

MONASTICISM IN ANGEVIN ENGLAND

HELEN STEELE

In 1164, King Henry II, now ten years into his reign, published the *Constitutions of Clarendon*. Henry was attempting to clarify the laws of England that had been left so uncertain after Stephen's reign and the civil wars that accompanied it¹. The Constitutions included clauses that made the relationships between laity and clergy the remit of King; he banned the church from excommunicating his vassals without his consent; he assumed control of the appointment of senior church officials and forbade clerics from traveling overseas without his permission.² It was the third article that proved most controversial. Traditionally, those in holy orders had been tried in ecclesiastic courts and exempt from civil action, but according to William of Newburgh, clerks "such as are guilty of heinous crimes," existed in the Church in England "like the chaff innumerable amid the few grains of corn." In the ten year's of Henry's reign, "more than a hundred murders had been committed by the clergy in England alone."³ Henry intended, with the *Constitutions*, to make clerics accountable to him and to

the civil courts. Article three stated, "Clerks charged and accused of any matter [...] shall come into his court to answer there to whatever it shall seem to the king's court should be answered there [...] if the clerk be convicted or confess, the church ought not to protect him further."⁴

Henry might have expected his Archbishop of Canterbury to support him and to sign the Constitutions. Henry had appointed his good friend Thomas Becket to that post after the latter had served him well as Lord Chancellor for the early part of his reign. During this period, Becket had shown few signs of zealous allegiance to the Church, but when he was appointed Archbishop, "he on a sudden exhibited [...] a change in his habit and manners". Although all the other assembled churchmen signed the document, albeit "by blandishments, or terrified them with alarms, that they deemed it necessary to yield to and obey the royal pleasure," Becket continually refused to sign the Constitutions, despite Henry's fury.⁵ As the King became more irate, Becket fled into exile in France, where he remained for six years. Angry letters passed between Becket, the King and the Pope until in 1170 the two sides seemed to come to an agreement. Becket returned to England, but he did not intend to lose this war of wills with the King. He carried letters from the Pope suspending several prelates who had sided with the King. On hearing this news, Henry "lost the mastery of himself, in the heat of his exuberant passion, from the abundance of his perturbed spirit, poured forth the language of indiscretion."⁶ Inspired by his words, four knights traveled to England and murdered Becket in Canterbury Cathedral.⁷

¹ Secondary sources used in this article include Robert Bartlett, *England Under the Norman and Angevin Kings, 1075-1225* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2000); Giles Constable, *The Reformation of the Twelfth Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996); C. Warren Hollister, Robert C. Stacey and Robin Chapman Stacey, *The Making of England to 1399*, 8th Ed (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001); C.H. Lawrence, ed, *The English Church and the Papacy in the Middle Ages* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1965); Richard Mortimer, *Angevin England, 1154-1258* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994); Francis Oakley, *The Western Church in the Later Middle Ages* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985); Richard Southern, *Western Society and the Church in the Middle Ages* (London: Penguin, 1990) and *The Making of the Middle Ages* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953).

² "Constitution of Clarendon" in *Source Problems in English History*, eds Albert Beebe White and Wallace Notestein (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1915).

³ William of Newburgh, *Historia Rerum Anglicarum* (History of the Kings of England), in *Chronicles of the Reigns of Stephen, Henry II., and Richard I*, ed. Richard Howlett (London: Longman 1884), book 2, chapter XVI.

⁴ "Constitution of Clarendon", article 3.

⁵ William of Newburgh, *Historia Rerum Anglicarum*, book 2, chapter XVI.

⁶ *Ibid.*, book 2, chapter 25.

⁷ For more information on the life and the murder of Thomas Becket, see Edward Grim, *Vita S. Thomae, Cantuariensis Archiepiscopi et Martyris*, in *Materials for the Life of Thomas Becket* volume 2, James Robertson, ed., (London: Rolls Series,

The Church apparently won an important victory when the approbation of fellow monarchs, the Pope and general feeling forced King Henry to submit to the Church, to swear an oath of innocence and revoke the Constitutions of Claredon.⁸ Yet deeper conflicts within the church, some caused by Becket himself, prevented the Church from capitalizing upon this victory. Clerical chronicles, written in the years after Henry's submission, illustrate the story of the weakness of the church that the drama of Becket has often overshadowed, yet which is equally as significant. These chronicles reveal the internal dissent within the monasteries, the conflicts with secular society and the secular clergy, and the continuing entanglement of monasteries and the State.

