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury, 1162-1170*, ed., trans. Anne Duggan (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000); Lanfranc, *The Letters of Lanfranc, Archbishop of Canterbury*, ed., trans. V. Helen Clover and Margaret T. Gibson (Oxford: University Press, 1979); Peter of Celle, *The Letters of Peter of Celle*, ed., trans. Julian Haseldine (Oxford: University Press, 2001); Gilbert Foliot, *The Letters and Charters of Gilbert Foliot, Abbot of Gloucester (1139-48), Bishop of Hereford (1148-63) and London (1163-87)*, ed., trans. Z. N. Brooke et al. (Cambridge: University Press, 1967); Anselm, *Letters of Anselm, Archbishop of Canterbury*, ed., trans. Samu Niskanen (Oxford: University Press, 2019); Bernard of Clairvaux, *The Letters of St. Bernard of Clairvaux*, ed., trans. Bruno Scott James and Beverly Mayne Kienzle (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1998); Nicholas of Clairvaux, *The Letter Collections of Nicholas of Clairvaux*, ed., trans. Lena Wahlgren-Smith (Oxford: University Press, 2018); Malcolm Barber and A. K. Bate, eds. *Letters from the East: Crusaders, Pilgrims and Settlers in the 12th-13th Centuries*. (London: Routledge, 2016); Joan Ferrante, 'Epistolae', *Epistolae*, <https://epistolae.ctl.columbia.edu/>.

⁶ Micol Long, 'Il est jeune, honnête, instruit, accueille-le, *Moyen-Âge* CXXVI, no. 2 (2020): 292.

- E - Interceding to request forgiveness e.g. for runaway monks
- F - Requesting further assistance for pre-existing beneficiaries

These categories do not constitute an exhaustive list. There is some overlap between each one and the individual letters all require careful contextualization. Nevertheless, the categories reveal how elite religious networks were built, observing the various favors that well-established individuals asked of each other on behalf of the beneficiaries. As we shall see, these favors often aided the senders and recipients more than the intended beneficiaries.

Two questions of data quality must be examined here. The first area to highlight is that the dataset used in this study is incomplete since it relies on the surviving evidence, which consists of letter collections that were compiled by the editors in line with their particular aims. Many letters sent by these individuals have not survived and the extant letters have gone through various forms of editing during the compilation process. One of the central motivations of compilation was to preserve a particular legacy or image of the individual writer. For example, much of Becket's collection was compiled shortly after his martyrdom in part to support his canonization, whereas there is evidence to suggest that Anselm's collection was at least partly edited during his lifetime.⁷ The many missing letters would have given a more complete idea of the individuals' social networks. The deliberately sculpted and condensed source base inevitably skews the conclusions that can be drawn from it and, in some cases, highlights individuals and relationships that the compiler, rather than the writer, thought significant.

The second question to consider with this dataset is the authorship of the letters. It was common for these letters to be dictated to a scribe rather than written by the author, so the language of the letters does not necessarily reflect the direct words of the accredited author. Their dictation could also lead to issues of forgery, as we will see in the case of Nicholas of Clairvaux. The methodological focus of this research bypasses such questions to a certain extent. The network visualizations rely on sender and recipient data, not letter content and the close reading considers overall themes rather than specific language. The questions of incompleteness and authorship nevertheless limit the analysis to a snapshot of the overall network which would have been much larger and more varied than the surviving evidence allows me to demonstrate.

1.2 Historiography

⁷ Thomas Becket, *The Correspondence of Thomas Becket*, ed., trans. Duggan (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), cv; Anselm, *Letters of Anselm*, ed., trans. Niskanen, Oxford Medieval Texts (Oxford: University Press, 2019), cxxxviii.

This work builds on a considerable body of scholarship on trust and friendship. Trust research was popularized by sociologist Niklas Luhmann and brought to the attention of historians by Geoffrey Hosking, among others.⁸ Although pioneering in the historical study of trust, Hosking's work makes broad comparisons between periods and leaves much ground left to be covered in exploring the specificity of trust in pre-modern communities. One of the first pre-modern historians to examine trust is Sheilagh Ogilvie, whose work highlights the role of exclusion in trust between guild members.⁹ In the field of medieval trust scholarship, Ian Forrest's work on the connection between local "trustworthy men" and bishops in the late Middle Ages has done much to illustrate the context-specific nature of trust.¹⁰ Medievalists have also explored the language of trust and the methodological approaches to studying it.¹¹

My work considers the themes of exclusion highlighted by Ogilvie, creating a context-specific analysis of trust in elite religious communities in the central Middle Ages. The study reveals how trust between senders, recipients and beneficiaries could strengthen their networks. It also considers the role of friendship in recommendation letters and builds on work on medieval friendship and the monastic landscape by scholars such as Brian Patrick McGuire, Richard Southern and Julian Haseldine.¹² The letters reveal the multiplicity of friendship in this context, the language of which was used to strengthen relationships for personal reasons and also as a means of self-enhancement. Haseldine has connected the themes of trust and friendship to historical networks, suggesting that trust could be useful for studying the often overlooked "structures" of networks.¹³ In medieval

⁸ Niklas Luhmann, *Trust and Power: Two Works* (Chichester; New York: Wiley, 1979); Geoffrey A. Hosking, *Trust: A History* (Oxford: University Press, 2014).

⁹ Sheilagh Ogilvie, 'The Use and Abuse of Trust: Social Capital and Its Deployment by Early Modern Guilds', *CESifo Working Paper Series* 1302 (2004), 1-45.

¹⁰ Ian Forrest, *Trustworthy Men: How Inequality and Faith Made the Medieval Church* (Princeton: University Press, 2018).

¹¹ See, for example: Justyna Wubs-Mrozewicz, 'The Concept of Language of Trust and Trustworthiness: (Why) History Matters', *Journal of Trust Research* 10, no. 1 (2020): 103; Dorothea Weltecke, 'Trust: Some Methodological Reflections', in *Strategies of Writing: Studies on Text and Trust in the Middle Ages: Papers from 'Trust in Writing in the Middle Ages' (Utrecht 28-29 November 2002)*, ed. Petra Schulte, Marco Mostert, and Irene van Renswoude (Turnhout: Brepols, 2008).

¹² Brian Patrick McGuire, *Friendship & Community: The Monastic Experience, 350-1250* (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian Publications, 1988); Southern, *Saint Anselm* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2004); Julian Haseldine, 'Friendship and Rivalry: The Role of Amicitia in Twelfth-Century Monastic Relations', *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 44, no. 3 (1993): 390-414.

¹³ Haseldine, 'Friendship Networks in Medieval Europe: New Models of a Political Relationship', *Amity: The Journal of Friendship Studies*, 2013, 69-88.

letters of recommendation, trust appears as a written sentiment, as we see discussed in Nicholas' letter to Galcher, and as an unspoken phenomenon, often only revealed after it is betrayed.¹⁴ When studying the letters, combining the historical study of trust and friendship with network visualization can help uncover how these notions interacted to benefit members of central medieval religious communities.

In addition to the study of friendship and trust within the letters, a network visualization approach helps us to reach broader conclusions than a close reading of the letters will allow. Scholarship in the humanities is currently undergoing a "network turn" which has highlighted the value of visualization in historical research.¹⁵ Within medieval historiography, scholars have used network analysis for a variety of different purposes, from mapping settlements in the Black Death to considering the role of the group in the medieval Roman Empire.¹⁶ Historians can benefit greatly from this approach, but as Kate Davison has warned, it must be used alongside other, more qualitative methods or it risks losing the "commitment to historicism".¹⁷

Pre-modern correspondence networks have also received considerable scholarly attention, from the fields of Byzantine epistolography to the letters written by and concerning early-modern Benedictine nuns.¹⁸ The "Connected Clerics" database demonstrates the vast potential of letters to reveal the "spatial worlds and social connections" of their clerical-elite writers and recipients.¹⁹ The work of Ruth and Sebastian Ahnert has shown how letters can be indicators of powerful networks and their use of network theory to visualize and analyze Tudor letters from the British State Papers is a groundbreaking example of the

¹⁴ Nicholas of Clairvaux, *The Letter Collections*, ed., trans. Lena Wahlgren-Smith (Oxford: University Press, 2018), pp. 196-201.

¹⁵ Ruth Ahnert et al., *The Network Turn: Changing Perspectives in the Humanities* (Cambridge: University Press, 2020).

¹⁶ See, for example: Jose M. Gomez and Miguel Verdu, 'Network Theory May Explain the Vulnerability of Medieval Human Settlements to the Black Death Pandemic', *Scientific Reports* 7, no. 1 (2017): 434-67; Johannes Preiser-Kapeller, 'The Ties That Do Not Bind. Group Formation, Polarization and Conflict within Networks of Political Elites in the Medieval Roman Empire', *Journal of Historical Network Research* 4 (2020): 298-324.

¹⁷ Kate Davison, 'Early Modern Social Networks: Antecedents, Opportunities, and Challenges', *The American Historical Review* 124, no. 2 (2019): 26.

