



**POUR UNE HISTOIRE
DE L'ESPACE AU
MOYEN ÂGE :
TEXTES ET CARTES
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*RECREATING MEDIEVAL SPATIAL UNDERSTANDING
AND MEANING AT THE ABBEY OF LE BEC-
HELLOUIN, NORMANDY*

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MOTS-CLÉS : ESPACE, MONASTERE, SPACE, MONASTERY

Résumé : Cet article explore le cas de l'abbaye du Bec-Hellouin en Normandie, entre le IX^e et le XIII^e siècle. Les vestiges matériels de l'abbaye étant presque inexistant, ce sont les sources narratives qui nous informent principalement sur l'occupation de l'espace à cette époque. Il s'agit de s'interroger sur le problème méthodologique que rencontre l'historien qui cherche, par l'analyse des textes, à reconstituer les « pratiques médiévales de l'espace ».

Abstract : This article considers how it is possible to reconstruct the use and meaning of space within the abbey of Le Bec-Hellouin during the Middle Ages, particularly between the 11th and the 13th centuries. Material remains are virtually non-existent and so we are heavily reliant on written texts. In addition to the information provided by the narrative sources, this article considers how, as scholars, we deal with these methodological problems in seeking to recreate 'medieval practices of space'.

Recreating medieval spatial understanding and meaning at the abbey of Le Bec-Hellouin, Normandy

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Bec-Hellouin is one of the most famous Norman abbeys founded in the eleventh century¹. The circumstances of Bec's foundation, the importance of the monks Anselm and Lanfranc, and the abbey's broader place in the Anglo-Norman realm mean that the community has left behind a rich documentary tradition. This includes charters, narrative sources, monastic treatises and customs through which historians can attempt to reconstruct the use and meaning of space. This enterprise is not without its problems. The lack of substantial archaeological and architectural remains is a barrier to a more complete understanding of how this institution functioned. This means that scholars are heavily dependent on the written evidence, which, although rich, is also patchy.

¹ I am grateful to the organisers for inviting me to participate in the study day and the participants for their thoughtful observations and questions. The discussion here will be developed more fully in a forthcoming article on the religious life and use of space in the abbey of Bec in *The Abbey of Le Bec in the Middle Ages: a Handbook*, ed. by B. POHL and L. GATHAGAN to be published by Brill.

This paper focuses in particular on the life of Herluin of Bec, written by Gilbert Crispin in the early twelfth century². Gilbert had been a monk of Bec prior to his appointment as abbot of Westminster. In writing the life of the monastery's first abbot, Gilbert drew on the oral tradition of the community, Herluin having died in 1070. It also draws on some of the other narrative sources connected with the community, notably Eadmer's life of Anselm and some of the lives of the later abbots, for example William and Boso, written by Milo Crispin³. Also of importance are the treatises that survive regarding the profession of monks and abbots and the liberties of the monastery⁴. Additionally the Bec Chronicle also survives, probably dating from the mid-twelfth century onwards. This begins in annalistic form though its contributors have collated or confused various events. Space precludes discussion of it here.

The early narrative sources are particularly useful in terms of thinking about how the monks of Bec understood their monastic practice and history and how they reflected back on it in the decades following the abbey's initial foundation. Bec had always been closely tied to the political sphere of the Anglo-Norman realm, particularly as two of its most famous

² *Vita Herluini* in *The Works of Gilbert Crispin: Abbot of Westminster*, ed. A. S. ABULAFIA and G. R. EVANS, Londres, Oxford University Press, 1986, p. 183-212 ; trans. S. N. VAUGHN as « The Life of Herluin » in *The Abbey of Bec and the Anglo-Norman State, 1034-1136*, Woodbridge, Boydell, 1981, p. 67-68.

³ EADMER, *The Life of St Anselm, Archbishop of Canterbury*, ed. and trans. R. W. SOUTHERN, Oxford, Clarendon Press (Oxford Medieval Texts), 1972 ; Milo CRISPIN, *Vita venerabilis Willelmi Beccensis tertii abbatis and Vita venerabilis Bosonis*, *Patrologia Latina*, vol. 150 ed. J.-P. MIGNE, Paris, 1834, cols 713-732, trans. S. N. VAUGHN as « The Lives of William and Boso », in *The Abbey of Bec and the Anglo-Norman State, op. cit.*, p. 117-126.