The Chronicles were popular works written by both regular and secular clergy. Regular clergy were those in holy orders who were theoretically withdrawn from the world, such as monks and nuns. Benedictine monk Jocelin of Brakelond, who wrote in detail about the affairs of the important abbey at Bury St Edmunds between 1172 and 1202, gives a crucial insight into the concerns and pressures facing monks. His fellow Benedictine Richard of Devizes illuminates the rôle of the church in state politics over a brief period at the beginning of the reign of Richard I. Secular clerks interacted with secular society, holding parishes and performing pastoral duties. Seculars Walter Map, who wrote in the 1180s and 1190s, and his contemporary Giraldus Cambrensis (Gerald of Wales) were not afraid to be highly critical of their contemporaries, including the regular clergy. Roger of Hoveden, working in the same period, writes chronicle as

1875-1885); Gervase of Canterbury, "Thomas Becket's Death," in *History of the Archbishops of Canterbury*, translated by Joseph Stevenson, *The Church Historians of England*, volume 5, part 1 (London: Seeley's, 1853), 329-336; Roger de Hoveden, *The Annals of Roger de Hoveden: Comprising the history of England and of other countries of Europe from A.D. 732 to A.D. 1201*, translated by Henry T. Riley (New York: AMS Press, 1968), 260-339 and Benedict of Peterborough, "The Murder of Thomas Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury, 29 December 1170," *Chronicle of Benedict of Peterborough*.

⁸ Roger de Hoveden, *The Annals of Roger de Hoveden: Comprising the history of England and of other countries of Europe from A.D. 732 to A.D. 1201*, translated by Henry T. Riley (New York: AMS Press, 1968), 356.

history, including large amounts of primary evidence, and as such is a valuable source. It is important, however, to read all these chronicles critically. Chronicles, as personal accounts, were infused with bias. This, it is important to recognize this and look at the context and beyond to perceive the truth.

The Church and the monastic movement in Angevin England at this time were in flux. New Orders, such as the Cistercians had established themselves in England, often in the far reaches of the nation in an attempt to isolate themselves from secular society. The Benedictines, who had built their monasteries in every corner of England, stretched and adapted their own rule to suit the new circumstances. These changes created great tension both within the monasteries and between the monasteries and the secular world. In addition, the Church, once envisaged as offering some respite from the morass of secular life, remained firmly entangled within the State. The power of the church and its role in Angevin society attracted not only the pious but also those more interested in power and influence, leading to further criticism. However, while there was criticism of practical aspects of the Church, the critics at the time did not question the rightness of the Church and Christianity as a whole. Critics wanted to change the church from within, not anything more drastic. However, the Church was not eager to change, and it took centuries for fundamental change to force itself upon the Church.

Life in the monasteries was supposed to be one of quiet contemplation of God, a fellowship of men dedicated to an ideal more important than worldly matters. Yet, as the chronicles attest, the monastic life was one of internal disputes, power games, corruption, and luxury. It is little wonder that respect for the regular clergy waned in the period and led to disputes.

St Benedict wrote his Rule ca. 530 CE in Italy, and over the course of three centuries, the Benedictine monastery became the model for all European monasteries. The Rule focused upon obedience: to God, to the abbot and to the Rule. It was extremely detailed and included instructions on the living arrangements of the monks, on

how the monks should hold services, sing the psalms, and organize the monastery. The rule forbade personal property, determining this to be a “special vice to be cut off root and branch,” and idleness or excessive drinking or eating.⁹ Richard Southern notes that the Rule expected monks to “put up with everything – poverty, illness, harshness – because these things lead back to God.”¹⁰ Yet, by the latter part of the twelfth century, this was clearly not the case in the Benedictine monasteries. As John Appleby writes in his Introduction to the Chronicle of Richard of Devizes, they had become “rich and complacent.”¹¹

Perhaps it is not surprising that the monks in the twelfth century monasteries demanded a higher standard of living and more access to authority than did their predecessors. Monasteries recruited their monks from the lesser nobility: the third sons and bastard children who would not inherit material wealth, for whom a religious life was more a profession than a calling. Indeed, Southern described the monks as “a conscript army [...]”¹² While undoubtedly many men did have a calling, others cared less for the religious aspects than for the food on their plates and their position in the pecking order.

In 1182, King Henry II, on the advice of the monks at the Abbey of Bury St Edmunds appointed Samson as the new Abbot of St Edmunds. When Samson returned to the Abbey, he discovered it in a terrible state. The previous Abbot, Hugh, had allowed such profligacy and mismanagement that the abbey was in debt to local usurers for large sums of money. The monks had used abbey property as collateral until “the sum of the debt owing to that Jew was a thousand and two hundred pounds, over and

above the amount by which usury had increased it.”¹³ This was a huge sum by medieval standards. Although the abbey held almost sixty fiefs,¹⁴ each of which might have an annual income of up to seventy-five pounds,¹⁵ the actual rent received by the abbey was far less, and certainly not enough to allow the monks to continue living as they had been.