¹⁸ See, for example: Johannes Preiser-Kapeller, 'Chapter 16 Letters and Network Analysis', in *A Companion to Byzantine Epistolography* (Leiden: Brill, 2020); Bronagh Ann McShane, 'Visualising the Reception and Circulation of Early Modern Nuns' Letters', *Journal of Historical Network Research* 2 (2018).

¹⁹ *Connected Clerics*, digital humanities project by Royal Holloway, University of London, <https://discover-connecc.openatlas.eu>.

benefits of a combined literary and network analysis.²⁰ Their work highlights that letters contain certain unique properties such as a clear sender and recipient which allow them to be used as the basis for visualizations of social networks.²¹ Letters of recommendation offer the third unique property of a clearly identified beneficiary, which makes them ideal candidates for a network visualization approach. For the eleventh- and twelfth-century letters that make up the corpus of this study, this approach has been overlooked. The transnational nature of elite clerical culture as well as the large number of surviving recommendation letters, which always involved at least three individuals (many of them celebrated historical figures), makes this corpus an excellent basis for exploring network building. This study reveals a form of networking which incorporates unknown individuals into a world of well-established clerics. We can observe the personal trajectories of both the senders and recipients, on the one hand, and the less experienced beneficiaries, on the other, to understand the reasons for their successes and failures in the ecclesiastical sphere.

1.3 Methodology

This research employs two main methodologies, resulting in a qualitative study explored through network visualization. The first approach is a close analysis of the sources, particularly considering their references to trust and friendship. The second is a network visualization approach. These methods are linked since the network dataset stems from the letters themselves and the close reading helps to understand and reconstruct the networks.

In its data collection, this study follows the document-to-categorization approach designed by Claire Lemerrier and Claire Zalc, which involves extracting data from the written document and categorizing and visualizing it.²² The data for the visualizations is taken from the letters of recommendation, with the sender as the source and the recipient as the target. I also record the category of each letter based on the type of beneficiary. The datasets from each of these sections are separated into edges (representing the beneficiaries) and nodes, (representing the senders and recipients). I have visualized the data as directed graphs using the software Gephi.²³ The nodes are force-directed to repel each other, while the edges attract their nodes. I have used edge thickness to demonstrate

²⁰ Ruth Ahnert and Sebastian Ahnert, *Tudor Networks of Power* (Oxford: University Press, 2023).

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Claire Lemerrier, Claire Zalc, 'From Source to Data', in *Quantitative Methods in the Humanities* (University of Virginia Press, 2019).

²³ Mathieu Bastian, Sebastien Heymann, and Mathieu Jacomy, 'Gephi: An Open Source Software for Exploring and Manipulating Networks', *Proceedings of the International AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media* 3, no. 1 (2009): 361–62.

the number of letters surviving between individuals in the visualization. Figure 1 shows a visualization of the entire network of letters explored in this study. The accompanying Table 1 shows the breakdown of recommendation types across the entire corpus.

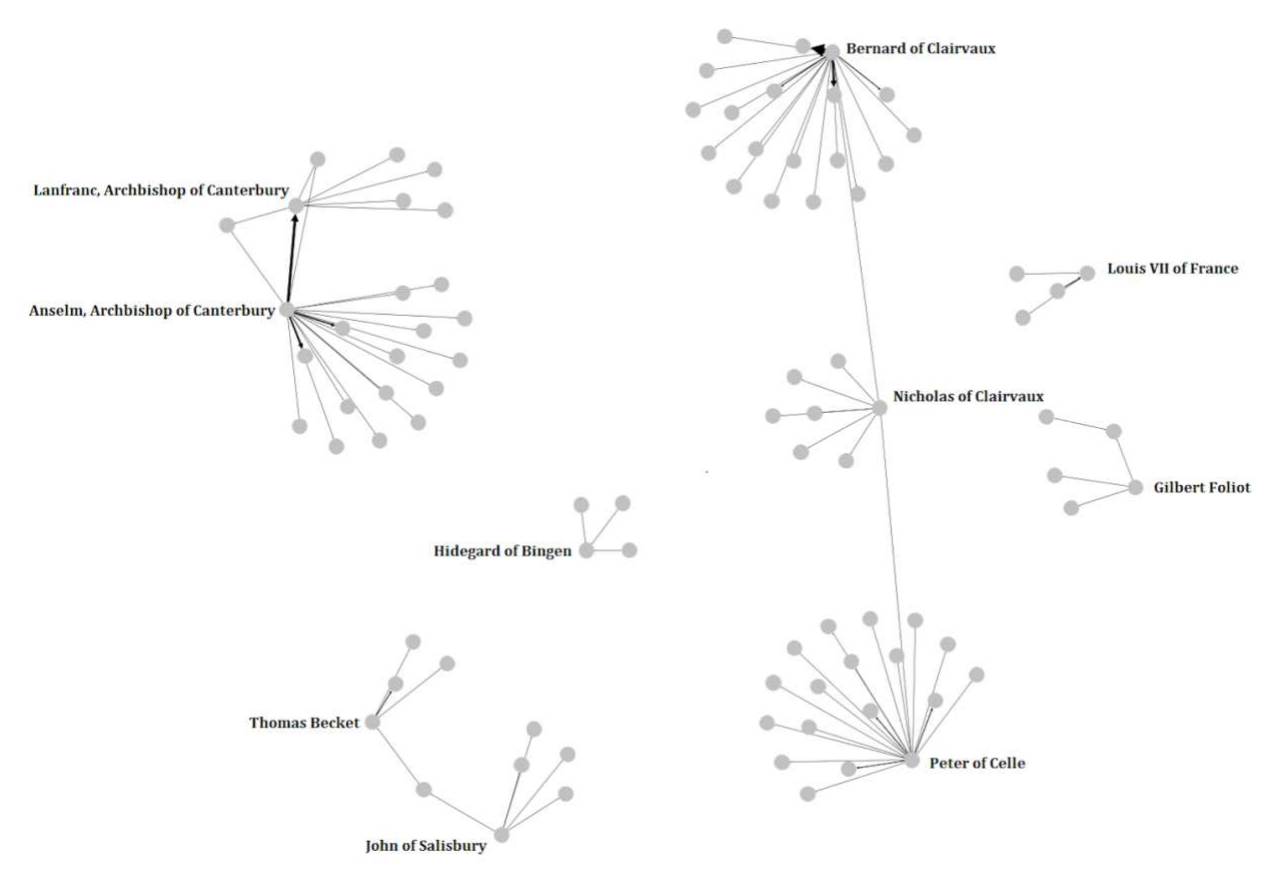


Fig. 1 A network visualization of the entire corpus of letters of recommendation (edge thickness: quantity)

Category	Type of Recommendation	Count	Edge Ratio
A	Recommending those requesting specific training and education	22	19.0%
B	Recommending people undertaking journeys such as pilgrimages	7	6.0%
C	Asking for aid for the poor and exiles	14	12.1%
D	Recommending people for their skills and experience	49	42.2%
E	Interceding to request forgiveness e.g. for runaway monks	19	16.4%
F	Requesting further assistance for pre-existing beneficiaries	5	4.3%

Tab. 1 Category ratios for the entire corpus of letters of recommendation

Instead of a dense, interconnected network, the visualization reveals a set of mostly disconnected, sometimes overlapping ego networks of the individuals whose letters form the edited collections. Many parts of this graph are not connected or are only connected through one node, and our case studies will explore some of these disconnected elements.

The visualization reduces the role of the beneficiary to that of an intermediary. Not much is known about the beneficiaries, who are often unnamed in the letters. In the visualizations, the beneficiary is indistinguishable from the letters themselves despite having a central role in their creation and transmission. Even when we consider the percentages of each category of beneficiary, the dataset reveals much more about the senders and recipients. Within this graph, the largest category at 42.2% is D, or people being recommended for their experience and skills. This is more than double the next category, demonstrating that beneficiaries within the network were likely to be recommended again. This hints at notions of inclusion and exclusion and the likelihood of gaining access to networks. The next largest category is A at 19.0%, showing that many young people were recommended for specific training purposes. This could also reflect well on the senders and recipients and establish strong and useful connections for them. Category E, requesting forgiveness at 16.4%, offers interesting insights into the ability of those within networks to help others keep their positions. The category data look quite different when we consider the recommendation habits of individuals, such as Anselm.

2. Anselm: An Early Network

Our first case study focuses on Anselm, best known for his role as Archbishop of Canterbury and his philosophical and theological writings.²⁴ The network examined here is constructed from letters of recommendation sent during his early career from 1071 until 1093, while he was prior and then abbot of Bec Abbey in France. Friendship is perhaps the most obvious theme of his early collection; indeed, Southern writes that the Bec letters stand out for their “expressions of friendship” and that their inclusion in Anselm’s edited collection, some of which was compiled during his lifetime, shows that this was one of the ways he wanted to be remembered.²⁵ A visualization of Anselm’s early network is shown in Figure 2 and presents Anselm at the heart of a thriving network of individuals covering different areas of ecclesiastical importance. These individuals were not merely part of his list of correspondents but made up a group of people with whom he felt comfortable

²⁴ For scholarship on Anselm see, for example: Giles E. M. Gasper and Ian Logan, eds., *Saint Anselm of Canterbury and His Legacy* (Durham: Institute of Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2012); Richard W. Southern, *Saint Anselm: A Portrait in a Landscape* (Cambridge: University Press, 2004).

