Mediaeval Monastic Orientalism? Sanctity and the East in the Works of Bernard of Clairvaux

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INTRODUCTION

Was there such a thing as mediaeval orientalism? This is one of the questions at the forefront of Suzanne Conklin Akbari's 2012 monograph, *Idols in the East*, a study of the later Middle Ages based partly on extrapolations of the theory of orientalism espoused by Edward Said in 1978.[1] As Said's definition of orientalism places its origins in the enlightenment period, to successfully make use of his theory it is necessary to deconstruct it to fit the period in question. Akbari does this through the Foucauldian concept of *discourse* seminal to Said's framework.[2] For Foucault, discourse is the significance of texts or statements, be they literary or conversational, particularly in constructing views or impressions about political, social, and power relations.[3] This has particular relevance for post-colonial and racial studies, such as, crucially, orientalism.[4] Hence Said argues that the post-enlightenment discourse about the Orient resulted in an essentialisation of the east, often associated with anachronism.[5] So, following Said, Akbari looks at a wide range of "statements" in Latin, Old French, Italian, German, and Middle English, to analyse the

[1] Suzanne Conklin Akbari, *Idols in the East: European Representations of Islam and the Orient, 1100–1450* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press 2012); Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin Classics, 2003).
[2] Akbari, *Idols*, 6–7.
[3] Michel Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge, 2nd edition* (London: Routledge, 2002), 23–33 and *passim*.
[4] Sara Mills, *Discourse* (London: Routledge, 2004), 20–24, 94–109.
[5] Said, *Orientalism*, 1–4, 54–55.

understanding of "the East" in the European Middle Ages, to conclude that there was indeed a mediaeval orientalism, although different in important ways to that of Said.[6]

This type of discourse analysis of cultural understanding is to some extent also used by Jean Leclercq in his 1982 monograph *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God*, who argues that the understanding of culture, monastic culture in his case, is predicated on an understanding of their language and literature, for him the most important vessel for cultural output.[7] Leclercq, as opposed to Akbari, has a far narrower focus, and looks at the textual input and output, that is, the "discourse," specifically within the mediaeval monastic tradition. Of course, he also does not focus on orientalism as such. The purpose of my study, then, is a synthesis of methodologies of Akbari and Leclercq, in answering the question "was there such a thing as mediaeval *monastic* orientalism?"

This paper centres around the works of St Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153), someone situated at the apex of mediaeval Christian, and specifically monastic, culture. Bernard can be culturally linked to both the early mediaeval tradition and its developments into the later Middle Ages.[8] Firstly, he is often given the epithet "The Last of the Fathers," a reference not only to his familiarity with the writings of the early Church fathers (such as Gregory of Nyssa, Ambrose, and Augustine), but also a textual similarity with them.[9] He was not only an exegete following in their tradition, but also stylistically exhibited what M.B. Pranger describes as "a certain degree of self-consciousness," that is, a palpable presence in his writings, where his own experiences and emotional connection to his readers is apparent, as in patristic texts.[10] He is also particularly significant for the continuity of the Middle Ages, and remained popular for several centuries, as shown by the innumerable manuscripts of his writings compared to the relative paucity of his output.[11] His preaches for the Second Crusade, and his argumentative engagement with scholastics and Cluniacs also situates him at the beginning of the spatial and theological expansion of later mediaeval Latin Christendom.[12]

Said specifies three interconnected meanings of orientalism: (1) the academic interest in Eastern studies, (2) the conceptual or literary interest in the oriental aesthetics, and finally (3) the "corporate institution" for dealing with the real, modern East. "Corporate" orientalism is not (necessarily) corporate in the capitalist sense for Said, and certainly not in the context of this paper,

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[6] Akbari, *Idols*, 18, 180–188.

[7] Jean Leclercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God*, trans. Catherine Misrahi, (New York: Fordham University Press, 1982), 37.

[8] Thomas Merton, *The Last of the Fathers* (London: Lowe and Brydone, 1954), 23–24.

[9] Jean Leclercq, *Bernard of Clairvaux and the Cistercian Spirit*, trans Claire Lavoie (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1976), 25–26.

[10] M.B. Pranger, *Broken Dreams: Bernard of Clairvaux and the Shape of Monastic Thought* (Leiden: Brill, 1994), 163–165. See also Leclercq, *Love of Learning,* 4–6 for a discussion of this effect in Bernard's prologue to his sermons on the Canticle of Canticles.

[11] Leclercq, *Cistercian Spirit,* 82–29.