Throughout Jocelin’s *Chronicle*, there is a theme of internecine strife at St Edmunds. The monks there constantly jockeyed for influence and control, and gossip and rumor were a common currency. This is illustrated in the choice of Samson as Abbot. The monks debated extensively the qualities they wanted in the new Abbot and those monks who might fit their criteria. When one monk was suggested as being “eloquent and prudent,” the response proved typical of the true concerns of the brethren “From good clerks deliver us.” The monks rejected others as not learned enough, too old and too young, too lax and too strict and not good enough at the singing of psalms.¹⁶ All told, the debates continued for eighteen months before the monks took their nominations to the King.

Jocelin details the attempts of Abbot Samson to control spending and better manage the abbey’s property throughout his chronicle. Despite the urgency of the situation, many of the monks resisted change and grew resentful at any attempts to change their lifestyles. Throughout his reign, Samson frequently clashed with the holders of the cellarer position. The cellarer was a monk who, according to the Benedictine Rule, the monks of the chapter should choose to be “wise, mature in character [...] not turbulent” and to “do nothing without the order of the abbot.”¹⁷ At St Edmunds, the cellarers were anything but. In Abbot Hugh’s time, the “cellarer entertained all guests

⁹ “Rule of St Benedict,” *Patrologia Latina* Vol. 66, col. 215ff, translated by Ernest F. Henderson, *Select Historical Documents of the Middle Ages* (London: George Bell and Sons, 1910).

¹⁰ Richard Southern, *Western Society and the Church in the Middle Ages* (London: Penguin, 1990), 220.

¹¹ Richard of Devizes, *Cronicon Richardi Divisensis de Tempore Regis Richardi Primi* (The Chronicle of Richard of Devizes of the Time of King Richard the First), edited by John T. Appleby, *Medieval Texts*, eds V.H. Galbraith, Sir Roger Mynors and C.N.L. Brooke (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd, 1963), xv.

¹² Richard Southern, *The Making of the Middle Ages* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953), 162.

¹³ Jocelin of Brakelond, *The Chronicle of Jocelin of Brakelond Monk of St. Edmundsbury: A Picture of Monastic and Social Life on the XIIth Century*, translated and edited by L.C. Jane, introduction by Abbot Gasquet (London: Chatto and Windus, 1907), 1.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 48.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 11.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 5.

¹⁷ “Rule of St Benedict,” rule 31.

of whatever condition, at the expense of the monastery”¹⁸ and while “cellarers succeeded each other in rapid succession,” each one managed to run up more debt. When Samson attempted to curb spending by having one of his clerks oversee the cellarer, the monks were furious: “murmurs rose [...] nor is there a spot in the house which is not resounding with poisonous hissings.”¹⁹ Even when Samson wanted the monks to forgo their usual level of luxury for a while to help pay for repairs to the shrine of St Edmund, damaged in a fire, the monks complained that they would “perish with hunger and thirst” and forced Samson to concede.²⁰

However, sometimes the monks could not force an Abbot to concede. The Benedictine Rule allowed both excommunication and corporal punishment for obstinacy, disobedience or contempt for his elders,²¹ but abbots varied in how often they invoked these punishments. Abbot Hugh had imprisoned and later exiled Samson to Acre for dissent in the early 1170s²² but while Samson himself briefly imprisoned and excommunicated some monks during a particularly intense argument, this was merely one time among many.²³ More often, he worked to achieve some measure of harmony.

It was not merely at the Abbey at St Edmunds that monks ignored and twisted the Rules. In fact, it would appear that problems at other monasteries outweighed the minor squabbles at St Edmunds. Pope Alexander III was so concerned with the situation in 1179 that at the Third Lateran Council, he issued a series of decrees concerning the behavior of the clergy. While many of the decrees covered both secular and regular clergy, some directly addressed the behavior of monks. The decree reasserted the ban on individual monks holding property, and banned the growing practice of the monasteries paying lay lords to receive the monastic habit.²⁴ Despite Benedictines vowing celibacy when they entered the monasteries, there were

clearly enough monks breaking these rules that Alexander felt it necessary to restate them, writing, “That clerks in holy orders shall not keep concubines” nor should clerks “frequent monasteries of nuns.” This was not a merely theoretical concern either: the wording of the decree – “Clerics in holy orders, who in open concubinage keep their mistresses in their houses, should either cast them out and live continently or be deprived of ecclesiastical office and benefice” – clearly assumes that the practice takes place.²⁵

The growing laxity in the Benedictine monasteries was not invisible to the rest of society. It created dissent both from within the monasteries themselves and within the greater society. The former drove the reform movement in the eleventh and twelfth centuries that produced the new religious orders. These new orders, while internally more coherent, brought with them new sets of problems. Chroniclers, especially Walter Map, accused them of greed, corruption and high-handedness and they became as disliked as the Benedictines.