⁴ *Three Treatises from Bec on the Nature of Monastic Life*, ed. G. CONSTABLE and trans. B. SMITH, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2008. This edition includes the following works : *Tractatus de professionibus monachorum*, p. 29-105, *De professionibus abbatum*, p. 107-133, *De libertate Beccensis monasterii*, p. 135-169.

monks – Lanfranc and Anselm – went on to become archbishops of Canterbury. There were debates and conflicts with the secular lords as to the exact nature in which the monastic lands were held from them⁵. In addition, the archbishops of Rouen were keen to ensure the Bec abbots made a profession of obedience to them in line with the customs of papal reform⁶. The twelfth century also saw the increasing popularity of new orders like the Cistercians and, especially in Normandy, the order of Prémontrés, drawing on more eremitical traditions⁷. Although these communities were founded in significant numbers after the earliest narratives of Bec were written, there is no doubt that defending a more eleventh-century understanding of the rule with its emphasis on community and above all stability to a particular place was key to the history and identity of certain communities. We see this especially in the later writing of Orderic Vitalis where the stability and community of Benedictine monasticism is explicitly contrasted with that of the new orders in Book VIII of his *Historia ecclesiastica*⁸.

So what can these narrative texts reveal about twelfth-century understanding of space and our own methodologies?

⁵ See S. N. VAUGHN, *Anselm of Bec and Robert of Meulan : the Innocence of the Dove and the Wisdom of the Serpent*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1987, and *The Abbey of Bec and the Anglo-Norman State*, *op. cit.*, for discussion.

⁶ *De libertate Beccensis monasterii* discusses this in detail.

⁷ B. ARDURA, *Abbayes, prieurés et monastères de l'ordre des Prémontrés, en France, des origines à nos jours : Dictionnaire historique et bibliographique*, Nancy, Presses universitaires de Nancy (Centre culturel des Prémontrés), 1993 ; C. BERMAN, *The Cistercian Evolution: the Invention of a Religious Order in Twelfth-Century Europe*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000.

⁸ Orderic VITALIS, *The Ecclesiastical History*, ed. and trans. M. CHIBNALL, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1968-1981, vol. 4, p. 310-337. This is discussed in L. V. HICKS, « Monastic Authority, Landscape and Place in the Ecclesiastical History of Orderic Vitalis », in *Gender and Authority in Medieval and Renaissance Chronicles*, ed. J. DRESVINA and N. SPARKS, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012, p. 102-120.

First we can take up the challenge of Lefebvre cited by most medievalists who work on understanding the use and representation of space. The idea that historical change can be tracked through spatial understanding is crucial here⁹. The early sources from the abbey of Bec allow us to see how the twelfth-century community negotiated its early and uncertain past to create a more stable narrative and more certain position within the Anglo-Norman polity. In this respect we can take on board the cultural geographer Doreen Massey's idea that place is created by the connections sustained between people and a much larger geography. She also refers to space as a « simultaneity of stories-so-far » ; in other words, a combination of different stories and histories that combine to produce something dynamic, rather than a more static understanding akin to a snapshot in time¹⁰. This is a particularly apt idea for a consideration of an understanding and representation of monastic space, with its emphasis on community, repetition and connection with the past alongside the ebb and flow of the community and the mixing of different temporalities. The space of the monastery enacts all these things together, while the places it embodies act as a depository and continuation of these stories. By considering spatial practices and representations we can move away from the idea of foundation as an event, to consider it as a process, a theme that Steven Vanderputten has considered in relation to reform¹¹. This paper puts the early history of Bec in that context.

⁹ H. LEFEBVRE, *The Production of Space*, trans. D. NICHOLSON-SMITH, Oxford, Wiley-Blackwell, 1991 ; first published as H. LEFEBVRE, *La Production de l'espace*, Paris, Anthropos, 1974.

¹⁰ D. MASSEY, *For Space*, London, Thousand Oaks, 2005, p. 9 and following for discussion.

