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Conference Notes on
Stephen Harding as the Sole Author
of the *Carta Caritatis*:
Did the *Carta* found the Order?*

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THE DEBATE CONCERNING who founded the Cistercian Order comes up during major anniversaries like the one in 1998.¹ Events like the current one in 2019 force us to ask the question in a more focused way, since the *Carta Caritatis* turns 900 this year. Even if Robert of Molesme had not had dreams of founding an order in 1098, as some claim, certainly by 1119 the Cistercians had grown to the point of needing a constitution and thus had been born. That fact is indisputable, but another matter is still open: Who wrote the *Carta*, and was it really important to know the answer? Stephen Harding is certainly the man most often presented as its author, but the issue was irrelevant for many generations. Stephen's authorship only later became one of his saintly attributes.

The *Annuario Pontificio* lists 1119 as the year of the Cistercian Order's approbation, thus implying that Stephen was the founder.² Yet many of us recall celebrating the Order's 900th anniversary in 1998: that would

* This article is an excerpt and adaptation of my lecture at the Dallas symposium in July 2019. A longer version, also in English, appears in *The Charter of Charity 1119–2019: A Document to Preserve Unity Among Communities*, ed. Eric Delaissé, Cerf Patrimoines (Paris: Cerf, 2020). A German translation of the long version is forthcoming in the *Analecta Cisterciensia*.

1. Brian McGuire, "Who Founded the Order of Cîteaux?" *The Joy of Learning and the Love of God: Studies in Honor of Jean Leclercq*, ed. E. Rozanne Elder, CS 160 (Kalamazoo–Spencer: Cistercian, 1995) 389–413.

2. Art. Ordine Cistercense, *Annuario Pontificio* (Vatican City: Editrice Vaticana, 2016) 1417.

make Robert—not Stephen—the founder. Other sources claim that Alberic was the first abbot of Cîteaux. Even more radically, Jean Leclercq once claimed that Bernard of Clairvaux founded the Cistercians.³ It depends on the perspective. The practical point of view reminds us that the filiation of new daughter abbeys began under Stephen, thus making constitutional structures necessary. It was this moment of successful administration that led to the Cistercians' prestige as something new.⁴

Nonetheless, it is important to recall that the Order's foundational documents have been widely understood as a varied plurality, emerging over the generations. It is not accurate to single one out, since the papal bulls *Parvus fons* (1265) and *Fulgens sicut Stella Matutina* (1335) are considered to be indispensable later developmental stages of the *Carta*.⁵ They helped to flesh out important legislative issues.

Today, many historians agree that most foundation narratives remain artificial constructs to a certain degree. The question of founding an order is much more complex than finding a date. We must remember that a religious rule does not found a monastery. Saint Benedict did not found the Benedictine Order, nor can one claim with certainty that Saint Francis founded the Franciscans.⁶ In any case, Cistercians propagated a new way of legal thinking in their religious communities that many of them thought to be authorless, a compelling combination of antiquity and novelty. Medieval Cistercian hagiography propagates this mystical sense of the Order's beginnings, even after several generations: Caesarius of Heisterbach's *Dialogus* claims that the Holy Spirit gave the inspiration for the Cistercian Order, Saint Benedict was its founder, and Robert of Molesme was its reformer.⁷

3. Jean Leclercq, "La 'paternité' de S. Bernard et les débuts de l'Ordre cistercien," *RBen* 103 (1993): 445–81; English translation: "Saint Bernard and the Beginnings of the Cistercian Order," *CSQ* 29 (1994): 379–93, cited in McGuire 412 n. 45.

4. Hildegard Brem, "Die Carta Caritatis," *Cistercienser-Chronik* 126 (2019): 194–214, here 206–9.

5. Julien Paris, *Du premier esprit de l'ordre de Cîteaux* (Paris, 1653) 13–17.

6. He composed a primitive rule, now lost, which was in legal terms a failed document with no effect on the Order's canonical structure (Volker Leppin, *Franziskus von Assisi* [Darmstadt: WBG Theiss, 2018] 123).

7. *Hoc autem fixum teneas, ordinis nostris auctorem esse Spiritum Sanctum, institutorem sanctum Benedictum, innovatorem vero venerabilem Abbatem Robertem* (Caesarius Heisterbacensis, *Dialogus miraculorum*, trans. Nikolaus Nösges, commentary by Horst Schneider, *Fontes Christiani* 86 [Turnhout: Brepols, 2009] 1.1.8–10).