²⁵ Southern, *Saint Anselm and His Biographer: A Study of Monastic Life and Thought 1059-c.1130*. (Cambridge: University Press, 1966), 68-9.

sending and receiving recommendations. The accompanying Table 2 shows the breakdown of recommendation types across the network.

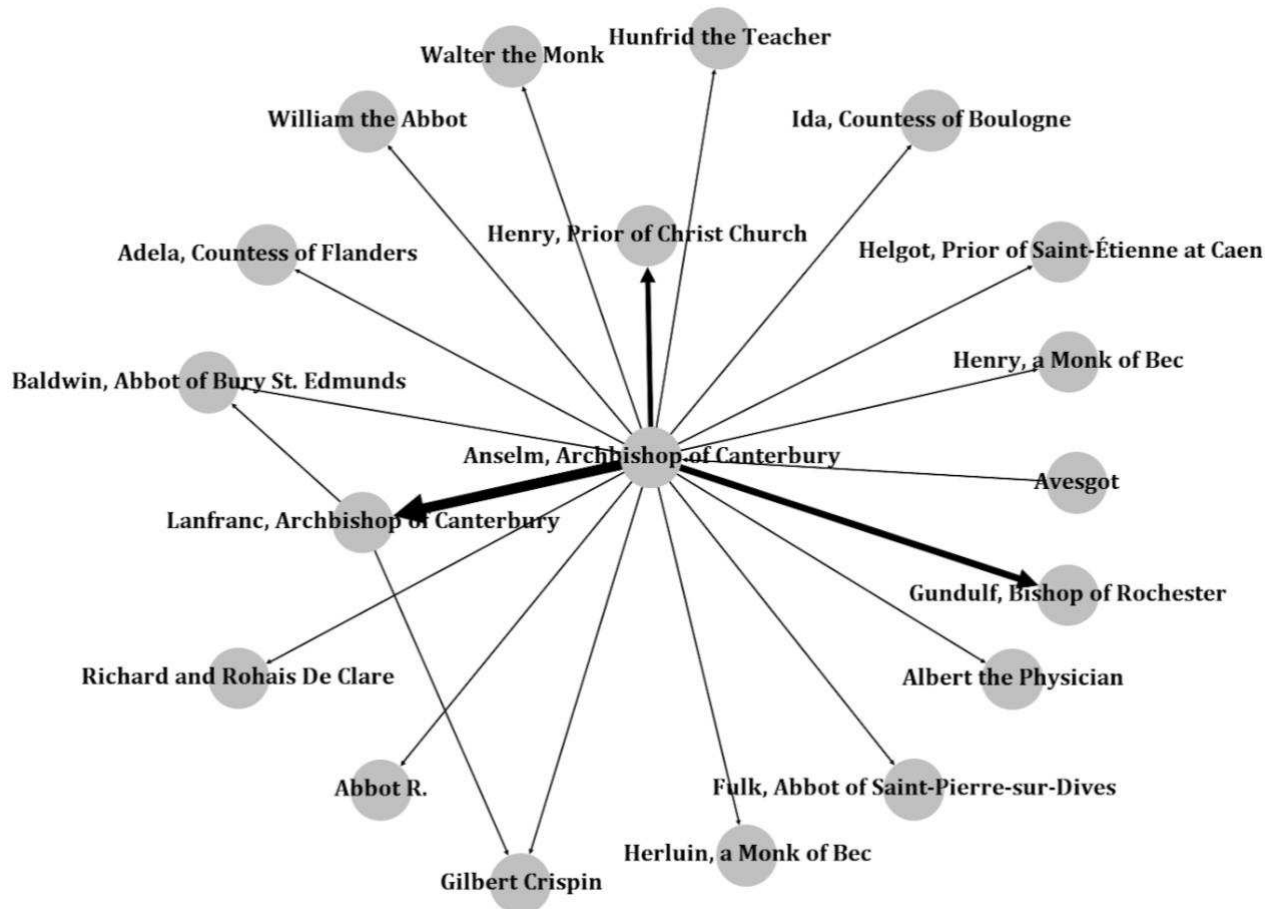


Fig. 2 Senders and recipients in Anselm's early network (edge thickness: quantity)

Category	Type of Recommendation	Count	Edge Ratio
A	Recommending those requesting specific training and education	14	46.7%
B	Recommending people undertaking journeys such as pilgrimages	1	3.3%
C	Asking for aid for the poor and exiles	2	6.7%
D	Recommending people for their skills and experience	2	6.7%
E	Interceding to request forgiveness e.g. for runaway monks	9	30.0%
F	Requesting further assistance for pre-existing beneficiaries	2	6.7%

Tab. 2 Category ratios for Anselm's early network

Breaking down this visualization into types of beneficiaries, we see that Anselm's priorities were quite different from those of the wider network. In the overall network visualization, category D is overwhelmingly the largest, but Anselm's largest category is A at 46.7%, meaning his requests for people to gain specific training and education, and those sent to him, were the foundation of his network. This is seen best in Anselm's connection with Lanfranc, his predecessor as archbishop and the strongest edge in the visualization. Their relationship was based on years of correspondence and their shared identity as Italians who had established themselves at Bec. The importance of shared identity cannot be overlooked and is perhaps one of the reasons why central medieval religious networks were so highly elite and featured very few women. The second largest category is E, requests for forgiveness, at 30.0%. This shows Anselm's commitment to keeping individuals within his network even when they had made mistakes. These categories reveal that Anselm was keen to expand his network and how hard he fought against excluding those already within it.

2.1 Trusted connections

Anselm built up several trusted relationships during his early career, which helped him to promote himself and to create a support system to fall back on in moments of need. The letters between Anselm and Lanfranc, while the latter was archbishop, indicate the benefits of continued correspondence through recommendation. These letters formed part of a well-established connection of recommendations between Bec and Canterbury, which Long

notes was an advantage for all involved.²⁶ The surviving letters include two sent in 1072 concerning Gerard, a convert attempting to gain a position at Bec but struggling with debt.²⁷ Anselm used the letter to maintain his friendship and correspondence with Lanfranc as well as to persuade him to grant his request. He asks that Lanfranc, in his “merciful kindness” treat Gerard well.²⁸ Towards the end of the letter, he writes that it was on “our advice” that Gerard went to Lanfranc, offering Gerard the backing of a trusted member of the community.²⁹ A letter Anselm sent to Gerard provides Anselm’s advice on gaining Lanfranc’s trust. Anselm advises Gerard to explain “how much” he needed his debts absolved and instructs him to take the letter of recommendation with him as “witness that we send you to him”.³⁰ Anselm believed that it was enough for Lanfranc to see the letter as their strong connection warranted Lanfranc’s trust in Anselm’s convictions.

Anselm’s letter collection also contains multiple letters recommending Maurice, a monk of Bec, which reveal how Anselm changed his writing style depending on the recipient, even when the beneficiary remained the same.³¹ Maurice was a child oblate who became Anselm’s “trusted secretary, copyist and amanuensis”.³² For the first recommendation, Anselm writes to Lanfranc that he knows “the righteousness” of his “justice” and asks for Albert, the Physician, to treat Maurice for headaches.³³ This level of reverence is not found in the same request sent to Henry, a monk of Bec and more Anselm’s equal than his superior, in which Anselm recommends Maurice “as one dear friend to another dear friend”.³⁴ He writes a similar letter to Gundulf, another close friend and monk of Bec, but includes a request that “you treat him as if he were me”.³⁵ Requests of this nature were common in letters of recommendation as an attempt to increase the trust of the recipient in

²⁶ Micol Long, “‘Visiting Monks’: Educational Mobility in 11th and 12th Century Monasteries”, in *Les Mobilités Monastiques En Orient et En Occident de l’Antiquité Tardive Au Moyen Âge (IVe-XVe Siècle)*, ed. Olivier Delouis, Maria Mossakovska-Gaubert, and Annick Peters-Custot (Rome: Publications de l’École française de Rome, 2019), 409-425.

²⁷ Anselm, *Letters of Anselm*, ed., trans. Niskanen, Oxford Medieval Texts (Oxford: University Press, 2019), 42-43.

²⁸ “misericordem uestram benignitatem”, *Ibid*.

²⁹ “nostro consilio”, *Ibid*.

³⁰ “quantum debeas et quantum te de tuo habere confidas”; “in testimonium quia nos te mittimus ad illum”, *Ibid*, 44-45.

³¹ *Ibid*, 76-85.

³² Benjamin Pohl, ‘Who Wrote Paris, BnF, Latin 2342?: The Identity of the Anonymus Beccensis Revisited’, in *France et Angleterre*, ed. Francesco Siri (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2020), 176.

