

*Introduction to this special edition on  
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international context*

Article

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# INTRODUCTION TO THIS SPECIAL EDITION ON READING ABBEY

## Reading Abbey: Intellectual and Artistic Culture in an International Context

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Reading Abbey rarely receives the attention it deserves.<sup>1</sup> Its physical remains are a battered shell, in what until fairly recently was an unsympathetic urban environment, and it simply cannot compete with the cluttered grandeur of Westminster, or the magnificence and completeness of Canterbury, or the romantic ruin of so many of our great Cistercian abbeys. But it should attract our attention, for when it was founded, Reading was one of the most important religious institutions in northern Europe. It should be studied and understood within a broad European context. This is what the papers in this collection aim to do.

Reading Abbey had close connections with the Anglo-Norman and Angevin kings. It was founded by Henry I around 1121 as his mausoleum. Henry died in Normandy, but his body was brought back for burial at Reading, as he intended, and was buried before the high altar in January 1136. When Henry founded the abbey, he was still mourning the death of his revered wife, Matilda of Scotland, and of his son and heir, William Adelin, who had drowned in the White Ship disaster. He had just remarried - to Adeliza of Louvain, in the hope that this would bring him a new heir. So from the start, Reading Abbey was intimately linked to death, birth and commemoration of the English royal family.<sup>2</sup> The abbey was dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary, the intercessor for mankind at death. Henry I's daughter and eventual intended heiress, the Empress Matilda, showed particular devotion to the Virgin Mary.<sup>3</sup>

The kings and their families and entourages stayed often at the abbey, and parliament was occasionally held there. Its close relationship with the English kings means that we should think of it alongside other great medieval abbeys like Westminster Abbey in England, Saint-Denis in the Capetian lands, Saint-Etienne at Caen (the mausoleum of William the Conqueror) and Fontevraud in the Angevin lands, Monreale in Norman Sicily, and Las Huelgas in Castile.

From its foundation the abbey was a member of the Cluniac order, if an unusually independent one. Henry I and his family had close connections with the order.<sup>4</sup> Henry himself was generous to the mother house of Cluny, funding the rebuilding of the nave after it collapsed in the early 1120s. He was regarded as the main patron of the great new church of Cluny III after the death of Alfonso VI of Castile in 1109. Henry also gave to the Parisian Cluniac house of Saint-Martin-des-Champs. Henry's sister, Adela of Blois, retired to the Cluniac nunnery of Marcigny in Burgundy, probably around 1120. Her youngest son, named Henry after his uncle, was given as an oblate to Cluny. Henry of Blois went on to pursue a glittering ecclesiastical career in England, becoming abbot of Glastonbury and later bishop of Winchester. Henry I insisted that Reading was established as a full abbey, not as a dependent priory of Cluny, so its Cluniac links were not straightforward. It is often suggested that these links faded quickly – though Hugh II, abbot of Reading between 1186 and 1199 went on to become Abbot of Cluny itself, and head of the order.<sup>5</sup> Both the Empress Matilda and Henry II favoured the reformed monasticism and new Augustinian canons of the twelfth century – the Cistercians and Premonstratensians, and, in Henry's case, Carthusians and Grandmontines. Nevertheless, both the Empress and Henry II continued the family traditions of generosity to Cluny and to Reading Abbey.<sup>6</sup> Cluniac culture was much more diffuse than the culture of the Cistercians, and is less easily recognised. But the importance of Reading's Cluniac links in both the intellectual and the liturgical life of the abbey are brought out by many papers from this conference. Again, it meant that from the start, Reading Abbey was tied into the European monastic mainstream.

The first abbot of Reading, Hugh of Amiens, exemplifies the international nature of the context for Reading Abbey.<sup>7</sup> Hugh was abbot of Reading between 1123 and 1130. He had been born in north-eastern France around 1085, and, as a young aspiring cleric, he studied at the

Cathedral School of Laon under the renowned Master Anselm. In 1112, Hugh joined the Cluniac order, where his rise was meteoric. Within two years, he was prior of Saint-Martial at Limoges. Then in 1120, he became prior of the Cluniac priory of St Pancras at Lewes, before being persuaded by Henry I to become abbot at Reading. In 1128, the pope attempted to move him to Rome as a cardinal. In 1130, with the backing of Pope Innocent II, he became archbishop of Rouen, the leading prelate in Normandy, though both Henry I and the monks of Reading tried to keep him. It was a long pontificate: Hugh remained archbishop until his death in 1164. In 1135, Hugh was called to the death bed of Henry I, and he oversaw Henry's burial. Hugh supported King Stephen during the Anarchy, but appears to have established good relations with the Angevins once they came to power.