The *Carta* itself states at the very outset that many monks were involved: "Abbot Stephen and the brothers have decided."⁸ Yet this statement has been overlooked, from the *Exordium Magnum* to the *Nomas-ticon Cisterciense* (1664) and all the way through to our day. Time and again, they list Stephen as the author. The 1944 *Compendium of the History of the Cistercian Order* writes of the *Carta* as "unique in conception," "the work of one man [Stephen], the product of his extraordinary genius."⁹ Such authorial attribution is anachronistic and influenced by modern notions of intellectual property. Scholars currently unanimously accept that the *Carta* was finished years after Stephen died.

Searching for a genius who created the Order from scratch contradicts the ideals of the Cistercian movement. Cistercians did precisely not want to live like disciples who had gathered around charismatic leadership personalities: they tried to avoid personality cults. The only founding father to have been canonized by the Holy See was Robert in 1222, yet even then, the effort came from outside of the Order: Molesme Benedictines, not the abbots of Cîteaux, initiated it.¹⁰ For over four hundred years, the Order celebrated only Robert liturgically, not Alberic or Stephen, making it clear that there was no push from within Cistercian ranks to canonize the other two.

No one could claim that the *Carta*, whenever it was finished, was completely new. Many of its elements were classics of monastic administration, like visitation. Visitations date back to the Desert Fathers and were well known to monks and nuns in the Benedictine tradition hundreds of years before Cîteaux.¹¹ One could argue, however, that Stephen's personal accomplishment lay in getting the document approved. Many forget that the pope in office in 1119, Calixtus II, did not approve the *Carta* from Rome but from the city of Saulieu, only about 80 km from

8. Hildegard Brem and Alberic Altermatt, *Einmütig in der Liebe* (Langwaden-Turnhout: Bernardus-Verlag, 1998) 98.

9. *Compendium of the History of the Cistercian Order* (Trappist, KY: Abbey of Gethsemani, 1944) 44.

10. Joseph-Marie Canivez, *Statuta capitulorum generalium Ordinis Cisterciensis* (Louvain: Bureaux de la Revue, 1939) 527 (#7). Alberic is not listed in the Roman Martyrology, but his veneration on January 26 was sponsored in a special way by the Feuillants in 1701; the General Chapter approved Alberic's feast in 1738 (Seraphim Lenssen, *Hagiologium* [Tilburg, 1949] 8; Canivez 7:724, footnote).

11. Jörg Oberste, "Das gottgeweihte Leben auf dem Prüfstand. Kirchliche und klösterliche Visitationen vor den Zisterziensern," *Die Lebenswelt der Zisterzienser. Neue Studien zur Geschichte eines europäischen Ordens*, ed. Joachim Werz (Regensburg: Schnell + Steiner, 2020) 184–205, here 195.

Cîteaux. That is where Calixtus (previously archbishop of Vienne, Burgundy) was elected to the papacy by a small group of cardinals and then crowned.¹² He had not yet left. This feat of approbation was a miniature masterpiece of diplomatic skill.

STEPHEN ABSENT FROM GENERAL MEDIEVAL HAGIOGRAPHY

HISTORY HAS RENAMED the early abbot of Cîteaux. Harding was probably his first name as a boy oblate at the cathedral-monastery of Sherborne, located in south-central England. He left Sherborne as a young man and went to study in France. Harding probably took the name Stephen during his pilgrimage to Rome, in honor of the protomartyr. It was Early Modern hagiographers who made a surname of Harding, calling him "Stephanus Hardingus."¹³ Authors of the nineteenth century endorsed this anachronistic shift wholeheartedly, so that today most think that Harding was his family name.¹⁴

While Stephen does appear in important narrative texts like the exordia and Herbert's *Liber visionum et miraculorum Clarevallensium*, these texts did not circulate widely. He is absent from the books that were truly popular in medieval Europe. Voragine's *Legenda aurea* has entries on Benedict, Bernard, and Francis of Assisi, but no entry on the theoretical founder of the Cistercian Order. Stephen is also missing from the *Dialogus miraculorum* by Caesarius of Heisterbach. Therefore it comes as no surprise that we have no system of iconographic attributes for the third abbot of Cîteaux. He has never been nearly as popular as Saint Bernard, whom he welcomed as a novice.