³³ “ego noui iustitiae uestrae rectitudinem”, *Ibid*, 76-77.

³⁴ “secure uobis illum ut dilectum dilecto commendamus”, *Ibid*, 78-79.

³⁵ “Precor ut in omnibus gerens eius sollicitudinem propter Dei et proximi caritatem nostram erga eum exhibeas uicem”, *Ibid*, 80.

the beneficiary and strengthen the original relationship, provided the beneficiary met the expectations of the recipient. The next letter is similar; however, it includes some reflections on the friendship between the sender and recipient. Anselm writes to Herluin, another monk of Bec, that the request, if granted, would “prove” to Anselm that “despite the long absence”, Herluin is still his “friend”.³⁶ Recommendation letters thus helped to maintain connections within networks, with Anselm suggesting that granting the request would restore some trust between the two individuals. The final letter recommending Maurice is addressed to Albert, the Physician, in which Anselm reminds Albert that the latter had allegedly promised to become a monk.³⁷ The centrality of the physician within each correspondence, as the individual with the power to heal Maurice, shows that it was possible to be part of this elite religious network without an official title, although it was not for Anselm’s lack of trying that Albert was not yet fully established within the monastic community.

While Anselm’s letters to Lanfranc were instrumental in shaping their friendship, the letter that had perhaps the greatest impact on him was one Lanfranc sent to Anselm, recommending Lanfranc’s nephew to Bec. While the letter of recommendation itself does not survive, Anselm’s response does.³⁸ Being the senior in their relationship, Lanfranc was doing Anselm a great honor in asking him to grant a request. In his response, Anselm acknowledges this, writing that “just as it is not credible that someone would entrust his dearest one to ones not dear to him, it is generally impossible that he should not love the place where the one lives whom he deeply loves”.³⁹ Here, Anselm extends Lanfranc’s trust in him to the wider community at Bec. Whether Lanfranc intended this broader application of his trust or not, Anselm’s response shows that recommendation letters had a great impact on the people sending and receiving them as well as the intended beneficiaries. Therefore, the influence of even a single recommendation could span entire monastic communities.

2.2 The ability to exclude

Exploring the ways networks could be strengthened and broadened to include new individuals is just one side of a much larger story. It is important to consider the darker side of Anselm’s network, which lies in his exclusion of specific individuals and groups. This exclusion can be seen in the broader networks of the religious elite, as shown in Dominique

³⁶ “et tu probes te etiam longe absentem in amicitia nostra permansisse”, *Ibid*, 80-81.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 83-85.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 60-65.

³⁹ “Sicut ergo quod quis dilectissimum sibi non dilectis uelit credere non est credibile, ita ut non diligat ubi quem ualde diligit conuersatur non solet esse possibile”, *Ibid*, 60.

Iogna-Prat's study of Peter the Venerable, who created a divide between the monastic community at Cluny and all outsiders.⁴⁰ Anselm's ego network reveals exclusion in two forms, one based on a failure to impress with a request and the other an implied exclusion in the lack of many women in his network of recommendation.

The example of Avesgot, a monk of Saint-Pierre de la Couture, demonstrates how a letter of recommendation could cause more damage than good if handled improperly. Avesgot wrote to Anselm asking that the latter play a role in the education of his nephew.⁴¹ The letter claims that the two men had been "friends and familiars only in discussion" and that Avesgot was keen for this to be "tested" through "action".⁴² The letter contains three key mistakes which ultimately prevent the request from being granted. Avesgot writes his name before Anselm's, a disrespectful act, especially when writing to someone in a senior position. He also fails to give Anselm his proper title and writes in his letter that he wonders why Anselm has not achieved the fame of others, such as Lanfranc. All the words of flattery that he includes in the latter parts of the letter make no difference as, by failing to demonstrate his familiarity with the accepted conventions of the genre, Avesgot set himself up for rejection. Anselm's response is harsh, writing that not only was he unable to teach at that time, but he also writes that he had no "intention" to do so.⁴³ Later, Anselm essentially blocks any further requests, writing that "true friendship can exist...even if the need for demanding something never approaches".⁴⁴ Insisting that this does not alter their friendship seems merely a formality, and the letter pushes Avesgot firmly outside Anselm's network of recommendations.

There is a second, broader form of exclusion in Anselm's network. Religious networks were exclusive by nature since they featured only those with the means to travel. Nevertheless, many elite women in Europe could have taken part in Anselm's network, and he does write to some women, as the visualization in Figure 2 shows. Letters of recommendation are not the strongest source of information on Anselm's relationships with women and Sally

⁴⁰ Dominique Iogna-Prat, *Order & Exclusion: Cluny and Christendom Face Heresy, Judaism, and Islam (1000-1150)* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2002).

⁴¹ Anselm, *Letters of Anselm*, ed., trans. Niskanen, Oxford Medieval Texts (Oxford: University Press, 2019), 406-407.

⁴² "Hactenus amici atque familiares solummodo fuimus locutione, sed minime experti sumus nos, si necesse esset, operatione", *Ibid.*

⁴³ "Non enim eiusmodi studii, in quo possit proficere dilectus ille uester de quo scripsistis, est michi nunc licentia nec intentio uel opportunitas, sicut fuit olim uel putat uestra sanctitas", *Ibid.*, 54-55.

⁴⁴ "Potest enim esse uera amicitia, ubi semper uiget bona uoluntas, etiam si nunquam instet flagitandi necessitas nec praesto sit praestandi facultas", *Ibid.*

Vaughn has shown that Anselm did enjoy “close friendships with women”.⁴⁵ There are very few letters of recommendation to women in Anselm’s collection, either due to his editing, which would suggest that he did not consider correspondence with women worth including in his collection, or due to the scarcity of women in his network of mutual aid. In the letters that do survive, we do not see Anselm utilising these connections to the full. For example, in a letter to Adela, Countess of Flanders, who was retired in a Benedictine convent at the time and therefore well placed to help Anselm, he asks Adela to intercede with her son, Robert I of Flanders, hinting that he valued her as a resource mostly for her connections with a powerful man.⁴⁶ These elite religious networks could survive only when based on exclusivity, which served to make them more desirable. This particular letter collection indicates a partial exclusion of elite women, with whom Anselm corresponded in other settings, from networks of recommendation.

2.3 Advantageous reputation

There is no doubt that Anselm built up a positive reputation during the time he spent at Bec, but the extent to which this was a deliberate move to advance his career has been questioned. Upon being offered the role of Archbishop of Canterbury, Anselm publicly resisted, accepting the position only after the king agreed to some strict conditions which would benefit the house at Bec. This resistance has been interpreted in two different ways. Southern sees Anselm as a complex, fundamentally withdrawn man, content to remain at Bec until the end of his life and reluctant to be in the spotlight.⁴⁷ On the other hand, Vaughn argues that it is not enough to take Anselm “at face value” since it was customary to display a certain reluctance to assume a high-ranking position within the Church.⁴⁸ She writes that Anselm could have risked his reputation if he appeared to be an “ambitious courtier”.⁴⁹

Studying letters of recommendation offers fresh insights into this debate. In Southern’s response to Vaughn, he writes that this perspective would alter our understanding of how Anselm saw friendship since its use as a tool of “self-advancement” constitutes a “betrayal

⁴⁵ Sally Vaughn, ‘Saint Anselm and His Students Writing about Love: A Theological Foundation for the Rise of Romantic Love in Europe’, *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 19, no. 1 (2010): 54–73. For further scholarship on Anselm’s relationships with women see, for example: Sally N. Vaughn, *St. Anselm and the Handmaidens of God: A Study of Anselm’s Correspondence with Women* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2002).

⁴⁶ Anselm, *Letters of Anselm*, ed., trans. Niskanen, Oxford Medieval Texts (Oxford: University Press, 2019), 223.

⁴⁷ Southern, ‘Sally Vaughn’s Anselm: An Examination of the Foundations’, *Albion* 20 (1988): 181.

⁴⁸ Vaughn, ‘St. Anselm: Reluctant Archbishop?’, *Albion* 6 (1974): 240–50.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 250.

of all his passionate words about the place of friendship in the monastic life”.⁵⁰ However, Anselm’s letters of recommendation demonstrate a clear overlap between friendship used for personal reasons and self-advancement. In his early network, we see deep personal connections which developed and deepened alongside practical requests.

These relationships are evidence of conscious network building and reveal Anselm’s aspirations long before becoming archbishop was a possibility for him. In his later years, he would rely on the support of friendships he cultivated during his time at Bec. The most obvious of these connections was with Lanfranc, whose support of Anselm allowed him to travel to England and make himself known there. The visualization in Figure 2 shows additional connections he would later rely on, such as with Gilbert Crispin, his former pupil who became Abbot of Westminster in 1085. As early as 1073, we can see Gilbert’s network flourishing, with Lanfranc recommending his nephew to Gilbert as he had done with Anselm.⁵¹ In 1090, Anselm wrote to Gilbert with a letter of recommendation interceding on behalf of a supposed criminal. Towards the end of the letter, he writes, “may your love, ever sweet to me, prosper”, reminding Gilbert of their history and setting his intentions for the future.⁵² This helped to maintain their reciprocal friendship and established their new, more equal relationship, as Gilbert was no longer a beneficiary but an important member of Anselm’s network of senders and recipients.