[12] Merton, *Last of the Fathers*, 38–44.

but rather corporate as institutional, be it politically or militarily, with an essentialising purpose of handling the east as something to be dealt with.[13]

Part I outlines the importance of the texts of and about Eastern saints in the origins of monasticism, that is, the academic interest in them, as well as the importance of their aesthetic in the continuation of monasticism, that is, a conceptual or literary orientalism. Part II focuses on the works of Bernard of Clairvaux, both his specific interaction with the first two meanings and his rôle in establishing and promulgating the third. Part III examines the immediate aftermath of Bernard, and the influence of his rhetoric on later mediaeval monastic orientalism. I will finally conclude that there was indeed an identifiable mediaeval monastic orientalism, beginning as an academic and conceptual interest in the cult of Eastern saints that developed, through Bernard and his contemporaries, into the fully fledged tripartite orientalism of the late mediaeval monastic tradition.

PART I: THE ROLE OF EASTERN SAINTS IN WESTERN MONASTICISM

Eastern sanctity had a bipartite influence on Western monasticism. The first regards the discourse of the saints themselves, that is their actual writings and the earliest writings about them, that influenced the development of monasticism. This amounts to an academic orientalism, or at least as far as "academia" existed in the non-scholastic mediaeval regular communities.[14] Secondly, after the reification and foundation of official monastic centres, the later discourse about Eastern sanctity frequently placed it at the forefront of discussions and justifications, using them not only as sources but also as aesthetic or spiritual inspiration. This amounts to a conceptual orientalism. The combination and reconciliation of these two meanings was the culture into which Bernard was born.

1. Eastern Saints as Sources for the Foundation of Monasticism

The life of St Anthony, and the *Life of St Anthony* by St Athanasius, can be described as the origins and initial promulgation of a definably monastic vocation.[15] Athanasius tells the story of Anthony's inspiration by Matthew 19.21–22 in his decision to leave society and live an eremitical life in the desert.[16] The importance of Anthony's *Egyptianness* should not be left unstated. The fact that leaving society meant, for Anthony, going into a literal desert resulted in an aesthetic of asceticism closely associated with deserts, either physical or metaphorical, that continued throughout the monastic tradition. It is even evident in Athanasius: κατ' ὀλίγον καὶ τὴν ἔρημον

[13] Said, *Orientalism,* 3–4.

[14] For a survey of the specific style of monastic scholarship as opposed to scholasticism, see Leclerq, *Love of Learning,* 1–34 and *passim.*

[15] John McCulloh, "Confessor Saints and the Origins of Monasticism: The Lives of saints Anthony and Martin," in *The Middle Ages in Texts and Texture: Reflections on Medieval Sources,* ed. Jason Glenn (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011), 22–24.

[16] McCulloh, "Confessor Saints and the Origins of Monasticism," 24.

ἐμπλήση τῆς ἀσκήσεως, "[Anthony] would soon *fill the desert with asceticism (monasticism).*"[17] Here, the metaphorical monopolisation of desert life by monasticism is directly linked to the physical space in which it began.

The next important textual event in the history of western monasticism is the publications of two related texts, the *Rule of St Benedict* and the *Life of St Benedict* attributed to St Gregory.[18] These two texts, as Leclercq states, solidified the monastic tradition as specifically *Benedictine*.[19] Similarly to Athanasius' *life,* the rôle of the *Rule of St Benedict* cannot be understated, as it formed the basis for nearly every major monastic order, and even those who do not follow the *Rule* often resulted as a reinterpretation of, or reaction against it.[20] But even though these texts are western, so to speak, their Eastern influences are abundantly apparent. Benedict closes his *Rule* by restating: *Ceterum ad perfectionem conversationis qui festinat, sunt doctrinae sanctorum patrum, quarum observatio perducit hominem ad celsitudinem perfectionis,* "Finally, the most urgent things for the perfection of one's conversion are the doctrines of the saintly fathers, the observation of which leads one to the heights of perfection."[21] The *fathers*, here, are specifically Eastern; indeed throughout the text, Benedict is "attracted, not only to patristic sources in general, but to Eastern sources in particular."[22] Evidently, the writings of Sts. Athanasius, Benedict, and Gregory all utilise Eastern sainthood as scholarly theological sources, revealing their "academic" orientalism.