In the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the growing dissatisfaction with the traditional Benedictine Rule within the monasteries led to the forming of new monastic orders. Their version of the Rule reflected growing concerns about the excesses and the limited spiritualism of the Benedictines.²⁶ One of the earliest of the new Orders was the Cluniac, founded at Cluny in France in the tenth century and aimed at creating a new foundation. While the Cluniacs officially followed the Benedictine Rule, they emphasized the *Opus Dei*, the mass, to such an extent that they had time for little else. The Cluniacs never had a strong impact upon England, having only a limited number of establishments.²⁷

Far more important to English religious life were the monks of the Cistercian Order. Like the Cluniacs, they theoretically followed the Benedictine Rule, and like them, they adapted the rule to their own needs. Founded in

¹⁸ Jocelin of Brakelond, *Chronicle*, 2.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 32.

²⁰ *Ibid.* 43.

²¹ “Rule of St Benedict,” rule 23.

²² Jocelin of Brakelond, *Chronicle*, 2.

²³ *Ibid.* 46.

²⁴ Roger de Hoveden, *Annals*, 505.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 510.

²⁶ Richard Southern, *The Making of the Middle Ages*, 163.

²⁷ David Knowles and R. Neville Hadcock, *Medieval Religious Houses: England and Wales* (London: Longman, Green and Co., 1953).

Citeaux in 1098,²⁸ the Cistercian Order became popular under St Bernard of Clairvaux and soon spread to England. Waverley, Rievaulx and Fountains were all important Cistercian foundations in existence by the beginning of Henry II's reign.²⁹ The Cistercian version of the Rule emphasized asceticism and withdrawal from the world. While this contrasted strongly with the traditional interpretation of the rule in abbeys such as St Edmunds, this created a new set of problems. To achieve this isolation, when the Cistercians acquired land they would remove all existing villages and churches from the land. They did not manage parishes or run fiefs, instead converting the land to entirely agricultural use, which they and their lay-brothers farmed themselves.³⁰

While some of the new Cistercian foundations undoubtedly managed to establish themselves on land that was mostly empty and without any great upset, some of the new monasteries caused a great deal of grief and hostility. Walter Map writes extensively in his *De Nugis Curialium* about the iniquities of the Cistercians, and while it might appear that he is, for some reason biased, in the same work he is positive about individual Cistercian monks, describing the Cistercian Peter of Tarentaise as "He was [...] in all circumstances [...] every way perfect."³¹ This seems to confirm, to some extent, that his dispute was with the abuses of the Cistercians, not the ideals themselves. Thus, while the reader should be cautious about accepting Map's words at face value, they should not completely dismiss them either, especially as other historians have confirmed some of Map's assertions. In addition, it is notable that the temper of the times allowed such an inflammatory text. Map wrote and published his work for general consumption without any apparent negative consequences.

Map describes many of the abuses of which the people accused the Cistercians in his "On Monks." Despite the Cistercian ideal of poverty, Map accuses them of having both a great "reserve of wealth" while showing extreme "stinginess."³² He complains that they are hospitable to each other and especially to potential benefactors, but do not show the same charity to the poor or even to other clerics, who are neither "invited, or dragged in, no, nor allowed to enter the hostelry."³³ Map includes the Cistercian justification of their behavior, quoting them as saying, "We are spoiling the Egyptians [non-Cistercians] and enriching the Hebrews [the Cistercians]." The Cistercians believed that their way was the only way to God, to which Map strongly objects.³⁴ This arrogance, noted by other historians, Richard Southern explains as possibly resulting from the sudden and unexpected success they achieved³⁵ but for whatever reason, it led to painful clashes with the secular world.