Instead of demonstrating a dichotomy between personal and political friendship, letters of recommendation show that Anselm’s relationships were at once personal and political. Both aspects of this friendship were genuine, and many of his friends benefited from his recommendations and responses to theirs. Considering his early network of letters of recommendation helps us to reconcile the seemingly dissonant versions of Anselm painted by existing scholarship. We do not have to view his actions as aimed purely at self-advancement or as motivated by the ideas of deep personal friendships. Instead, we can understand Anselm as an individual who forged connections for their own sake, creating important and emotional relationships with those with whom he corresponded. At the same time, Anselm had an awareness of his friends’ utility as members of a broad, transnational network, which helped to secure him one of the positions most likely to benefit those friends and the Church in his later life.

⁵⁰ Southern, ‘Sally Vaughn’s Anselm’, *Albion* 20 (1988): 187.

⁵¹ Lanfranc, *The Letters of Lanfranc*, ed., trans. Clover and Gibson, Oxford Medieval Texts (Oxford: University Press, 1979), 101-3.

⁵² “Valeat semper dulcis michi uestra dilectio”, Anselm, *Letters of Anselm*, ed., trans. Niskanen, Oxford Medieval Texts (Oxford: University Press, 2019), 366-67.

3. Bernard and Nicholas of Clairvaux: Distinct Networks

Our next case study considers the networks of Bernard and Nicholas of Clairvaux. St Bernard is most famous for his role in the reform of the Benedictine movement and for founding Clairvaux Abbey.⁵³ This study examines his relationship with Nicholas, his former secretary, whom Bernard dismissed for stealing and forging letters.⁵⁴ Bernard's letters demonstrate the consequences of betraying trust within this elite community, and those written by Nicholas show the role of friendships in evading these consequences. Lena Wahlgren-Smith's introduction to the edition of Nicholas's letters notes that Nicholas is often studied only for his connections with the more famous Bernard.⁵⁵ Little attention has been paid to the fact that, despite publicly announcing Nicholas's untrustworthiness, Bernard failed in ostracizing Nicholas. The visualization of their combined networks in Figure 3 offers some insights into why this might have been. The visualization paints a striking picture of Nicholas's influence within the monastic community, which stretched beyond the reach of his former master. The accompanying Table 3 shows the breakdown of recommendation types across the network.

⁵³ For scholarship on Bernard of Clairvaux see, for example: G. R. Evans, *Bernard of Clairvaux* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Brian Patrick McGuire, *Bernard of Clairvaux: An Inner Life* (Cornell University Press, 2020).

⁵⁴ For scholarship on Nicholas of Clairvaux see, for example: Giles Constable, *The Letters of Peter the Venerable Volume II* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1967); Augustin Steiger, 'Nikolaus, Mönch in Clairvaux, Dekretär des hl. Bernhard', *Studien Und Mitteilungen Zur Geschichte Des Benediktinerordens Und Seiner Zweige*, 1917, 45–50.

⁵⁵ Nicholas of Clairvaux, *The Letter Collections of Nicholas of Clairvaux*, ed., trans. Lena Wahlgren-Smith (Oxford: University Press, 2018).



Fig 3. Senders and recipients in the networks of St Bernard and Nicholas of Clairvaux (edge thickness: quantity)

Category	Type of Recommendation	Count	Edge Ratio
A	Recommending those requesting specific training and education	2	4.9%
B	Recommending people undertaking journeys such as pilgrimages	4	9.8%
C	Asking for aid for the poor and exiles	4	9.8%
D	Recommending people for their skills and experience	26	63.4%
E	Interceding to request forgiveness e.g. for runaway monks	5	12.2%
F	Requesting further assistance for pre-existing beneficiaries	0	0.0%

Tab. 3 Category ratios for the networks of Bernard and Nicholas of Clairvaux

The category percentages help us to see how these individuals built their networks of recommendation. Most of the letters in this combined network are category D at 63.4%, revealing that individuals who were already known to the network were more likely to be recommended. Category F is not represented here, suggesting that the network members did not recommend any one individual more than another. Categories C, E and B are quite equally represented at 9.8%, 12.2% and 9.8% respectively. These are quite similar categories from the perspective of the senders and recipients since they demonstrate the charitable nature of those within the network. Finally, unlike Anselm's network, where it represents most of the letters, category A is the smallest in this network at 4.9%, showing that different priorities suited different people, and that it was possible to create a successful network regardless of the specific building methods.

3.1 Trust and authentication

Bernard of Clairvaux's letter network contains explicit references to trust and implicit trust language in authentication, used in this study to mean the process of verifying the author of a letter. Bernard used many methods to build trust in himself and his recommended beneficiaries. For example, a letter to Theobald, Count of Champagne, indicates a form of authentication as Bernard writes that Theobald "may trust without fear" in the intermediary.⁵⁶ Not only must the sender and recipient trust each other, but they must also trust that the beneficiary will deliver the letter exactly as instructed. Such safe delivery could not be taken for granted, as will be seen later in the network of Thomas Becket. First, we will explore some occasions where the trust of the sender was betrayed closer to home.

⁵⁶ Bernard of Clairvaux, *The Letters*, ed., trans. James and Kienzle (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian Publications, 1998), 71. Latin text not provided in this edition.

The letters in Bernard's collection paint a broad picture of the events surrounding Nicholas's dismissal. In around 1149-1151, Bernard wrote to Pope Eugenius III, expressing anger that a "serpent" had "deceived" him and "obtained letters of recommendation" against his will.⁵⁷ He asks that the deceiver "gains nothing" from the letters he sent in Bernard's name, and a later letter of recommendation reveals his decision to use a new seal in future "containing both my image and name" in the hope of maintaining trust in his identity.⁵⁸ It would seem that Bernard used a recommendation letter to convey this information in an attempt to rekindle his reciprocal relationship with the pope in the wake of the forgeries. This was not the end of the betrayal, and Nicholas was found to have been the culprit and dismissed from Clairvaux in 1151 for his various transgressions. Even after considering the implications of long-distance trust and putting strong authentication methods in place, Bernard was betrayed by one of the closest people to him.

3.2 An attempted exclusion

When Bernard finally expelled Nicholas from Clairvaux, he wrote a third letter to Eugenius explaining the situation.⁵⁹ This is the first letter where Nicholas is named, and Bernard makes it clear that he wishes for Nicholas to be excluded from the monastic community altogether. In the letter, we see anger, frustration, embarrassment and anxiety in equal parts, culminating in Bernard's determination to ensure that Nicholas receives nothing but poor treatment wherever he goes. The language Bernard used to reveal Nicholas reflects the othering so common in exclusion. Bernard writes that "Nicholas has left because he was not one of us", not simply indicating that Nicholas was no longer welcome in the Clairvaux community but making a point that he was never truly a part of it.⁶⁰ This demonstrates an attempt to rewrite and even rethink the years that Nicholas spent as Bernard's secretary. The letter suggests that Bernard regretted not mentioning the betrayer by name to the pope before. He expresses concern that he may never know what was written in his name, and using his seal and, indeed, the exact influence of Nicholas on his master's letter collection is still unknown.⁶¹ Bernard's uncertainty reveals the shaky ground on which trust in communication was built in these long-distance relationships.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 430-1.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 435-6.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*.

⁶¹ Jeroen De Gussem, 'Bernard of Clairvaux and Nicholas of Montiéramey: Tracing the Secretarial Trail with Computational Stylistics', *Speculum* 92, no. S1 (2017): 190-225.

Instead of admitting embarrassment, Bernard writes that he “knew for some time” about Nicholas’ wrongdoing but was “waiting whether for God to convert him or for him to betray himself like Judas”.⁶² The comparison with Judas implies that Bernard had acted as Christ did, allowing Nicholas to make the final error from which there was no return. Later in the letter, Bernard writes that “no one has better deserved life imprisonment”, showing the impact of Nicholas’ betrayal on Bernard, who knew that Nicholas was not necessarily facing such exclusion, even from the religious community.⁶³ The letter explains that Nicholas had boasted of “friends in the Curia” and implores the pope to remember Arnold of Brescia, an Augustinian canon who was exiled multiple times for his attacks on the Church and his threat to the pope.⁶⁴ In comparing them, Bernard was reminding the pope of this recent threat and even went as far as to describe Nicholas as “worse” than Arnold, demonstrating his commitment to ensuring that Nicholas could never again participate in elite religious networks.⁶⁵ Bernard wrote to Eugenius not merely for his connection as a fellow Cistercian or his role as pope but out of fear of Nicholas’s claim that he could establish himself in Rome. This alters the power dynamic between Bernard and Nicholas, shifting the tone from anger to concern: Bernard felt he needed to use his position to remind the pope not to accept his ex-secretary at any cost. Unlike the exclusion of Avesgot, whose fumbled request left him unlikely to establish himself within any network, Nicholas had already worked within the elite religious networks outside of Clairvaux. Even from someone as renowned as Bernard, it was difficult to exclude someone with their own well-established network.

