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A Case in which a Revitalization of Something Medieval Turned out not to be Medievalism

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A Case in which a Revitalization of Something Medieval Turned out not to be Medievalism

Part of the journal section "Forum: Falling into Medievalism"

Mette B. Bruun, "A Case in which a Revitalization of Something Medieval Turned out not to be Medievalism"

The Cistercian Order was founded in Burgundy, France, in 1098 in a wake of the reform-enthusiasm related to the so-called Gregorian reform. The Order saw a rapid success in the 12th century and spread through most of Europe not least thanks to its main figure, Bernard Clairvaux (1090-1153). Bernard was an influential man. He corresponded with princes and popes and engaged in a wide array of ecclesiastical causes and politics. He was constantly on the watch for heresy or relapse in whichever guise and persistently sought to drive his contemporaries into soteriologically safer havens: Cistercian monasteries, crusades, orthodoxy, or, if so, simply god-fearing lives. First and foremost, he became the central figure of the Cistercian order and its endeavours to reform Benedictine monasticism. And he produced a large *oeuvre* of treatises, letters and sermons. Most renowned were his eighty-six sermons on the *Song of Songs* which employed the nuptial vocabulary of the Old Testament *Song of Songs* to describe the affectionate union between Christ and the Soul.

Centuries passed with ups and downs for the Cistercians. Most were downs. Wars and plagues made it difficult for them to maintain the population of the monasteries and to maintain the uniformity that had always been one of the Order's governing principles. The uniformity was promoted by visitations between the various monasteries and by the annual General Chapter during which all abbots from the order met in Cîteaux-if bad times did not prevent them. But from the thirteenth century and onwards, bad times did exactly that. Furthermore, new forms of religious life appeared which enabled lay people to lead a devoted and regulated life without exactly taking monastic vows.

The seventeenth century saw a new wake of reforms following the Reformations of the sixteenth century. In France, this wake also reached the Cistercian Order in the shape of Armand-Jean de Rancé (1626-1700). He was Richelieu's godson, the chaplain of Louis XIV's brother, and led the typical life of a French courtier of the time. He was the abbot *in commendam* of five different monasteries. The system of having monasteries *in commendam* was widely spread; it first and foremost entailed that the abbot received an income from the monastery without necessarily having either administrative or ascetic aspirations. It is typical of this kind of arrangement that Rancé never visited any of the five monasteries during the 22 years he had them *in commendam*. In 1657, however, the death of his mistress from scarlet fever turned him away from worldly pleasures. Rancé decided to sell his abbot-titles and retire to one of his monasteries. It was due to this development that he came to his Cistercian monastery of La Trappe in Normandy for the first time. Later records were eager to tell about the state at the monastery when Rancé first arrived: The buildings were falling down, birds nested in the dormitory, men and women walked freely in and out of the monastery and played *boules* in the refectory when bad weather

prevented them from playing outside. The monastery garden was overgrown with weeds and bushes, and the forests surrounding the buildings were crammed with vagabonds and assassins. This report was written as a foil for a laud of Rancé's reform rather than as a precise rendering of the state of affairs, but it may not have been exaggeration throughout. At any rate, when Rancé first arrived at La Trappe, the commendatory abbot was apparently terrified by its horrible state-spiritually as well as materially. He decided to stay, reform the monastery and, possibly, the whole order. This was his first meeting with Cistercianism. He had to go through a one year noviciate at a neighbouring monastery in order to become a monk. The strict asceticism made the former courtier collapse when he was halfway through it; eventually, however, he returned to La Trappe, became a monk there, and took up the position as its proper abbot. It was from that position that he launched his reform.

Rancé's reform was first and foremost centred on penitence. It prescribed hard manual labour, silence, a meagre diet, isolation from the world, and renunciation of studies. The hard labour was partly a penitential exercise, partly a way of keeping the monastery self-supportive so that communication with the world might be kept at a minimum. This was also the reason why Rancé had Louis XIV's permission to remove the highway that ran outside the monastic walls: La Trappe had had its location since middle of the twelfth century; he could not move it further away from the world-but he could move the world away from the monastery. Rancé's reform eventually made a significant impact on the Cistercian order, the stricter branch of which is now commonly known as the Trappists. Cistercians, however, still disagree whether Rancé represented true Cistercian spirit or blind rigidity. Already back in the 1660s, the reform met with equal measures of admiration and resistance. The monks of La Trappe died in great number presumably, rumours went, because of the dire asceticism. Cistercians felt that the strong-headed abbot jeopardized the uniformity of the Order. Rancé's poor knowledge of Cistercianism prior to his monastic profession was brought to mind.

It became crucial to position the reform within a traditional Cistercian framework, and Rancé's main work *De la sainteté et des devoirs de la vie monastique* (1683) - among other things - served that purpose. In two great volumes Rancé presented the main points of his reform and placed it within the Cistercian genealogy ranging from the Old Testament prophets, via the apostles, through the Egyptian desert fathers of the fourth century, onwards to the *Rule of Benedict* and the Medieval Cistercians. It is this last group which is of primary interest in this context. Rancé believed his reform to be (and wanted to show that it was) in chiming with the medieval Cistercian ethos as expressed by Bernard of Clairvaux. He frequently refers to Bernard, addresses his texts, retains his key points of view on the love of God, the humility of the soul, the role of obedience and moulds them in what, from an outside perspective, seems unsurprisingly a seventeenth-century fashion. First and foremost, he stresses throughout the concordance of his reform with the Bernardine ideals. Now, is this a case of a revitalization of the Middle Ages or even of medieval ideals?