Hugh was at the very centre of a circle which took the lead in defining the position of the abbey of Cluny and Cluniac Benedictine monasticism in the great age of monastic reform of the early twelfth century.<sup>8</sup> Hugh's connections were impressive. His cousin, Matthew, also became a major Cluniac churchman – and may well have been responsible for introducing Hugh to the order. Matthew was from c. 1114-1127 prior of the Parisian Cluniac house of Saint-Martin-des-Champs, a royal house, established by Philip I of France in 1079.<sup>9</sup> Matthew caught the eye of Pope Calixtus II, who made him Cardinal Bishop of Albano, and papal legate from 1127 until Matthew's death in 1135. Both Hugh and Matthew were close friends of Peter the Venerable, abbot of Cluny from 1122-1156; indeed, Peter wrote an admiring biography of Matthew. Alberic, abbot of Saint-Martin des Champs, then of the Burgundian Cluniac house of Vezelay, before his appointment as cardinal bishop of Ostia and papal legate, was the dedicatee of one of Hugh's writings.

The early 1120s, when Reading Abbey was founded, was not an easy time for the Cluniac order. The building of the huge and elaborate third abbey church at Cluny was putting pressure on the order's economic resources. The brief abbacy of Pontius in the mid-1120s ended in scandal and disorder. The First Lateran Council of 1123 tried to put all monks firmly back in their cloisters, preferring regular canons for the fulfilment of pastoral roles. This was the decade when the criticism of the old Benedictine and Cluniac monasticism by the reformed orders, which had been largely implicit, took on a new

polemical sharpness in the writings of St Bernard of Clairvaux and William of St Thierry. It was Hugh's cousin, Matthew of Albano, who put the case for Cluniac monasticism and what might be called moderate monastic reform. In 1130, it looked as though the Cluniac order might find itself even more decisively relegated to the 'anti-reform' camp, when a papal schism set the Cluniac monk Anacletus II against the more overtly reformist Innocent II. In the event, Hugh of Amiens and Matthew of Albano were instrumental in ensuring that Henry I and the Anglo-Norman realm on the one hand, and Louis VI and France on the other declared for Innocent II.<sup>10</sup>

So the early days of Reading Abbey, with its Cluniac monks and its abbot at the heart of the Cluniac enterprise, coincided with a period of upheaval and threat to the order. Hugh, along with Peter the Venerable and Matthew of Albano, played a crucial role in guiding the order – and Reading Abbey – through the crisis.

Hugh's cultural, intellectual and political connections were not confined to the Cluniac order. Abbot Suger of Saint-Denis was a close friend. He invited Hugh to play an important role in the consecrations of his new church, especially of the western chapels in 1140.<sup>11</sup> Among the Norman bishops, Hugh dedicated his books to Arnulf of Lisieux and (probably) to Philip of Harcourt, bishop of Bayeux. Both dedications suggest the quality of Hugh's intellectual milieu. The Paris-educated Arnulf saw himself as the most sophisticated and cultured bishop in Normandy. Arnulf underestimated some of his colleagues, but highly cultured he certainly was. Philip of Harcourt was a noted bibliophile, who left his enormous library, replete with classical texts and histories among the religious volumes, to the Abbey of Bec – though he was not above attempting to steal relics from Salisbury for his collection too.<sup>12</sup>

Hugh, like Matthew of Albano, had studied with Master Anselm at Laon. Hugh himself wrote several works.<sup>13</sup> The *Dialogus* of c. 1123-6 was dedicated to Matthew of Albano, and written while Hugh was abbot of Reading. It encapsulates the teachings of the Laon school, and has been called the first attempt to produce a systematic theology – in that anticipating the work, some forty years later, of Peter Lombard.<sup>14</sup> It includes a spirited defence of monks as priests and in pastoral roles: in which it argues against the canons of the Lateran Council and its promotion of canons regular.<sup>15</sup> His other works were written during his

tenure as archbishop of Rouen: a *Commentary on the Hexameron*, of c. 1142, dedicated to Arnulf of Lisieux; the *Contra Hereticos* of 1145-8, dedicated to Alberic of Ostia; and the *De Memoria* of c. 1159, dedicated, probably, to Philip of Harcourt.<sup>16</sup>

There are fragmentary indications that the Abbey begun at Reading under Hugh reflected his connections with the broad cultural and intellectual currents of the early twelfth century in its material manifestation. The most famous of these is the capital showing the coronation of the Virgin, now in Reading Museum, and probably originally from the cloister or the chapter house, and generally dated around 1130. This is the first surviving example of what was to become a favoured iconography of the Virgin in Medieval Europe. The next surviving example is the apse mosaic at Santa Maria in Trastevere in Rome, generally dated around 1140; after this, the next surviving example is the west portal tympanum at the cathedral of Senlis, of around 1150 - after which the image quickly becomes widespread.