Contrary to Bernard’s wishes, Nicholas did not lose his place in the elite monastic community following his expulsion from Clairvaux. Instead, he found favor in Rome and was reinstated at his first monastery in Montiéramey, eventually becoming prior of Saint-Jean-in-Châtel. The veneration of Bernard has influenced the way that Nicholas has been understood, mostly as a thorn in the side of this historical icon. Wahlgren-Smith paints a more complex picture of Nicholas, noting that while his writing demonstrates his “immaturity and vanity”, the story of his exclusion is one-sided since his impressions have not survived.⁶⁶ It is also possible that Nicholas did not intend to betray Bernard. Wahlgren-Smith has suggested that Nicholas, writing so many letters on behalf of others and identifying so strongly with his community at Clairvaux, may have forgotten that he

⁶² Bernard of Clairvaux, *The Letters*, ed., trans. James and Kienzle (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian Publications, 1998), 435-6. Latin text not provided in this edition.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ Nicholas of Clairvaux, *The Letter Collections* ed., trans. Wahlgren-Smith (Oxford: University Press, 2018), xi-xxii.

“should have been acting as a mouthpiece of his monastery”.⁶⁷ Understanding Nicholas’s actions in this context helps us see that there was more to him than his portrayal as a deceitful, untrustworthy monk. Giles Constable argues that Nicholas’s writing style indicates a possible “identification of himself with his masters” and that he was perhaps “chastened” by his experiences in Clairvaux, suggesting that he learned from his mistakes in his later life and service.⁶⁸ Bernard died shortly after the incident, so we are left wondering what his thoughts may have been on his failed exclusion attempt.

3.3. Recovering a reputation

A combination of network visualization and trust and friendship analysis helps to reveal how Nicholas recovered his reputation. Figure 3 shows that Nicholas had connections through his letters of recommendation that Bernard did not seem to have. Bernard’s concern about Nicholas’ claim that he had “friends in the Curia” was not simply the rebellious taunt of a recently discovered thief.⁶⁹ Indeed, John F. Benton writes that Nicholas was an “ambitious man with a talent for ingratiating himself with influential patrons”, which allowed him to continue his career after being cast out of the Cistercian community.⁷⁰ Nicholas’s links with respected members of the community outside Bernard’s network, visualized in Figure 3, helped him to establish himself as an important figure in his own right and not just a representative of Clairvaux.

One of the most influential of Nicholas’s independent connections was with Henry, Count of Champagne, who employed Nicholas after he left Bernard. Theobald, Henry’s father, was in Bernard’s recommendation network, but it was Nicholas who managed to strike up a friendship with his son. Letters of recommendation were a large reason for Nicholas’s success here, as he had recommended Henry as a crusader to the Byzantine Emperor in around 1147.⁷¹ Nicholas was no doubt building a history of favors with Henry and his elite family in the hope that they would be reciprocated in the future, although he could not have known the extent to which this would become true. Although Nicholas distanced himself from Clairvaux, he continued to use Bernard’s image as a powerful symbol to advance his

⁶⁷ Nicholas of Clairvaux, *The Letter Collections* ed., trans. Wahlgren-Smith (Oxford: University Press, 2018), xxv.

⁶⁸ Giles Constable, *The Letters of Peter the Venerable Volume II* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1967), 330.

⁶⁹ Bernard of Clairvaux, *The Letters*, ed., trans. James and Kienzle (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian Publications, 1998), 435-6. Latin text not provided in this edition.

⁷⁰ John F. Benton, ‘The Court of Champagne as a Literary Center’, *Speculum* 36, no. 4 (1961): 555.

⁷¹ Nicholas of Clairvaux, *The Letter Collections* ed., trans. Wahlgren-Smith (Oxford: University Press, 2018), xxiii.

career. We see this in his presentation of Bernard's work, passed off as his own, to those with whom he wished to gain a position.⁷²

In his later life, Nicholas appears to have fallen foul of the same tactics he used against Bernard. In around 1170, Arnulf of Lisieux wrote to Nicholas explaining that there was a man at St-Jean who had been taken in under a forged letter of recommendation that Arnulf never wrote.⁷³ There is no surviving reply so we can only guess what Nicholas's response might have been but it shows that this behavior was not limited to Nicholas and that even he could become a victim of it. That Nicholas remained influential in the elite religious space and rose to a position where he was aiding people recommended through forgeries shows that it was difficult to exclude someone when they had already created their own distinct network. More than anything, this shows how the elite religious community of the period was not one interconnected network but a series of often independent ones. If, for example, Bernard had maintained his ties to Theobald through his son, Nicholas would perhaps not have been so well received by Henry. For Nicholas, the independent networks within the wider religious community failed in attempts to exclude him, resulting in his ability to establish himself at a new monastery and the continuation of a long, successful career.

4. Thomas Becket and John of Salisbury: Networks in Exile

Our final case study considers Thomas Becket, another archbishop of Canterbury, whose murder over a dispute with the crown in 1170 made him a martyr with a cult following.⁷⁴ Before this, he spent many years in exile, which considerably affected the careers of those closest to him. Letters of recommendation highlight Becket's connection with his secretary, close friend, and constant supporter, John of Salisbury. Anne Duggan credits John with creating an "active friendship circle" for Becket in France despite Becket's status as an exile.⁷⁵ John's unswerving loyalty to Becket during the dispute led to him following Becket into exile and his network of connections in England shrank. Despite Becket's subsequent exoneration, John's network never fully recovered, and he was unable to secure a role in England even after Becket's death. The visualization in Figure 4 shows the recommendation networks of the two men during this period. In the visualization we see

⁷² Gussem, 'Bernard of Clairvaux and Nicholas of Montiéramey', *Speculum* 92, no. S1 (2017): 190–225.

⁷³ Arnulf, Bishop of Lisieux, *The Letters of Arnulf of Lisieux*, ed., trans. Frank Barlow, Camden Society. Third Series 61 (London: Royal Historical Society, 1939), 116–118.

⁷⁴ For scholarship on Thomas Becket see, for example: Anne Duggan, *Thomas Becket* (London: Arnold, 2004); Frank Barlow, *Thomas Becket* (London: Wiedenfeld and Nicolson, 1986).

⁷⁵ Duggan, *Thomas Becket: Friends, Networks, Texts, and Cult*, (Hampshire, Variorum, 2007).

the men reaching out to their respective close contact, linked only by one node, the Bishop of Poitiers, whom John asked to act as an intermediary between him and Becket. This visualization demonstrates the potential for well-established clerics to recommend themselves as well as more obscure beneficiaries. The accompanying Table 4 illustrates the breakdown of recommendation types across the network.

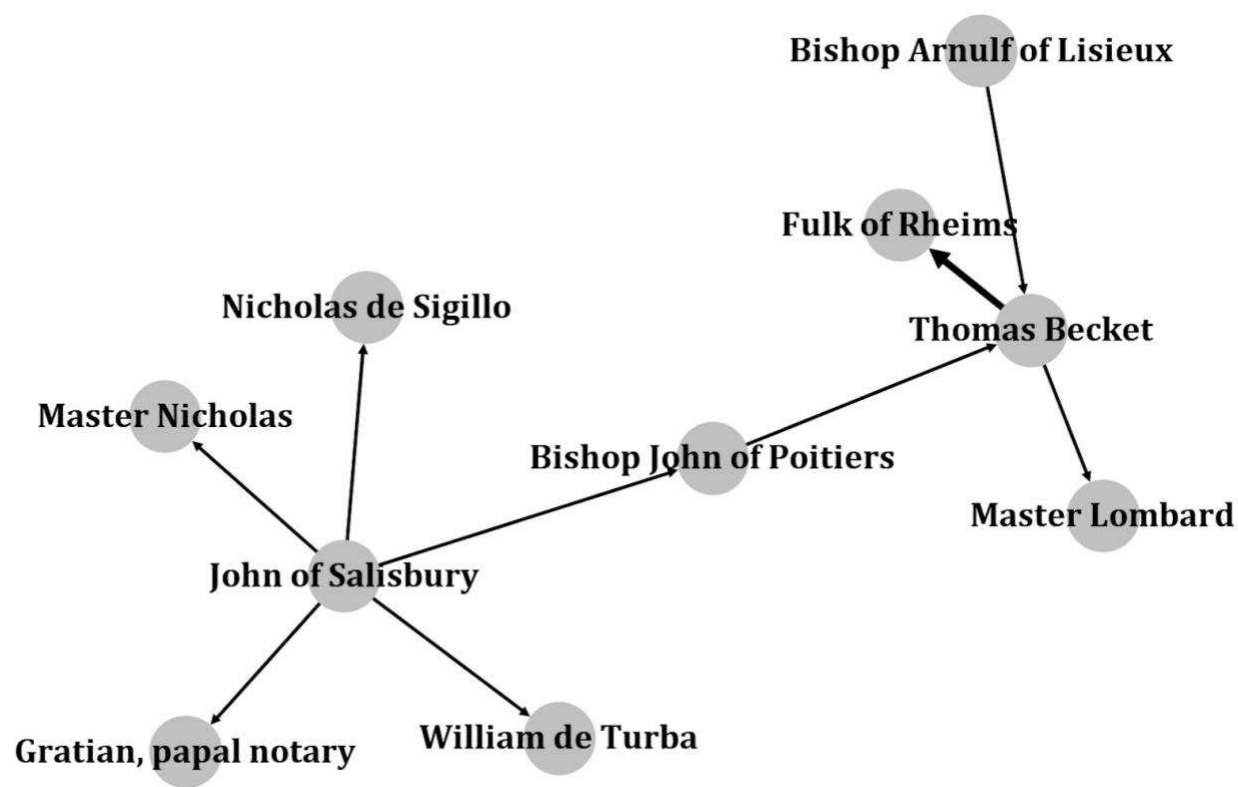


Fig. 4 Senders and recipients in the exile networks of Thomas Becket and John of Salisbury (edge thickness: quantity)