2. Eastern Saints as Aemulanda *in the Continuity of Monasticism*

After the foundation of Western monasticism on principles of Eastern sanctity, and once it had begun to flourish in Western Christendom, the Eastern saints retained their eminent role, although now as models for the perfect, ascetic, monastic life. In the early days of the Cistercian order, Ordericus Vitalis attributes to Robert of Molesme an explanation for the necessity of a stricter observance of the *Rule*: *nec aspero gradimur Aegyptiorum Patrum tramite, qui in Thebaida, et sancta in terra commorabantur*, "we no longer tread the harsh path of the Egyptian Fathers [Anthony, Macarius, and Pachomius] who survived in the Thebaid and the Holy Land."[23] Here, the example of Eastern saints is not specifically to any given text or story. It is merely the aesthetic of the asperity of the desert and the intensity of the devotion associated with them that is emphasised. In fact, evocations of Egyptian exemplary piety are most often repeated in moments of contention

[17] Athanasius, *Life of St Anthony,* 8. All translations in this paper are my own.
[18] Leclercq, *Love of Learning*, 11.
[19] Leclercq, *Love of Learning*, 89.
[20] Of the western monastic orders listed in the *Annuario Pontificio per l'anno 2022* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana 2022), 1439–1451, the Benedictines, Camaldolese, Cistercians, and Trappists all follow St Benedict's *Rule* or an interpretation of it, and the Carthusians, Paulines, and Hieronymites follow the *Statutes,* the *Rule of St Augustine,* and the *Rule of St Jerome* respectively, chosen in reaction to the Benedictine *Rule*.
[21] Benedict of Nursia, *Rule of St Benedict*, LXXIII.2.
[22] Leclercq, *Love of Learning*, 89.
[23] Ordericus Vitalis, *Historia Ecclesiastica,* III.8.

within the monastic sphere.[24] During the foundations of new monastic orders or other revivals, Egypt, and particularly St. Anthony, are often mentioned throughout the Middle Ages, from the Carolingian era to the twelfth century of Bernard.[25] And yet, it is not the deeds of the saints that are emphasised, it is the ideals they represented, a microcosm of the spiritual significance of monastic life as a whole.[26] In this way, hagiographies gained a new facet, in that they were not only treated as historical texts, parables, or pieces of biographical fiction, but now as an artistic representation of the aesthetics of sanctity, a description of the look and feel of the type of desolate piety associated with Eastern sainthood.

This is conceptual or literary orientalism. The discourse certainly essentialises the east along the lines of an imagined aesthetic, as well as exhibiting a demonstrable enthusiasm about it. Moreover, the aesthetics utilised are specifically anachronistic, with a clear emphasis on the ancient over the modern east. This is a trend in Biblical scholarship even in the period relevant to Said, where the eighteenth-century British and French political dominance of the Middle East led almost to a textual reappraisal of the significance of Eastern literature, adding a more specifically Biblical aesthetic to the discourse.[27] Nonetheless, this early monastic orientalism was the culture to which Bernard adapted and reacted, but as the Middle Ages developed, so did its orientalism, in no small part due to some of Bernard's own writings.

PART II: ORIENTALISM IN THE WORKS OF BERNARD OF CLAIRVAUX

Bernard exhibited the same tendencies above and followed in the tradition of aestheticising specifically Eastern asceticism. However, in the context of the crusades and the expansion of late mediaeval Latin Christendom, his writings about the modern east paint a very different picture. In this way, the difficulty of the differences between the ancient and the modern East translated into the third type of orientalism defined by Said, a "corporate" orientalism.

1. The Ancient East

In his writings about the ancient East, as above, Bernard exhibits an academic and conceptual orientalism. His academic orientalism was twofold: patristic and mystic. The importance of Eastern patristic texts such as Origen and Gregory of Nyssa is evident in his stylistic inspiration from them, as well as the more general point of the sheer number of their texts made for him at Clairvaux.[28] His mysticism is also something picked up from early Eastern saints. St Anthony was a mystic residing in the deserts of Egypt; St Bernard, in specific and fond emulation of him, was a mystic at the "deserts" of Cîteaux and Clairvaux.[29] His conceptual orientalism also

[24] Leclercq, Love of Learning, 99.
[25] Leclercq, Love of Learning, 99.
[26] Leclercq, Love of Learning, 99.
[27] Said, *Orientalism*, 17–18, 76–77.
[28] Leclercq, *Cistercian Spirit,* 25–26.
[29] Étienne Gilson, *Théologie mystique de Saint Bernard* (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1934), 30–32.

centres around St. Anthony. Of course, he was nominally the first of the monks, but once again Bernard does not emphasise the actual founding of monasticism as much as its aesthetics. In his *Apology to William of Saint Thierry,* where he argues in favour of the renewal of ancient ascetic values, mostly regarding the art and decadence of some modern monastic centres, he calls back to the time of St. Anthony:

> *O quantum distamus ab his qui in diebus Antonii exstitere monachi! Siquidem illi cum se invicem per tempus ex charitate reviserent, tanta ab invicem aviditate panem animarum percipiebant, ut corporis cibum penitus obliti, diem plerumque totum jejunis ventribus, sed non mentibus transigerent.*
>
> Oh, how greatly we differ from those monks who lived in Anthony's time! When one of them visited each other for a time out of charity, due to the extent of their avidity they received only the bread of the soul, so they almost entirely forgot the nourishment of the body and spent several days empty in their stomachs, but not in their minds. [30]

Importantly, this is not a section about food (although that comes next), but about excesses in general. Thus, he is not actually talking about the relationship the early monks had to food specifically but is appealing to the ascetic piety that the physical desert brought about, that should be emulated in all aspects of modern monastic life, according to him.

2. The Modern East

Things are certainly different in Bernard's discussions about the modern East, most evident in his discourse surrounding the Second Crusade. He was one of the most important agents in its origins; indeed, as the Trappist monk Thomas Merton put it in 1954, "the [second] crusade is Bernard's work."[31] He preached in favour of it at the Council of Vézelay in 1146, had close connections with Louis VII of France, Abbot Suger, and Pope Eugene III, and wrote in favour of the Order of the Knights Templar.[32] In a letter arguing for the necessity of the crusade, he emphasises the purity and sanctity of the area and the pollution of the people living there, *polluant loca sancta Agni immaculata purpurata cruore*, "they are polluting the holy places, purpled with the blood of the immaculate Lamb."[33] Akbari, in reference to this passage, mentions Bernard's theological relationship with blood, arguing that for him blood can both cleanse in the case of the immaculate Lamb, but also pollute, in the case of the Muslims living in the east.[34] In this letter the purpose is evident: Bernard's emphasis of the purity of the place and the pollution of its inhabitants argues for an organised military effort to, according to him, deal with the "problem."

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[30] Bernard of Clairvaux, *Apology to William of Saint Thierry*, IX.19.

[31] Merton, *Last of the Fathers*, 38.

[32] Watkin Williams, *Saint Bernard of Clairvaux* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1935), 262–263, 287–288.

[33] Bernard of Clairvaux, *La Lettre aux Princes et aux Prélats*, in "L'Encyclique de Saint Bernard en faveur de la croisade," ed. Jean Leclerq, *Revue Benedictine* 81 (1971): 20.

[34] Akbari, *Idols in the East,* 236–237.

In many of the most vicious passages in this letter, the insults are physical, likening the Muslims to dogs and pigs, calling them "dirty," and using their physical blood as contradiction to the sacred blood that makes places holy.[35] However, Bernard's supposed only problem with these people is theological, not racial. Of course, it may well be that these were just the worst ways he thought to attack a group of people, but it is a relevant hypocrisy regarding his treatment of ancient and modern Middle Easterners.

This discontinuity between the ancient East, with associations of Biblical origins and early monastic asceticism, and the modern East, with associations of idolatry and impurity, was the impetus for the development of a mediaeval corporate orientalism. From a zealous admiration for the anachronistic connotations, and an ability to physically, or irrationally racially, distance that from the current inhabitants made the decision to want to "deal with it" with an organised military effort quite clear for Bernard. There are even parallels to the corporate orientalism of Said's time period, such as the 1882 British annexation of Egypt seen as a solution to the perceived "backwardness" of Egypt, with a particular emphasis on Egypt's illustrious antique past.[36] This corporate orientalism as evident in the writings of Bernard continued to influence the discourse about the east throughout the course of the crusades and the Middle Ages, as well as in monastic centres.

PART III: CORPORATE ORIENTALISM IN LATE MEDIAEVAL MONASTICISM

As I have argued, Said's first two meanings of orientalism, the academic and the conceptual, both began in the early monastic period, up until the twelfth century of Bernard. However, in the writings of Bernard himself, all three meanings are evident but split. His academic and conceptual orientalism is firmly focused on the ancient east, whereas his corporate orientalism focuses on the modern east. The purpose of this third section, then, is to demonstrate the proliferation of this third type in later mediaeval monasticism.

Starting with Bernard might seem misleading, as clearly on a broader level, the first crusade was more influential than the second. However, given that the focus here is specifically on *monasticism*, the second crusade, and particularly Bernard's involvement in it, was arguably what solidified the discourse in these communities.[37] So, to demonstrate Bernard's influence in the proliferation of monastic corporate orientalism, it will first be necessary to look at his influence on the second crusade, and then the influence of the second crusade on monastic orientalism.