The capital is rather a modest work to be the sole progenitor of such an iconographic tradition. There was certainly one more visible and more elegant earlier example, painted on the chapter house vault of Worcester Cathedral, as Sandy Heslop has argued.<sup>17</sup> It is likely that Reading Abbey itself had a more impressive version of the image, perhaps on a, or the, western portal.<sup>18</sup> The abbey was dedicated to the Virgin. Historians have noted that Hugh introduced the Anglo-Saxon feast of the Immaculate Conception to Reading Abbey at the request of Henry I.<sup>19</sup> Whether the image originated at Worcester cathedral, or at Reading Abbey, it seems likely that its wide distribution in continental Europe owed much to the connections of Hugh and his cousin Matthew of Albano. Blum has argued convincingly that Hugh's friend, Abbot Suger of Saint-Denis, played a key role here, adopting the imagery for his lost north portal mosaic.<sup>20</sup>

Like Suger, and like his other friend, Arnulf of Lisieux, Hugh was a building churchman. As archbishop of Rouen, he built a new north west tower, that still stands, and, probably, a new choir, to replace the early eleventh century choir, which does not. In 1145, Hugh wrote to the bishop of Amiens to describe the outbreak of a cart cult to bring stones to his cathedral building, reflecting the same manifestation of popular piety and fervour as Chartres, during the works on the west front for another of his friends, bishop Geoffrey of Lèves.<sup>21</sup> At Reading,

Hugh must have overseen the establishment of the workshop and the start of work on the abbey church and the abbey buildings. Construction moved fast, for the abbey church was sufficiently complete for the burial of Henry I before the high altar in 1136. The church was consecrated by Thomas Becket as archbishop of Canterbury in 1164, by which time it was presumably finished.

Reading Abbey church was huge in scale, and based on a sophisticated underlying geometry. The few fragments that remain – and most of them are from the monastic cloister – suggest a building that was replete with elaborate sculpture of the highest quality.<sup>22</sup> Aspects of the cloister sculpture have been compared to work in the Loire, particularly at Saint Aubin at Angers, and a single but very fine shaft carved with mythical beasts in linked roundels, now in Reading Museum, is reminiscent of works for Suger's west front at Saint-Denis. The design of the cloister, with its row of delicate single shafts, with subtle alternation, has been compared to that of another royal monastery, Westminster Abbey. The huge space of the apsidal chapter house is reminiscent of the chapter house of St Peter's Gloucester, as indeed are aspects of the abbey church, including the plan with its polygonal apses and huge extended pier forms at the crossing. The abbey church almost certainly had a giant order, like Romsey and Jedburgh abbeys, which would have made the vast interior seem still more grandly impressive in scale.<sup>23</sup> It would also have given it something of the effects of the high inner aisle of Cluny III itself. It is sad that almost nothing is left of Saint-Martin-des-Champs from the period of the abbacy of Hugh's cousin, Matthew of Albano. But within England, the architectural frame of reference seems to have been Westminster Abbey and St Peter's Gloucester. Both were dedicated to St Peter, which might have seemed an appropriate dedication to someone building a Cluniac abbey: and both had royal connotations, as the sites of crown-wearings.

Reading Abbey, then, must be placed at the very centre of court arts and culture of Anglo-Norman and Angevin England. That art and culture was international in reach and influence; and Reading Abbey provided an essential ingredient in making it so.