While Map concentrates much of his anger upon the Cistercians, his eye turns also to the other new orders within England and upon their modes of living. While he clearly approves of the founding house of the Carthusians, he notes that another Carthusian house "impelled by covetousness, has followed the devil" and "waxed fat," its monks living lives far removed from the original ideal.³⁶ Similarly, he notes that the pure ideals of the Order of Grandmont seem to be starting to dissolve as "in their direction covetousness has pointed a finger."³⁷ Only the Gilbertines, founded by Gilbert of Sempringham seem to meet his approval. This order, unique to England had both a monastery and a nunnery on one site, although any interaction between the sexes was strictly limited.³⁸

Interactions between the monks and secular society depended a great deal upon the Order involved. In the case of traditional Benedictines, the Abbot was highly involved

²⁸ Richard Southern, *The Making of the Middle Ages*, 163.

²⁹ David Knowles et al, *Medieval Religious Houses*.

³⁰ Richard Southern, *Western Society and the Church*, 250–265.

³¹ Walter Map, *De Nugis Curialium* (Courtier's Trifles), edited and translated by M.R. James, revised by C.N.L. Brooke and R.A.B. Mynors, Oxford Medieval Texts, eds B.F. Harvey, D.E. Greenaway and M. Lapidge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 135.

³² Ibid., 87.

³³ Ibid., 99.

³⁴ Ibid., 87.

³⁵ Including Richard Southern, *Western Society and the Church*, 252.

³⁶ Walter Map, *De Nugis Curialium*, 51–53.

³⁷ Ibid., 115.

³⁸ Ibid., 116.

in secular society, often wielding power equivalent to any secular magnate. He had to manage fiefs, taxes and tolls and arrange the fulfillment of scutage for the king. The Cistercians, however, withdrew from secular society, and caused great upheaval in doing so.

Jocelin of Brakelond illustrates the power and the frustration associated with the abbot of a large abbey. St Edmunds was a particularly large and powerful house. It held a large number of fiefs and parishes, and had full control over the town of Bury St Edmunds, which lay just outside its walls. In this respect, it differed from the majority of houses, which were far smaller and held far less land. However, abbots of smaller houses would probably have recognized many of the problems Abbot Samson faced, albeit on a different scale.

When Samson assumed the abbacy of St Edmunds, he acquired external problems with the Abbey's fiefs in addition to the internal problems. Abbot Hugh had been "in temporal matters [...] unskilled and improvident" and his vassals had taken advantage of this and his age: "they did not that which was right, but that which was pleasing in his own eyes."³⁹ Jocelin describes Abbot Samson and the variety of his duties as Samson strove to regain control. The new abbot ordered a survey of all the manors owned by the Abbey and made sure that the tenants were finally paying the due and back rents. He also purchased the rights to new manors from the King and put the management of all manors directly under his control.⁴⁰ In the case of Adam de Cokefield, de Cokefield claimed a manor belonging to the Abbey as his inheritance. Samson defended the right of the Abbey despite the knight offering "much money" to Samson to quit his claim. Samson could even be somewhat harsh in his defense of the rights of the Abbey. When Herbert the dean built a windmill that threatened to reduce the dependence of the local population on the Abbey's mill, Samson demanded that Herbert demolish the windmill, making it clear he would have the windmill destroyed should Herbert refuse.⁴¹ Clearly, in this case as in others, Abbot Samson was determined to protect the

income and the rights of the monastery from external claims. It is a position that seems far removed from the original tone of the Rule, and Abbot Samson seems far more hardheaded and practical than the spiritual shepherd the Rule envisaged.⁴² Yet, such an approach was clearly necessary, given the financial needs of the monastery and the responsibilities of the abbot to both the Abbey as an institution and the monks themselves.

The Abbey also had rights to the town of Bury St Edmunds, and Samson was active in the management of the town. In 1190, he expelled the Jews from the town – an act that was seen as a sign of "great virtue"⁴³ and popular with the townspeople. Less popular, two years later, was Samson's insistence that town increase the payments made to the monastery. After two years of negotiation, the abbot and the town burghers came to an agreement, mostly because Samson threatened to refuse them permission to shop their wares at the fair of St Edmunds.⁴⁴ However, the question of payments to the monastery arose again in 1198, and remained unresolved by the end of Jocelin's *Chronicle*.⁴⁵

In addition to managing the manors and the town, the Abbot was the liege lord to many knights, who were tenants on these fiefs. From the beginning of his tenure, Abbot Samson had to balance the demands of the knights with the obligations he owed the King. Every manor in the land owed the king the tax known as *scutage* with which the King paid for an army.⁴⁶ Naturally, Samson tried to extract the money from the knights, with whom it proved extremely unpopular, and they clashed frequently over it. In 1198, King Richard was at war and wanted men not money. Samson even feared the loss of his barony, and the rights to the manors; ultimately, he was forced to pay mercenaries to stand in place of his errant knights. His fear was not unfounded; Jocelin notes that the King had

⁴² "Rule of St Benedict," rule 2.