Category	Type of Recommendation	Count	Edge Ratio
A	Recommending those requesting specific training and education	0	0.0
B	Recommending people undertaking journeys such as pilgrimages	0	0.0%
C	Asking for aid for the poor and exiles	4	40.0%
D	Recommending people for their skills and experience	6	60.0%
E	Interceding to request forgiveness e.g. for runaway monks	0	0.0%
F	Requesting further assistance for pre-existing beneficiaries	0	0.0%

Tab. 4 Category ratios for the exile networks of St Thomas Becket and John of Salisbury

This is the smallest dataset in the study by far, but the category distribution is not random. Of the ten letters in this sample, only two of the six categories are represented. C at 40.0% and D at 60.0% make up the entire sample, meaning that we can infer the men preferred sending recommendations on behalf of people in financial or spiritual difficulty and those they knew had particular skills. Unlike the other two case studies, where the specific reasons for recommendations are much more widespread, category C is personal to the two men, in exile themselves. John not only asked for aid for himself but also for other exiles, for example, his brother, who, unlike John, did manage to secure a role in England after Becket's martyrdom. The prevalence of category D is also understandable, either coming from their need to support well-known associates rather than risk a new connection or from an obligation to help the careers of those who remained by their side during the exile. Additionally, new individuals might be less inclined to seek the support of people in exile.

4.1 Untrustworthy messengers

Within the networks of Becket and John, there are two letters through which we can consider how beneficiaries could be excluded. Both letters were intended to make the recipient aware that their letter bearer could not be trusted. Beneficiaries were mostly in precarious positions, on the outskirts of networks, trying to be admitted. Therefore, it was not advisable to make any mistakes or betray their master's trust since it was unlikely that they would be allowed another chance to make up for their transgressions. Unlike the case of Nicholas of Clairvaux, who had established himself within Bernard's network and created a network of his own by the time he was caught betraying his master, many letter-bearers had not yet made a name for themselves within the elite religious community. There are two such examples in this collection: one letter sent in 1156 from Theobald, then Archbishop of Canterbury, to Pope Adrian IV and one sent in 1164 from John of Poitiers to Becket. The letters demonstrate what could occur when letter bearers were found to have betrayed the trust of the sender and recipient. All four figures were influential within the elite religious community and had the power to exclude the letter bearers with just one correspondence.

The two letters are almost the opposite of a letter of recommendation as they denounce the letter bearers rather than praise them. The first letter concerns Herbet, a man found to have misplaced Theobald's letters to the pope.⁷⁶ Theobald writes to the pope to let him

⁷⁶ John of Salisbury, *The Letters of John of Salisbury* ed., trans. Millor, Butler, and Brooke (Oxford: University Press, 1986), 20.

know that he “entrusted to your servant Herbert” many letters, giving three possible reasons that they never arrived, that “he has either betrayed his trust out of malice or lost them through negligence or has falsely pretended they were lost”.⁷⁷ Theobald does not seem to mind which one of these reasons is the truth, showing that letter bearers had very little opportunity to make even an innocent mistake before being replaced. Theobald writes that since Herbert was “insufficiently faithful on the first occasion”, he would “prefer” to send his “own messenger rather than be deceived for the second time by another’s”.⁷⁸ There was a real danger of swift exclusion for those who had not yet established themselves within the elite religious networks of this period. The letter also reveals that some senders policed their networks to ensure that their words were being delivered.

The next letter also questions the reliability of the carrier, but in this case, the sender decided to test the messenger by sending him out with another letter. Written in June 1164, a few months before Becket’s exile, John of Poitiers notes that the letter would have reached Becket much sooner “if the present bearer had not been delayed (as he alleges), by a long sickness”.⁷⁹ Instead of denying the bearer a second chance, John of Poitiers decides to give him the benefit of the doubt and test his theory, writing that “so he cannot say otherwise to you, he left me on the feast of St Albans”.⁸⁰ In this case, the messenger has been allowed to prove himself. It is assumed, however, that if he took too long to deliver the letter for a second time, he would not be allowed to continue in the service of the sender.

This is not the only interesting part of the letter since it ends with a request that Becket “remember...our mutual friend, Master John of Salisbury”, “the first to suffer the penalty of expulsion” for his service.⁸¹ As can be seen in the visualization, John of Poitiers is the only link that exists between Becket and John of Salisbury. That John of Poitiers took the time to remind Becket of his duty towards his loyal friend demonstrates that John of Salisbury had built up a good reputation within his network. The letter shows us once again that one letter could serve multiple purposes.

⁷⁷ “Nostrum et ecclesiae, quae apud nos est, statum uobis per Herbatum uestrum missis litteris significauimus, et ille aut per malitiam prodidit aut perdidit per negligentiam aut eas amissas esse fraudulenter simulauit”, *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ “Quia igitur parum fidelis in primis extitit, malumus proprium nuntium destinare quam secundo decipi per alienum”, *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ “Preuenisset tarditatem meam in litterarum uestrarum benedictione diligentia, nisi presentium latorem diuturna—sicut nobis proponebat—detinuisset infirmitas”, Thomas Becket, *The Correspondence of Thomas Becket*, ed., trans. Duggan (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), 100-101.

⁸⁰ “et ne aliud uobis suggerere posset, in festo sancti Albani a me discessit”, *Ibid.*

⁸¹ “magistri Iohannis Saresberiensis, memineritis, sepius ad animum reuocando quod relegationis penam primus ob hoc sustinuit, quia necessitatibus ecclesie uestre et uestris utiliter ac fideliter deseruire credebatur”, *Ibid.*

4.2 Navigating exclusion

Letters 56 and 56a in Duggan's translation of Becket's letters provide a rare example of a letter which survives in both its completed and draft forms. This helps us to understand a little of how Becket chose to navigate the tricky period of his exile. In the letter, Becket recommended his clerk to Fulk of Rheims in 1165.⁸² The letter reveals that recommendations could be extremely useful in continuing the careers of those associated with disgraced network members. It also provides us with a rare opportunity to explore the role of the sender in network maintenance, demonstrating the thought that went into a recommendation and the different ways the sender attempted to convey their message. As we saw in the case of Avesgot, a poorly written letter could have a devastating impact on the career of the sender. Despite Becket's prominence within the network, his exile put him in a fragile position, and it became more important than ever to maintain the relationships he already had. When the letters are compared, we see that Becket thought carefully about the image which he projected of himself in his correspondence. In the draft letter, he presents himself as a humble petitioner, in stark contrast to the pose he adopts in the final version.

In Letter 56a, Becket appears as a supplicant, whereas in the letter that was sent, he depicts himself and the recipient as equals. In the draft, Becket refers to himself as a "humble minister" who has "not earned your favor".⁸³ This is very different from the opening of the letter that was sent, which leads with the line "since we are in the Body of Christ".⁸⁴ While the first attempts to flatter the reader, the second opts to remind him that they are both part of the same network and frames the request in terms of religious obligation. In the draft, Becket then writes that he is "covered in embarrassment in the course of begging".⁸⁵ This appears to have been so true that Becket could not bring himself to send that version, instead writing a request that considers his recommendation a temporary solution to his clerk's diminished position. Becket writes that the beneficiary was disadvantaged "because he remained loyally with us (as he should) when the storm broke over our head".⁸⁶ This is not a humble request but a presentation of the facts of the situation as Becket saw them, with no apology but instead a request that the support for his clerk continue "as long as this

⁸² *Ibid*, 231.

⁸³ "minister humilis", "Aggredimur rogare qui non promeruimus", *Ibid*, 233.

⁸⁴ "Quoniam in corpore et de corpore Christi constitute", *Ibid*, 230-3.

⁸⁵ "licet inter supplicandum sese rubor ingerat", *Ibid*, 233.