The answer to this question becomes somewhat clearer when viewed through the lens of a struggle that Rancé had with one of the most admired men in the monastic landscape of the time, Jean Mabillon (1632-1707). Jean Mabillon was a Maurist monk in Paris's most famous monastery, Saint-Germain-des-Près (where he was later buried next to Descartes who exerted no little influence on his work). The Maurist branch of the Benedictines was another consequence of contemporary reform-endeavours. From their origination in the beginning of the seventeenth century, the Maurists had specialized in textual criticism and critical editions of important ecclesiastical texts. First came the lives of the Saints, later followed critical editions of the works of, among others, Bernard of Clairvaux and Augustine. Mabillon

became a leading figure in this work. He was one of three editors of the Bernardine *oeuvre* which appeared in 1667; this was the edition used by Rancé, and an edition revised by Mabillon was later to enter Migne's *Patrologia Latina* and thus became the authoritative Bernard-edition until *Sancti Bernardi Opera* appeared in the 1950s. Unlike Rancé, who hardly ever left his monastery, Mabillon spent much time on research travels trawling through monastic archives in France, Germany and Italy looking for texts that might illuminate monastic history. It was in this context that he discovered the source-value of charters from the Early Middle Ages. These texts had hitherto been neglected, but Mabillon found that much information lay hidden in these texts on ownership and the bequeathing of land and buildings. He also found, however, that many of them had been forged in order to promote claims to either land or honour. In order to distinguish true charters from false, he set up a finely chiselled system of critical criteria based on external factors such as paper, seals, palaeography and internal factors such as rhetorical and linguistic style, references in a text to contemporary events or references in other texts to the text in questions. He also manufactured a catalogue of Carolingian (Early Medieval) scripts. All these criteria to some extent built on practices established already in the Renaissance, but he systematized them in a way hitherto unseen. They were collected in *De re diplomatica* (1681), a groundbreaking work which owned Mabillon the title, "Father of Diplomatics," that is the discipline of authenticating sources. Mabillon was very much aware that the texts he was dealing with were of an ancient date, and his text critical work to a high extent forms an attempt to bridge the gap between the "then" of the texts and the "now" of the reader. Mabillon was a man of his time; his interest in learning, in the composition of a proper library and in the right balance between piety and study were in concordance with a significant part of the many texts on the gentlemanly ideal of l'honnête homme that were published at the time. And one of the main tools in his text critical endeavours was the employment of the brand new discipline of critique that was used in all kinds of judgements from scientific to aesthetic ones.

To Mabillon and his fellow Maurists, Rancé's expressed point of view that study was alien to the spiritual purpose of the monk was of course a provocation. After nine years of dignified silence, Mabillon let himself be talked into answering Rancé, and the two men engaged in a heated dispute. Rancé claimed that monks were required to be penitential Christians, not learned doctors and that when arriving at the gate of heaven they would be asked about humility rather than theology. Mabillon answered that study had always been a crucial part of the monastic curriculum and that any decent Cistercian reform had always entailed a renewed interest in monastic study, listing a number of examples. Rancé lined up just as many examples of monastic figures and movements who had been against study and once again protested that study would only make the monks stray from their true purpose. Eventually, the two men met at the initiative of the Princess of Guise, who was a friend of both. Mabillon visited La Trappe and, after a cautious beginning, the two men kneeled and reconciled their differences. One of the most important monastic struggles of the late seventeenth century had been resolved.

The struggle between the two monks implies a wealth of features and problems; in this context I shall only highlight one single point of interest. Both men were, according to their own statements, deeply inspired and moved by Bernard's texts. Rancé made them the core of his reform and referred to them incessantly. Mabillon edited them; he has written enthusiastically and lovingly about the work that went into discerning the true version from the false ones. To Rancé, Bernard was part of a monastic tradition that was ever potentially vibrant and alive-and accessible on a synchronic note. The constitution of the monastic genealogy is not a matter of temporal progression but of spiritual affinity. The legitimization of

the reform through constant references to Bernard is not a matter of reviving an earlier golden age but of associating his own ideals with those of this epitome of Cistercian spirituality. In other words, Rancé's project appears to be almost contra-temporal. To Mabillon, similarly, Bernard's message was spiritually compulsive. He was, however, also aware that the Bernadine texts were steeped in another time and handed down through various links and transmissions. To Mabillon, Bernard's historical distance is constantly present. The Maurist is a monk but he is also a historian; and in his approach to Bernard, he is very much both. In Rancé's view, history is a discipline that belongs way out of the monastic focus (unless, he admits, one has received an unequivocal call from God to that effect!). His revitalization of Bernard is not a revitalization of the medieval monk, but of a set of ideals synchronically present.

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