⁴³ Jocelin de Brakelond, *Chronicle*, 18.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁴⁶ "What Scutage is and Why it is so called," *Dialogue of the Exchequer, 1177*, Book 1, in *Select Charters of English Constitutional History*, William Stubbs & H. W. C. Davis, eds. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1913) 218.

³⁹ Jocelin de Brakelond, *Chronicle*, 1.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 11, 13, 19.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 24.

stripped the Bishop of London and other barons of their fiefs for failing to fulfill the demands of *scutage*.⁴⁷

The Cistercians avoided the need to manage large numbers of manors and knights by withdrawing from secular society as much as possible. However, their isolationism caused problems in a country already as crowded as England. There simply were not enough wild and untended places left for the Cistercians to expand as quickly as they had been, and in the absence of such places, they would acquire land and evict those living there. Map writes, “Those upon whom comes an invasion of Cistercians may be sure they are doomed to a lasting exile” and notes that, “Because their rule does not allow them to govern parishioners, they overthrow churches, and turn out parishioners, not scrupling to cast down the altars and level everything before the ploughshare”. He depicts them as pitiless in their evictions, describing the destitution, hunger, poverty and agony that follow in their wake.⁴⁸ It is not a pleasant picture, nor does Map intend it to be. Despite his vitriol, however, a number of Cistercian foundations did take over established land,⁴⁹ and they did evict the tenants, so to some extent these words are grounded in truth.

According to Map, however, the Cistercians did not stop at evicting tenants from land they had acquired legally; they acquired land illegally and forced men off land that the Cistercians did not own. Map accuses the Cistercians of forging land deeds, salting a landowner’s meadow and rendering it useless until the owner sold it to them, and even of moving a tree that served as a boundary marker to expand their lands.⁵⁰ Giraldus Cambrensis also relates versions of these stories, lending some verity to Map’s assertions.⁵¹ Map and Giraldus also agree on a story in which Cistercians send their laybrothers to murder an entire household that was resisting their demands.⁵² In

Map’s version, only one woman escapes and when her family returns to the manor some days later they find “an absolutely level, well-ploughed field, no appearance of human occupation.”⁵³ If true, this would be a sensational act, but the reader must be careful, for while there are two accounts, Map and Giraldus were good friends and colleagues, might have heard the story from the same, possibly false, source, or influenced each other. However, true or not, stories such as these became common currency in England in the period and served to inflame the already tense relations between the monasteries and other sections of society. These tensions even extended between different orders. Richard of Devizes, a Benedictine monk in Winchester, describes as “madness” the transfer of two monks to other orders.⁵⁴

The tense relationship between the monastic orders and secular society did not end with the laity. The secular clergy worked among the people, performing pastoral duties and living in the parishes. They must have seen for themselves the high-handed attitude of many monasteries, and frequently found common cause with the people. There were frequent arguments and points of contention between the secular clergy and the monks (the regulars), which could even result in violence.

Richard of Devizes illustrates this tension with the story of Hugh of Nonant and the monks of Coventry. Hugh was Archbishop of Coventry (or Chester) and in 1189, complained to Archbishop of Canterbury that the monks of Coventry had “laid violent hands on him and shed his blood before the altar.”⁵⁵ In response, Bishop Hugh expelled the monks from Coventry, tore down their buildings and replaced them with secular clerks.⁵⁶ Richard of Devizes relates that Hugh disliked monks so much that he declared, “You monks will die like demons and fall into hell like the first of your princes because you are devils whilst you are alive.”⁵⁷ Despite an appeal to the Pope, the matter remained unresolved for some years. In 1197 Abbot

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 27, 34.

⁴⁸ Walter Map, *De Nugis Curialium*, 93–95.

⁴⁹ David Knowles et al. *Medieval Religious Houses*.

⁵⁰ Walter Map, *De Nugis Curialium*, 105.

⁵¹ Giraldus Cambrensis (Gerald of Wales), *Opera: Works of Giraldus Cambrensis*, eds. J. S. Brewer, G. F. Wainwright, and J. F. Dimock, (London 1863–65), iv. 225–238.

⁵² Walter Map, *De Nugis Curialium*, 107 and Giraldus Cambrensis, *Opera*, 225–227.

⁵³ Walter Map, *De Nugis Curialium*, 107.

⁵⁴ Richard of Devizes, *Chronicle*, 26–27.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 69.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 72.