12. Gregor Müller, *Vom Cistercienser Orden* (Bregenz: Teutsch, 1927) 30.

13. Chrysostomus Henriquez uses the name Stephanus Hardingus in his *Phoenix reviviscens*, (Brussels, 1626) 139–51; Augustinus Sartorius, *Verteüschtes Cistercium Bis-Tertium* (Prague, 1708) 16.

14. H. E. J. Cowdrey, "Stephan Harding," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) 52:420–23, here 420.

STEPHEN IN EARLY MODERN HAGIOGRAPHY

THE PUBLICATION OF Baronius's *Martyrologium romanum* at the end of the sixteenth century prompted an increase in liturgical veneration of Saint Stephen. The Roman martyrology had this effect because it listed Stephen's feast on April 17, albeit at the eighth (and last) position for that date.¹⁵ The General Chapter of 1623 reacted directly to this challenge by amplifying liturgical commemorations for Stephen. It is true that in 1489, the abbot of Cîteaux had included Stephen in the *Compendium sanctorum ordinis cisterciensis*,¹⁶ and questionable sources claim that a beatification of sorts took place in 1584,¹⁷ but it took until 1623 to make the feast official, with gradual intensification following.¹⁸ The breviary of 1783 includes a feast for Stephen.¹⁹

But he was not necessarily being venerated for the legal document he was said to have written. The Roman martyrology makes no mention of the *Carta*, nor of whether Stephen founded the Order. Instead, it states that he received Saint Bernard into the novitiate.

Cistercian historians like Angel Manrique (1577–1649), Chrysostomus Henriquez (1594–1632), Charles de Visch (1596–1666), Caspar Jongelincx (1596–1669), and Bertrand Tissier (ca. 1600–1672) were Early Modern scholars who devoted themselves to writing the history of their order as part of the scholarly upswing that was an integral part of Baroque renewal. More research on these authors' portrayal of the *Carta Caritatis* and Stephen's role in writing it is necessary.

Baroque hagiography often portrays Stephen as the abbot who completed the Cistercian reform,²⁰ but it is difficult to define this completion. Was the Order complete because Stephen administered the group effort that led to the *Carta*, as legal scholars would maintain today, or was it for the less abstract reason that many men started entering? Over-determined

15. *Martyrologium Romanum* (Rome, 1586) 170.

16. Claudio Stercal, *Stephen Harding: A Biographical Sketch and Texts*, trans. Martha Krieg, CS 226 (Collegeville, MN: Cistercian, 2008) 35.

17. *Compendium of the History of the Cistercian Order* 346.

18. Cowdrey; Jean de la Croix Bouton, "Stephan Harding," *Lexikon des Mittelalters* (Munich: Lexma-Verlag, 1997) 8:119–20.

19. Stercal 35–36.

20. *cum ipsi sacra Cisterciensis reformatio fines acciperet* (Henriquez 146).

historical narratives about the Cistercian Order make it easier; they claim that the Order was complete once Bernard had entered it. Popular imagination favors schematic stories like this, not abstract details like drafting monastic constitutions and honing administrative structures.

GOTHIC REVIVAL: STEPHEN AS AN ENGLISHMAN

IDENTIFYING STEPHEN AS the sole author of the *Carta Caritatis* granted weight to the patriotic assertion that Stephen had contributed in this manner to "Anglia's glory"; this argument was first proposed by the Englishman William of Malmesbury, who was Saint Stephen's most important medieval biographer. Since then, there has been only one full-length modern biography of the saint. It was written in the nineteenth century by a young Englishman named Dalgairns. If Jean Leclercq warned that Malmesbury's statements were questionable because tainted by patriotic fervor,²¹ the same warnings are in order when reading Dalgairns. But precisely because his book was so widely distributed and has survived as the only monograph-length biography until our day, it provides valuable evidence about Stephen in romantic historiography.

Dalgairns was a historian to be reckoned with. Even if he had no access to archival sources, he regularly cited the Rule of Saint Benedict, the Rule of the Master, Manrique, Mabillon, Martène, and the *Nomasticon cisterciense*. To this day, a century and a half after its publication, *lexica* list the Dalgairns monograph as the most definitive source on Stephen Harding.²²

Dalgairns was a convert priest and confrere of John Henry Newman. His Cistercian book was the very first publication in Newman's series *Lives of the English Saints*. It was quite a success. The first edition appeared in English in 1844; two further English editions followed within the year with reprints as late as 2015. The book was translated into French in 1846 (several editions followed), German in 1865, and Hungarian in 1929.