¹¹ S. VANDERPUTTEN, *Monastic Reform as Process: Realities and Representation in Medieval Flanders, 900-1100*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2013.

One of the key themes, both in the early narrative sources and the treatises, is that of stability both of the monks themselves and the actual physical space and location of the monastery. This is particularly pertinent when set against the background of the growth of the new orders in the twelfth century. One of the criticisms levelled at these new communities was that some of their monks had broken their vow of stability to place, for example Robert of Molesme, founder of the Cistercians. By going into the wilderness, these men abandoned their original communities and deprived their monks of guidance. This was a particularly pertinent point for the Bec monks whose brothers, priors and abbots had gone on to head new abbeys or take on episcopal roles. Another key factor was that the monastery itself had moved several times. The narrative sources and treatises can therefore help us understand how the monastery anchored itself to a particular location and carved out its own space.

Unlike some of the other monasteries that have left behind a strong narrative tradition like Jumièges or St-Évroult, Bec had no Merovingian past to fall back on to justify its traditions. Right from the start though, Gilbert Crispin sought to connect the nascent foundation with the wider traditions of the Benedictine past. Herluin ruled in the manner of the earlier fathers, leading by example and consecrating the ground through tough manual labour as well as prayer. Indeed, for Herluin, an unlearned lay man, this was essential to his practice of monasticism. But the original site of the community at Bonneville was unsuitable. The move to Bec was a means of addressing some of the worst limitations of the previous site, most crucially the lack of water. The way this move is phrased in spatial terms is most instructive. Herluin was instructed in a vision to « reject the solitude of the countryside » (*ut dimissa solitudine campestri*)¹². This move reflects a hagiographical tradition seen in the foundation stories of other Norman monasteries : too much solitude is a

¹² *Vita Herluini*, *op. cit.*, p. 193 ; « Life of Herluin », *op. cit.*, p. 73.

burden and can actively hinder the monastic life. Community and the practices enacted in it were essential. As the number of monks grew at Bec it perhaps moved again to accommodate them all. Attention is then paid in the *Life of Herluin* to the construction of permanent buildings to solidify the place of the monastery in the landscape¹³. The relocation represents a maturing of the community.

Stability of place and its importance to the community are reflected in some of the visions recorded in the lives of the early abbots. One such event is recorded in the *Life of Lanfranc*¹⁴. After he had spent some time at the abbey, Lanfranc tired of the squabbling monks and resolved to become a hermit. The plan was to accustom himself to eating thistles and then flee the monastery by night – abandoning the community life for the solitary. Very rarely do good or honest things happen at night time in medieval narrative sources. The night renders familiar places unfamiliar and space becomes fluid with opportunities for connections between different thresholds, notably the earthly and spiritual worlds. In the *Life of Herluin*, Gilbert had recounted a tale in which the devil, disguised as a cleric, lurked in the privy waiting to tempt monks away¹⁵. Monasteries and monks in their early stages of formation are particularly vulnerable. Fortunately for Bec, in this narrative Herluin was warned of Lanfranc's intentions in a vision and was able to prevent him from leaving. The result was to make Lanfranc prior and to bring about a more stable observance of the rules. Milo Crispin records a similar event in *The Life of William*. During William's abbacy, an elderly hermit entered the monastery and later wanted to return to his solitary lifestyle. William was able to persuade him it was a trap set by the devil and that he

¹³ *Vita Herluini*, *op. cit.*, p. 193-194 ; « Life of Herluin », *op. cit.*, p. 73-74, 77.

¹⁴ *In vitam magni et gloriosi Lanfranci*, in *Patrologia Latina*, vol. 150, cols 29-58 (col. 33) ; « The Life of Lanfranc », trans. S. VAUGHN, *The Abbey of Bec*, *op. cit.*, p. 87-111 (p. 90-91).

¹⁵ *Vita Herluini*, *op. cit.*, p. 193 ; « Life of Herluin », *op. cit.*, p. 73.

should live out his days in the quiet order of the monastic cloister¹⁶. The integrity of the monastery, exemplified by its commitment to a coenobitic form of observance, was vital.