Samson was one of a committee appointed by the Pope to resolve the situation,⁵⁸ and although they decided in favor of the monks, the monks were unable to return to Coventry until after the death of Bishop Hugh in 1198.⁵⁹

Abbot Samson had his own problems with the secular clergy. In 1186, Samson and the Archbishop of Canterbury argued about the liberties of the manor of Eleigh. Both men wanted to control the manor, both had charters granting it to them, and Samson was even prepared to use military force to press his claim. They appealed to the Chancellor, William Longchamp, but he would not resolve the situation and it remained at a standoff for several years.⁶⁰ Samson was not even above deceit towards other churchmen when it was to protect the Abbey's interests. When the Bishop of Ely demanded the right to cut wood from the Abbey, Samson did not dare refuse. The Bishop's clerk, however, confused two manors and asked the right to cut lumber in a manor that was practically bare of trees. Samson did not correct him and promptly had all the trees in the correct manor cut down, so that when the Bishop attempted to correct the error it was too late.⁶¹ The bad blood continued between Ely and St Edmund's for some years: in 1201, Jocelin writes that the two argued over a market at Lakenheath. Ely had started a market there that threatened the income from St Edmund's market, and when asked to stop, "They would not desist, and threatening words went to and fro, and spears threatened spears." When the problem was still unresolved a year later, the bailiffs of St Edmund's demolished the market and took away all the livestock.⁶²

Just as the clergy, both regular and secular, was intimately involved in the lives of the people, it was also drawn in, sometimes willingly, into the affairs of state and government. Despite the Third Lateran Council enacting decrees that forbade many aspects of interaction between Church and state and the revocation of the Constitutions of Clarendon, the church in England had neither the will nor

the unity to prevent this entanglement. The King appointed bishops and abbots, often in exchange for payment; the clergy served as royal officers and justices; the King sold land to the Church and then demanded his *scutage* payments; the King acted as final arbiter in many clerical disputes. None of this was envisaged by the early monks, and in the wake of the Becket crisis and the defeat of the Constitutions, the Church must have believed themselves free of such interference. However, it was not merely one-sided: the clergy were often as keen to involve themselves in secular affairs as the King was for them to be involved.

The appointment of senior church officials by the King was a matter of great concern to many clergy. When Abbot Hugh died, the monks of St Edmund's fretted over their rights to appoint his successor. They debated their choice even though they "had no certain knowledge that we should obtain freedom of election from the lord king."⁶³ Ultimately, the King accepted their nominee Samson with the warning "if you do ill, I will exact a recompense at your hands."⁶⁴ Samson did well to heed the warning, as the King had the power to unseat Samson and appoint his own man. Despite the opposition of the monks, and "to the disgust of many," in 1191 King Richard appointed Robert of Hereford to be Abbot of Muchelney.⁶⁵ He, or his officers, also interfered in the appointment of the abbot of Westminster⁶⁶ and he appointed men to bishoprics as he pleased. In 1174 alone, Henry appointed a new Archbishop of Canterbury and five new bishops.⁶⁷ Under Richard, the situation was even worse. In 1189, according to Richard of Devizes, King Richard accepted large sums of money from potential candidates to the four empty bishoprics.⁶⁸ According to the Decrees of Pope Alexander III issued in 1179, the practice was a "shocking thing", venal and unlawful.⁶⁹ Yet Richard did it nonetheless and the Pope approved the bishops he appointed. Abbot Samson of St Edmunds seems to have recognized the danger from a

⁵⁸ Jocelin de Brakelond, *Chronicle*, 37.

⁵⁹ Richard of Devizes, *Chronicle*, 99.

⁶⁰ Jocelin de Brakelond, *Chronicle*, 20–21.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 52–53.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁶⁵ Richard of Devizes, *Chronicle*, 40.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁶⁷ Roger de Hoveden, *Annals*, 376.

⁶⁸ Richard of Devizes, *Chronicle*, 7.

⁶⁹ Roger de Hoveden, *Annals*, 498.

King bent on going to war and in need of funds: “The abbot [...] purchased the favor and grace of King Richard with gifts and money, so that he believed that he could carry through all his affairs according to his desire.”⁷⁰ Had the Church had the full freedoms that seemed promised by Henry in the wake of the Becket crisis, this should not have been necessary, but Samson realized that the Church had lost any ground it had gained in 1171.