⁸⁶ "qui quoniam inter procellas, que excanduerunt, nobis sicut debuit adhesit, rebus suis est expoliatus", *Ibid*.

present exile lasts”.⁸⁷ Becket ends with a remark similar to the trust-building comments of Anselm and Bernard, writing that he will “regard any good actions done to him as done to ourselves” and that they will be repaid “with the bestowal of reciprocal blessings”.⁸⁸ As someone with great prominence in the various elite religious networks of the time and who frequently had requests granted, Becket thought twice about begging Fulk to accept his request, instead coming across as demanding and sure of himself, even in his relatively insecure position in exile.

This was not necessarily the best course of action. In this case, the request was well received, and the beneficiary, Master Philip of Calne, made his peace with Henry II and ended up teaching at Rheims.⁸⁹ Nevertheless, there were those, including John of Salisbury, who thought that proceeding with caution was more appropriate in Becket’s unstable state. There are two surviving letters from 1167, during Becket’s exile, in which John of Salisbury recommends that Becket be less scathing and more respectful and cautious in his letters. Becket had written a letter to Cardinal William of Pavia, a papal legate working on reconciling Becket and Henry, who was deeply distrusted by Becket. Whatever John’s personal feelings on the legate were, he advised Becket to write more carefully. He writes that he “would not presume to judge the author’s mind” but that he did not agree with the “manner and style” of the letter.⁹⁰ This is a persuasive tactic, as John is claiming that he does not think Becket intended to write the letter in this way. He goes on to express concern that the letter did not “strike the note of humility” necessary for someone in as precarious a position as Becket.⁹¹ Underneath the formality of his writing, John is frustrated that Becket would not take more care in crafting such an important letter.

John’s persuasion did not convince Becket, who sent another draft to John that seems to have been very similar to the first. John wrote a second letter to Becket explaining that he could not “approve of the drafting either of the first or second letter” since they were both “too full of suspicion and biting sarcasm”.⁹² At this point, John’s frustration mounts as he seems to realize that Becket had no intention of taking the reconciliation attempt seriously.

⁸⁷ “dum instantis exilii necessitas ingruerit, in necessariis prout ipsum decet provideatis”, *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ “Nos enim quod ei boni feceritis uelut nobis impensum feremus”, “mutua benedictionum exhibitione debita cum deuotione respondebimus”, *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ Duggan, *Thomas Becket*, III 18.

⁹⁰ “etsi mentem scribentis iudicare non audeam, stili tamen formam probare non possum”, John of Salisbury. *The Letters of John of Salisbury* ed., trans. Butler, Millor, and Brooke (Oxford: University Press, 2003), 397-401.

⁹¹ “Non enim sonare uidentur humilitatem”, *Ibid.*

⁹² “Nec priorum nec posteriorum michi placet conceptio literarum quas ad dominum Willelmum mittere decreuistis, quia nimis plenae uidentur suspicionibus et supra modum dentosis salibus habundare”, *Ibid.*

Duggan writes that while John's belief in the cause they were fighting for was "as total as Becket's", his feelings for Becket were "more complicated".⁹³ She argues that the early letters from his exile demonstrate "the dilemma of a man of principle trying to save his career and his conscience".⁹⁴ Becket's refusal to write respectfully in his redraft points to the multiple viewpoints on what was considered appropriate in the epistolary craft and indicates the benefits of writing from a place of authority rather than pleading. We can see from the second example that it was equally important to consider the context before deciding how to frame a letter. John's frustration at his inability to change Becket's mind mirrors the helplessness felt by many in Becket's network that they could not do more to save their careers and those of the people they cared about.

4.3 A detrimental reputation

John of Salisbury was not born into nobility, so he relied on his education and careful networking to build his career. He achieved this with great success, gaining recommendations from some of the most respected figures in the elite religious community. Indeed, Bernard of Clairvaux recommended John to Archbishop Theobald in a letter written around 1150.⁹⁵ This launched John's successful career as Theobald's secretary, which he continued until being forced into exile on Becket's behalf. John was the beneficiary of many recommendations from Peter of Celle, with whom he sought refuge during his exile. Notably, it was Nicholas of Clairvaux, Bernard's untrustworthy secretary, who recommended John to Peter.⁹⁶

In a letter which was most likely written during John's early exile, Peter writes to Abbot Hugh of Saint-Amand recommending John of Salisbury, requesting that Hugh "reconcile him to the English king".⁹⁷ Peter put everything he had into the letter, demonstrated by his conclusion that "you will never be able to do me any greater service".⁹⁸ Unfortunately, the tactic did not work and John remained in exile. Others including Bishop John of Poitiers attempted to remind Becket that his friend was struggling for him, but there are no surviving accounts of Becket attempting to recommend John.⁹⁹ After Becket's death, Peter

⁹³ Duggan, *Thomas Becket*, II 429.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ Bernard of Clairvaux, *The Letters*, ed., trans. James and Kienzle (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian Publications, 1998), 75.

⁹⁶ Nicholas of Clairvaux, *The Letter Collections of Nicholas of Clairvaux*, ed., trans. Wahlgren-Smith (Oxford: University Press, 2018), 102-9.

⁹⁷ "et uestro reconcilietis regi Angl<orum>", Peter of Celle. *The Letters of Peter of Celle*, ed., trans. Haseldine (Oxford: University Press, 2001), p. 508.

⁹⁸ "Sciatisque pro certo quia nos in nulla re magis poteritis promereri", *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ Duggan, *Thomas Becket*, 99-109.

tried again to help John of Salisbury. In a letter to Prior Odo of Christ Church, Peter writes that Becket was “saved and preserved in that storm and tempest through master John” and argues that “your land would appear better and more brilliant than all other lands” if Odo would accept John and Becket’s other loyal followers.¹⁰⁰ Nevertheless, John never secured a position in England even after Becket was canonized.

A letter from John recommending his similarly exiled brother, Richard, reveals his thoughts on how friendship networks should operate in times of crisis. Writing to Master Nicholas in around 1166, John notes that “the violence of this tempest...has swept all charity out of the minds of some in whom I trusted”.¹⁰¹ Despite writing that he “had many friends” before his exile, he noted that few were “willing or brave enough” to show kindness now.¹⁰² The two men returned to England together in 1170, where, unlike John, Richard managed to secure a position. Through his letters of recommendation, we can see John’s connections crumbling around him during his exile because of his continued support for Becket. This demonstrates one of the major downsides of this period’s tendency towards the creation of ego networks, since Becket’s downfall negatively affected those in his network who chose to stay loyal to him. Even Becket’s death and subsequent veneration did little to save their careers.

5. Conclusion

Medieval letters of recommendation show that clerical networks, far from being developed by chance, were consciously created and maintained by their participants. Visualizations of the networks revealed in the surviving letters show not a vast web of interconnected individuals but a series of discrete and exclusive networks, offering a window into the distinct network-building methods of their authors. Ambitious medieval clerics pursued strategies for building up their personal connections—strategies made clearer when communications are visualized. All the revealed networks help the senders and recipients somewhat more than the intended beneficiaries. Considering them through the lens of friendship and trust, moreover, offers many insights. In the case of Anselm’s early network,

¹⁰⁰ “Accedit et hoc ad cumulum totius amicitie quod in turbine illo et tempestate per magistrum Iohannem saluatus et conseruatus est”, “Ceteris enim terris uestra melior et clarior appareret si doctrinam illorum reciperet”, Peter of Celle, *The Letters of Peter of Celle*, ed., trans. Haseldine (Oxford: University Press, 2001), 521.

¹⁰¹ “Verum nulla doloris causa ualentior aut uiolentior est quam haec, quod uis turbinis huius a quorundam mentibus de quibus confidebam et qui uidebantur aliquid esse excussit”, John of Salisbury. *The Letters of John of Salisbury* ed., trans. Butler, Millor, and Brooke (Oxford: University Press, 2003), 73-5.

¹⁰² “cum multos amicos habuerim in prosperis constitutus, uix unus et alter inuenti sunt qui in aduersis, ut credunt, positum aut uelint aut audeant salutare” *Ibid.*

it helps us to see that Anselm had a conscious, expertly maintained network from his early career, showing us that there was an ambitious side to the man seemingly so reluctant to become archbishop. For Nicholas of Clairvaux, visualization can help us to see how he managed to avoid exclusion from the monastic network, even after offending and being denounced by one of the most prominent people within it. Finally, we see a notable beneficiary in John of Salisbury and someone who seemed as if he would be appreciated in any network he tried to access, but his association with Becket meant that however hard he tried, his network could only shrink. Network visualization helps to sharpen what would otherwise be speculative conclusions about these intellectuals and tells us that these networks, or at least the impression of the networks left to us by the various letter collection editors, were not always connected but instead were disparate and fragmented. It was often this exclusivity which made them so advantageous to those functioning within them but for those on the outskirts, the complexity of the networks made them more difficult to join. These insights are useful individually but collectively show that conscious networking was as essential for central medieval religious elites as it is in the modern day.

Data Accessibility

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in Github at <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15298652>.

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