## Notes

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- 1 Though Ron Baxter's new book does much to address this issue - Ron Baxter, *The Royal Abbey of Reading* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2016).
  - 2 For Henry's foundation of the abbey, see Judith Green, *Henry I, King of England and Duke of Normandy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) esp. pp. 170-2; Baxter, *The Royal Abbey*, pp. 11-19.
  - 3 Marjorie Chibnall, *The Empress Matilda: Queen Consort, Queen Mother and Lady of the English* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991) esp. p. 181.
  - 4 For Henry and his family's connections to the order, see Green, *Henry I*, pp. 170-8, 210, 278, 312; Chibnall, *The Empress Matilda*, pp. 178-9.
  - 5 Giles Constable, 'An unpublished letter of Abbot Hugh of Reading concerning Archbishop Hubert Walter', in *Essays in Medieval History presented to Bertie Wilkinson*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1969) esp. pp. 22-29.
  - 6 For the religious patronage of the Empress Matilda, Chibnall, *The Empress Matilda*, pp. 177-194; for Henry II, Lindy Grant, 'Le patronage architecturale de Henri II et de son entourage', *Cahiers de Civilisation Médiévale*, xxxvii (19994), pp. 73-84, and see also Lindy Grant, *Architecture and Society in Normandy 1120-1270*, (London/New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), pp. 34-5.
  - 7 For Hugh's career, see Ryan Freeburn, *Hugh of Amiens and the Twelfth-Century Renaissance* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), pp. 5-13.
  - 8 For a masterly overview of the monastic reforms of the twelfth century, and Cluny's position and travails within it, see Giles Constable, *The Reformation of the Twelfth Century*, (Cambridge: CUP, 1996), passim.
  - 9 Andreas Sohn, 'Die Kapetinger und das Pariser Priorat Saint-Martin-des-Champs im 11 und 12 Jahrhundert', *Francia Forschungen zur westeuropäischen Geschichte*, 25 (1998), pp. 77-121. For Matthew of Albano, see also Stanislaus Ceglar, 'The Chapter of Soissons and the Authorship of the *Reply of the Benedictine Abbots to Cardinal Matthew*', in *Studies in Medieval Church History 2*, ed. By J.R. Sommerfeldt, Cistercian Studies Series 24, Kalamazoo (1976), pp. 92-105, and *The Letters of Peter the Venerable*, ed. Giles Constable, 2 vols., (Cambridge Mass: Harvard University Press, 1967) II, pp. 96-7.
  - 10 Reuter, 'Zur Anerkennung Papst Innocenz II', *Historisches Zeitschrift*, 39 (1983), pp. 45-7.
  - 11 Lindy Grant, *Abbot Suger of Saint-Denis: Church and State in Early Twelfth century France*, (London: Longman, 1998), esp. p. 245.

- 12 For the intellectual milieu of Arnulf and Philip d'Harcourt, Grant, *Architecture and Society*, pp. 28-9.
- 13 On Hugh's writings, see Freeburn, *Hugh of Amiens*, passim.
- 14 Freeburn, *Hugh of Amiens*, p. 84.
- 15 Freeburn, *Hugh of Amiens*, pp. 88-93.
- 16 For the dedications, see Freeburn, *Hugh of Amiens*, pp.113-4; 148; 201.
- 17 T.A. Heslop, 'The English Origins of the Coronation of the Virgin', *Burlington Magazine*, 147 (2005), pp. 790-97.
- 18 George Zarnecki, in *English Romanesque Art 1066-1200* (Arts Council of Great Britain, 1984), p.159, cat no. 113.
- 19 Pamela Blum, 'The Lateral Portals of the West Façade of the Abbey Church of Saint-Denis: Archaeological and Iconographical Considerations', in *Abbot Suger and Saint-Denis: A Symposium*, ed by Paula Gerson, (New York: Metropolitan Museum, 1987), pp. 213-4 : see also Freeburn, *Hugh of Amiens*, pp. 74-5
- 20 Blum, 'The Lateral Portals', pp. 209-18; Grant, *Abbot Suger*, p. 246.
- 21 Grant, *Architecture and Society*, pp. 69-70; Lindy Grant, 'Arnulf's Mentor: Geoffrey of Lèves, bishop of Chartres', in *Writing Medieval Biography: Essays for Professor Frank Barlow*, ed. By David Bates, Julia Crick and Sarah Hamilton, (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2012), pp. 173-184.
- 22 For the cloister sculpture, see George Zarnecki in *English Romanesque Art*, cat. no 113, p. 159, cat nos 127 a-s, pp. 167-171; Ron Baxter and Stuart Harrison, 'The Decoration and the Cloister at Reading Abbey', in *Windsor: Medieval Archaeology, Art and Architecture of the Thames Valley*, ed. By Laurence Keen and Eileen Scarff, British Archaeological Association Conference Transactions xxv (2002) pp. 302-312; and now Baxter, *The Royal Abbey*, pp. 215-300.
- 23 For the church, Malcolm Thurlby and Ron Baxter, 'The Romanesque Abbey Church at Reading' in *Windsor: Medieval Archaeology, Art and Architecture of the Thames Valley*, ed. By Laurence Keen and Eileen Scarff, British Archaeological Association Conference Transactions xxv (2002) pp. 283-5 for the Gloucester links, pp. 288-93 for discussion of the giant order; and now Baxter, *The Royal Abbey*, pp. 169-214.