The potential damage to the physical and spiritual character of the space caused by the monks leaving is clearly reflected in the unease felt at the removal of key figures in the early leadership of the monastery, notably Lanfranc and Anselm. The transfer of Lanfranc, who by this time had spent some time as abbot of St-Étienne in Caen, was shown to Herluin in an allegorical vision. William the Conqueror visited the monastery and desired to transplant a particularly fruitful apple tree to his own garden. Herluin was opposed to the idea, but the tree was uprooted. However, not all the roots were removed. Later the true nature of the vision was revealed when Lanfranc became archbishop of Canterbury rejuvenating the church in England, at least from a Norman perspective, while still providing support for the monastery at Bec. The allegorical tree of Bec continued to produce good fruit, notably Anselm and William of Cormeilles among others. The departure of Anselm also occasioned a moment of crisis in the community. *The Life of William*, written by the precentor of Bec, Milo Crispin, records the community's reaction to Anselm's elevation to the see of Canterbury as if it had been orphaned : « they had now lost such a sweet father, who once cherished his sons like a nurse in the bosom of his affection » (*et tanti aclam dulcissimi Patris amissionem, qui eos velut nutrix filios suos gremio dilectionis confovebat*)¹⁷. The loss of significant leaders and spiritual guides caused a significant rupture in the life of the monastery. It could leave the monks vulnerable to political machinations not only of local magnates but also of kings and archbishops. It was not an event that could be easily glossed over.

The importance of stability to the monks of Bec is reflected in the treatise on the profession of monks

¹⁶ *Vita venerabilis Willelmi* col. 720 ; « Life of William », *op. cit.*, p. 123.

¹⁷ *Vita venerabilis Willelmi*, col. 716 ; « Life of William », *op. cit.*, p. 118-119.

composed at Bec by an anonymous monk writing at the turn of the eleventh and twelfth centuries¹⁸. In discussing the difference between good and bad monks, he emphasises the vow of stability. The lack of stability among those who leave communities is what leads to a decrease in the observance of the rule and in the number of dedicated coenobitic communities. This is elaborated in a definition of the vow of stability later in the text, dealing with the formal profession of monks. Stability is defined here as « he promises that he will not go anywhere without the permission of his superior, nor will he change his abode for any cause whatever of his own volition, but will stay there till the end. A big promise and difficult for many » (*promittit nullo modo se iturum quoquam, absque licentia sui maioris, nec locum mutaturum pro qualibet causa propria voluntate, sed usque ad finem ibi permansurum. Magna, promissionem, et multis difficilem*)¹⁹. The author recognises that the view of stability is not easy to fulfil and needs a change in mental attitudes. Stability without faithfulness is no good : « Whoever does not love his own place and takes no precautions against boredom will certainly not last long » (*qui locum proprium non diligit et ab ocio non se precauet, nullo modo hanc pactionem observare diu preualeat*)²⁰. But what of the brother who has to leave ? To this question, so crucial to the monks in the first century of their foundation, our author has an answer : he should always work for the benefit of his church, preserve himself from sin and give no cause for the order to be defamed. In so doing he maintained his own stability well²¹. For Lanfranc, Anselm and the others, working to preserve the church was a way of remaining faithful, something that is

¹⁸ Constable argues that the author of this text, who also wrote the other treatises discussed here, was of the same generation of Abbot Boso : « Introduction » in *Three Treatises from Bec on the Nature of Monastic Life*, *op. cit.*, p. 3-28 (p. 24).

¹⁹ *Tractatus de professionibus monachorum*, p. 74-75.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 76-77.

²¹ *Ibid.*

made especially manifest in the letters Anselm wrote to sustain the community.

The narrative sources also provide a glimpse into the use of space in terms of the daily routine of the monastery. Unlike monastic customaries of which we have survivals from Bec as well as Lanfranc's constitutions for Canterbury Christchurch Cathedral Priory, the purpose of the hagiography is not to provide a detailed account of the order of the day, but to draw on it as appropriate to illustrate the qualities of the abbot or the character of observance. In turn this might reflect the good order of the monastery, highlight failings and provide insights into the daily life of the monastery. These details are often found in the context of visions, essential in stressing the coeval nature of monastic space and time, which exist in the past, present and future simultaneously through repetition and correct observance of the rule, including spatial practice.