21. Jean Leclercq, "Le témoignage de Guillaume de Malmesbury sur S. Étienne Harding," *Studia Monastica* 36 (1994): 13–19, cited in McGuire 412, n. 45.

22. Eberhard Hoffmann, "Stephan Harding," *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1937) 9:802; Thomas Merton, *In the Valley of Wormwood: Cistercian Blessed and Saints of the Golden Age*, CS 233 (Collegeville, MN: Cistercian, 2013) 200; Cowdrey.

In this presentation, Harding appears as the great Englishman who founded the great Cistercian Order. The Order, in turn, appears as a product of English culture. Dalgairns cites William of Malmesbury and reinforces the nationalistic aspects already nascent in the medieval portrait: "St. Stephen was in character a very Englishman; his life has that strange mixture of repose and of action which characterizes England. . . . His very countenance . . . was English; he was courteous in speech, blithe in countenance, with a soul ever joyful in the Lord."²³

It did not matter that few Englishmen of the day knew who Stephen Harding was. The violence done to the Cistercian Order was particularly manifest in England through that country's prominent examples of monastic ruins like those at the formerly Cistercian Tintern Abbey, about which William Wordsworth wrote his famous poem. For Dalgairns, such ruins were proof of the sins committed against England's Catholic cultural identity, and they needed spiritual reparation: "May his [St. Stephen's] prayers now be heard before the throne of grace, for that dear country now lying under the wrath of God for the sins of its children."²⁴

There is, however, one catch in the anglophile initiative to reclaim Stephen as an English saint: he chose to leave England at a very early age, and he never returned. The fact of his (probably forbidden) departure from Sherborne Cathedral crisscrosses the otherwise straightforward trajectory of sanctity that we find in Dalgairns' biography.

CONCLUSION

THE MODERN SEARCH for one single founder of the Cistercian Order that began in the nineteenth century and ended after the liturgical reforms of the Second Vatican Council led both Observances to celebrate the Feasts of Robert, Alberic, and Stephen on one and the same day, January 26th. The one feast day made them all founders in their own way. Monks of the first Cistercian generations would have had little interest in such questions, since their role models were desert monks who erased as many

23. John Bernard Dalgairns, *St. Stephen Abbot, The Cistercian Saints of England*, *Lives of the English Saints* (London: James Toovey, 1844) 187.

24. Dalgairns 187.

feast days from their calendar as possible. They found them to be distracting.²⁵

Even if Stephen had written the *Carta* by himself, it would be just one accomplishment among several other initiatives. His guiding hand in the Harding Bible and in the revision of the Cistercian Hymnal are equally significant accomplishments.²⁶ Recent times have looked eagerly on the first project, for which Stephen consulted Jewish scholars.²⁷ In the course of the project, Stephen wrote the Monitum of 1109, proving himself to be a Biblical expert in his own right.²⁸

Today's scholars do not consider Stephen to have been the sole author of the *Carta Caritatis*, but he was certainly a fascinating Cistercian monk. Various epochs have presented him differently, revealing more about their own values and interests than those held by the early abbot of Cîteaux.

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25. Pius Maurer, "Der heutige Generalkalender des Cistercienserordens," *Analecta Cisterciensia* 68 (2018): 339–59, here 344.

26. Stercal 24.

27. Michael Ernst, "Der hl. Abt Stephan Harding von Cîteaux und seine Bibel im Kontext der Vulgata-Texte und Vulgata-Revisionen bis zum 13. Jh.," *Aktuelle Wege der Cistercienserforschung*, ed. Alkuin Volker Schachenmayr, EUCist Studien 1 (Heiligenkreuz: Be & Be Verlag, 2008) 55–87.

28. G. Dahan, "Juifs et chrétiens," 9–10; cited in M. Ernst 67; see also several articles on a "Cistercian hermeneutic" in *Lexégèse monastique au Moyen Âge (XI^e–XIV^e siècle)*, ed. Gilbert Dahan (Paris: Institut d'études augustiniennes, 2014).