1. Bernard and the Second Crusade

The influence of Bernard on the second crusade, as mentioned above, was both theological and rhetorical. His own view of the necessity of intense religious fervour, as espoused in almost

[35] Bernard of Clairvaux, *La Lettre aux Princes et aux Prélats*, *passim.*

[36] Said, *Orientalism*, 35.

[37] Giles Constable, "Introduction" in *The Second Crusade and the Cistercians*, ed. Michael Gervers (New York: St Martin's Press, 1992), xix–xxi.

every one of his works, and his theological treatises on *militia* and *malitia* ("militia and malice"), intensified the discourse about the second crusade.[38] Perhaps as a result of this intensification, or perhaps as a cause for it, his rhetorical intensity was also particularly influential.[39] The racism in his descriptions of Muslims further contributed to this discourse. The combination of this vitriol with the admiration for the classical ancient east resulted in a discourse of the east as something to be contained, something to be dealt with, a corporate orientalism that only really came about around the beginning of the crusades.

2. The Second Crusade and Monasticism

One immediate outcome of the second crusade on monasticism was the establishment of a number of Cistercian monastic institutions in the east. The first of these was Balamand Monastery, founded in 1157 in the crusader state of Tripoli, followed by Salvatio in 1161, and several more throughout the continuation of the Long Twelfth Century.[40] This is poignant, as Bernard himself was never particularly interested in founding monasteries in the east.[41] He was even offered an old Byzantine church on Mount Joy by King Baldwin II to be converted into a Cistercian monastery, but declined.[42] Despite the strikingly fast expansion of the Cistercian order in the first half of the twelfth century, certainly at least in part due to Bernard himself, he neither had particular interests in either expanding into Asia, nor to go there himself.[43]

Why, then, were these monasteries founded after his death? I argue that this is a result of the discourse that he propagated, that even though he himself had been averse to the monastic expansion into Asia, the impact of his preaches overrode it. A suitable comparison is his *Book to the Knights of the Temple* from the 1130s, where, crucially, he spends the majority of the book describing various important areas and the Knight's settlements there.[44] Clearly, for Bernard, the monastic quality of the Knights Templar is particularly important, and their militia, while necessary, is secondary. This sentiment, coupled with the zeal expressed in his arguments in favour of the second crusade mentioned above, created a discourse of an essentialisation of the east as something to be dealt with, at times even with an emphasis on settlement. The founding of these monasteries, then, is a manifestation of this corporate orientalism. This is of course a microcosm. To overview completely the influence of Bernard and the second crusade in the entirety of the later Middle Ages would require a far longer study, but with a specific focus on monasticism, this

[38] Merton, *Last of the Fathers,* 39; Aryeh Grabois, "Milita and Malitia: The Bernadine Vision of Chivalry," in *The Second Crusade*, 49–52.
[39] Hans-Dietrich Karl, "Crusade Eschatology as Seen by St. Bernard in the Years 1146 to 1148" in *The Second Crusade*, 36–40.
[40] Denys Pringle, "Cistercian Houses in the Kingdom of Jerusalem" in *The Second Crusade*, 184.
[41] Williams, *Bernard of Clairvaux*, 262.
[42] Pringle, "Cistercian Houses," 183.
[43] Williams, *Bernard of Clairvaux,* 262; Brenda Bolton, "The Cistercians and the Aftermath of the Second Crusade" in *The Second Crusade*, 137.
[44] Bernard of Clairvaux, *Book to the Knights of the Temple*, V–XIII.

typifies a representative trend in the discourse surrounding the East, spurred on by Bernard himself.

CONCLUSION

Bernard is not everything. He did not found the Cistercian order or the order of the Knights of the Temple. Nor was he the single instigator of the second crusade, and he played no role in the first (as he was five or six when it started). That being said, his influence in continuation of all of these phenomena, the expansion of the Cistercian order and the Knights Templar, and, as argued above, the second crusade, is notable. Thus, whether as a catalyst or a reflection of his *milieu,* his writings offer ample evidence of the discourse at the time, especially with regards to orientalism.

In the course of this paper, I have shown that there is a traceable tradition of orientalism within Western monasticism. With its origins in the academic and conceptual orientalisms of the initial founding and eventual consolidation of monastic centres, developing into a corporate orientalism, with Bernard arguably in the centre of it. Indeed, all three types of orientalism continued during the course of the Middle Ages, but it is only in or around Bernard's time that the third is as evidently visible. There is a multiplicity of orientalisms, the post-enlightenment orientalism of Said, the non-monastic mediaeval orientalism of Akbari, the monastic orientalism here, as well as many more. They are, however, all inherently different, and all require their own parameters of analysis.

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