Abbot William had a particular devotion to Herluin and would pray at his tomb before and after any journey he made. Herluin appeared to him in a vision and led him on a tour of the monastery. This itinerary recorded by Milo Crispin is interesting as it seems to take in the precincts of the monastery including its earliest site at Bonneville. Herluin led the abbot through the outbuildings around Le Parc, to the church at Bonneville and then back to the monastery itself where the cloister was empty except for one monk. Milo Crispin was puzzled by the vision's meaning, but Abbot William interpreted it as indicating that something in the monastery was in need of correction²². What it does show is an understanding of process and change. William's night-time tour of monastic sites associated with Bec underlines the trials of the early community, the search for stability and the need to preserve the monastic quality of the space. Milo notes that Herluin had built the church with his own hands, echoing Gilbert's *Vita Herluini*. The reason for the vision might have

²² *Vita venerabilis Willelmi*, col. 720 ; « Life of William », p. 123.

been unknown to Milo, but it perhaps can be read as the continuation of pastoral care handed down from abbot to abbot. It is not accidental that the vision follows on from William's prayers at Herluin's tomb. Monastic space is, as Lefebvre categorises « absolute space », characterised by links between the real and imagined²³: the physical space of the community on the earth with the imagined community of the living and the dead connected in time and space.

The English monk Eadmer, close confidant of Anselm also recorded a vision which sheds light on our understanding of monastic space. Anselm, while still abbot, was pondering how it was possible for prophets to see both the past and the future. He was granted a vision in which he could see straight through the solid masonry of the church and dormitory. He could thus watch the monks preparing for matins. Some were lighting candles round the altar and others were illuminating different parts of the church. He also witnessed one of the monks sound the bell to awaken the brethren²⁴. This vision allowed Anselm to see that the community would flourish in the future, sustained by the rule.

For the most part, however, the early narrative sources from Bec do not provide a detailed portrayal of day-to-day observance. These were accounts written by monks for monks and as such much of the detail regarding times of office and who should be where and when would have been taken for granted. Bec, like other abbeys had constitutions which regulated the daily order though it would be a mistake to regard them as fixed and unchanging. It would perhaps be more accurate to regard them as a theme upon which the monks improvised to a certain degree. What the narrative sources do show is an awareness of the contemporary concerns of the twelfth century. Another tract – On the Liberty of the Abbey of Bec (*De libertate Beccensis monasterii*) – is concerned with the dual problem of exact terms on which the

²³ H. LEFEBVRE, *The Production of Space*, *op. cit.*, p. 234, 254-255.

²⁴ EADMER, *Life of St Anselm*, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

monastery had its lands and of whether or not the abbots should profess obedience to the Archbishops of Rouen. Taken alongside the lives of the abbots the treatises show the process of a twelfth-century community trying to negotiate its own place in a rapidly changing world. It was acutely conscious of the weak points in its monastic past. In its early days it stood apart from the Cluniac inspired reform of the major ducal abbeys like Fécamp and Jumièges. It did not have a Merovingian past from which to draw its authority in the manner of Orderic's St-Evrout. Instead, it grew relatively quickly from humble beginnings to be for a while one of the most significant monastic institutions in the Anglo-Norman realm. Its uncertain beginnings and loss of key figures to abbeys or bishoprics elsewhere might well have suggested a need to preserve and explain the character of Bec and to justify its traditions with reference to the use of monastic space.

To conclude, sources like the rule or the constitutions of a particular house provide a set of spatial practices, which are adapted to local circumstance. Visitation records give an indication of where practice deviates too much from those statutes. The narrative sources considered here in contrast provide glimpses into how the community expressed its concerns in a spatial sense at key moments in its life and history. Herluin, for example, did not know he had founded what would become such a great abbey ; he was searching for a form of observance that suited him as an unlearned layman. By the time Gilbert and Milo Crispin and their contemporaries were writing, circumstances demanded a history that firmly situated Bec in time, space, location and monastic tradition. It was a history that located Bec in versions of the past, present and, through visions, the future in order to reassure, resolve conflict and disruption and, crucially, stability. The key message for historians of spatial representation and understanding that lies in the narrative

history of Bec is the importance of the quality of space and the importance of finding the right place.