Clerics were not always the victims of the whims of the King: they often served as his officers and justices. During Richard’s reign, his Chancellor was the Bishop of Ely, William Longchamp, a man whose sole interest in life seemed to be the accumulation of power. With Richard absent on Crusade, Longchamp effectively ruled England in his stead, and used the opportunity to vie for power with Prince John, extract money from clergymen for stolen land and install family members in influential positions.⁷¹ When John finally deposed Longchamp, the Bishop, out of spite, placed his entire see under interdict so that none there could receive any sacraments.⁷² Longchamp became so despised that when he visited St Edmunds in 1193, “he found no one to chant mass for him, either clerk or monk. But the priest, indeed, who stood at the first mass and at the canon of the mass, and the other priests by the altars, ceased, and stood with unmoved lips, until a messenger came and said that he had left the church.”⁷³

Like many other abbots and clergy, Samson was a justice, hearing cases carefully and discreetly.⁷⁴ Others were not so scrupulous. Concerning justices, Map writes that the “clerical officers are usually found more oppressive than the laymen”. He speculates that for some it was an attempt to gain notice with the King and possibly win a bishopric, describing an abbot who “had the poor despoiled more savagely than any layman, hoping perhaps to gain a bishopric by the favor accruing from his prey.”⁷⁵ Despite the decrees of Pope Alexander III proscribing clerks from undertaking secular business, declaring,

“neither is a clerk [...] to exercise any secular jurisdiction under any princes or men of secular power” under pain of loss of ecclesiastical office, it would seem that the English clergy were quite prepared to ignore the pope in their quest for power and influence.⁷⁶ That even William Longchamp, one of the more venal of the churchmen in this regard, retained the support of the pope through all his actions, speaks a great deal to the real impact of these decrees.

Although theoretically clerics of the Church gave their first and highest loyalty to the Pope, in England in this period, this loyalty often clashed with devotion to the King and to the emerging national ideal. This can be seen as early as the Becket crisis. In 1170, several bishops, including the Archbishop of York, crowned King Henry’s son Henry as King in London.⁷⁷ The Pope directly opposed this action, but their allegiance to the King held sway.

Less controversial were the feelings of Englishness clearly enunciated by men of the Church. Abbot Samson was “wont to preach to the people in English” not in the more acceptable Latin.⁷⁸ He was so devoted to the King that when Richard was taken prisoner, “The abbot stood forth [...] and said that he was ready to seek his lord the king. He said that he would search for him in disguise or in any other way, until he found him and had certain knowledge of him.”⁷⁹ Much of these feelings seemed focus against the French, often the enemy of England. Throughout his chronicle, Richard of Devizes praises the English at the expense of the French, and Walter Map calls France, “the mother of all mischief.”⁸⁰ Clearly, while there was still a way for churchmen to go to fully reject the full authority of the Pope and think primarily as Englishmen, they had taken first steps along that road during this period.

⁷⁰ Jocelin de Brakelond, *Chronicle*, 45.

⁷¹ Richard of Devizes, *Chronicle*, 10–11, 39.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 54.

⁷³ Jocelin de Brakelond, *Chronicle*, 21.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁷⁵ Walter Map, *De Nugis Curialium*, 13–15.

⁷⁶ Roger de Hoveden, *Annals*, 512.

⁷⁷ William of Newburgh, *Historia Rerum Anglicarum*, chapter 25, para 1.

⁷⁸ Jocelin de Brakelond, *Chronicle*, 16.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁸⁰ Richard of Devizes, *Chronicle* and Walter Map, *De Nugis Curialium*, 73.

Although the English Church seemed to have won an important battle with the power of the monarchy in 1170, they failed to capitalize upon the temporary weakness of the crown. Instead, Henry and his successors may have won the war, as real authority shifted from the church to the state, and as clergy and laity alike began to identify themselves primarily with the King and nation. The growing moribund state of the Benedictine monasteries and the arrival of controversial and disliked new Orders such as the Cistercians created greater disunity and disharmony. A united Church, led by the Pope and the Archbishop of Canterbury, was clearly unattainable.

The Benedictine monasteries were often profligate, the monks greedy, fractious and troublesome. Their abbots were powerful temporal lords, spending more of their time

in estate management and arguments over money than on spiritual matters. The Cistercians, on the other hand, isolated themselves from society, evicting tenants, causing distress and evoking strong dislike throughout the country. The perceived problems with the regular clergy caused great tension between them and the secular clergy. It is clear that neither side much liked each other, and both worked to improve their position at the expense of the other. Both sides clearly worried about the influence of the King in their affairs, but at the same time, both worked for him and paid him for his favor. Some churchmen even showed the King more loyalty than they did the Pope, and this together with the seeds of national feeling, did not bode well for the Church in England.

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