CASSINESE HORIZONS: PETER THE DEACON, COWDREY'S "GOLDEN AGE," AND BENEDICTINE TRADITION

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Abstract: This paper reexamines the evidence for the intellectual life of Montecassino in the central middle ages, by interrogating a key supporting text: Peter the Deacon's *De viris illustribus casinensis coenobii*. This work is a catalogue of the greatest scholars associated with the abbey, listing their achievements in the liberal arts. It argues that, rather than being read *sui generis*, this text needs to be set within a longstanding Benedictine tradition. Peter's catalogue reveals an attempt to reconcile the local achievements of Montecassino with a model of the universal church, as well as rising tensions between eremitical and coenobitic practices. The concluding section examines the historiographical implications of this argument for our understanding of eleventh-century Montecassino, and suggests that the label of a "golden age" would not have been welcomed by Peter himself.
Keywords: Peter the Deacon, Montecassino, Jerome, Desiderius, Benedictine.

Introduction: illustrious men in an illustrious institution

So much of the history of Montecassino is refracted through the lens of Peter the Deacon, the abbey's "chartularius ac bibliothecarius" (archivist and librarian).[1] Few historians have a kind word to say about Peter, who is often regarded as a braggart and plagiarist of the most audacious kind. Yet the paradox is that we are reliant on Peter for so much of our information about eleventh- and twelfth-century Montecassino, and its political and intellectual ambitions. Peter, who arrived at the abbey in 1113 as a five-year old oblate, and who went on to become Montecassino's most prolific author, editor, forger, and publicist, is rarely treated in his own right. Unlike his more famous predecessor at Montecassino in the eighth century, Paul the Deacon, no one has chosen to explore Peter's "narrative worlds," or to address him as a serious reporter of southern Italian medieval history.[2]

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1 Peter the Deacon, *De viris illustribus casinensis coenobii*, c.47, PL. 173.1048A. It is also known as *De viris illustribus casinensibus*. Hereafter *DVIC*. This is in fact J-P Migne's reprint of the seventeenth-century edition made by G. B. Mari.

2 Attention to Paul the Deacon has no doubt been spurred on by interest in medieval ethnicity, and Walter Goffart's inclusion of Paul in his list of early medieval "narrators of barbarian history." Cf. Christopher Heath, *The Narrative Worlds of Paul the Deacon* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017), among the most recent works on Paul. Peter receives only brief treatment in the most recent work on the history of Montecassino, where he largely serves as a useful source for information about the abbey. Kriston R. Rennie, *The Destruction and Recovery of Monte Cassino, 529-1964* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021), 130. As discussed below, in n.6, Herbert Bloch is an important exception to this characterisation, but his interest

The historian who wishes to get to grips with the political and intellectual world of southern Italy in the central middle ages cannot avoid an encounter with Montecassino. As a monastic institution, the role it played in the life of the eleventh- and twelfth-century Latin church is perhaps rivalled only by Cluny. That was, of course, a role which the abbots and monks of Montecassino were eager to promote.[3] The survival of manuscripts from the abbey point to exactly what kinds of resources—textual, human, and institutional—it possessed.[4] But this prominence can mean that Cassinese texts are often treated *sui generis*, as if they stand outside the historical currents that shaped the writing and recording of the past in other monasteries; they are rarely the subjects of comparison.

The purpose of this article, therefore, is to consider how one particular text composed by Peter the Deacon fits into a wider world of monastic (and specifically Benedictine) writing. That text is the *De viris illustribus casinensibus coenobii* ("On the illustrious men of the monastery of Montecassino"). It considers how much Peter had in common with other monastic authors writing in the same tradition. It is only once we have established the boundaries of the genre that we can probe the unique features of Peter's text, and only then can we bring the Cassinese context back into the picture. In other words, this article treats Peter the Deacon as one twelfth-century monastic author among many, responding (mostly) to a common set of imperatives. As the second part of this article makes clear, this reading has some significant implications for how we write the history of the abbey in the eleventh century, and, perhaps most importantly, for Cowdrey's framing of a "golden age" of Montecassino under Desiderius (abbot 1058-87), a historiographical paradigm which remains influential.

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in Peter has not been picked up in more recent historical writing.

3 See Walter Pohl, "History in Fragments: Montecassino's Politics of Memory," *Early Medieval Europe* 10:3 (2001): 343–74, for the limits of this process.

4 Herbert Bloch, *Monte Cassino in the Middle Ages* (3 vols., Rome, Edizioni Di Storia E Letteratura, 1986).

Authorial reputation

Peter's most important historical legacy was perhaps his continuation and editing of the *Chronicle* of Montecassino, begun by Leo of Ostia.[5] To put it in the most neutral terms possible, we can describe Peter as a zealous partisan of his abbey, keen to put the historical record and written word at its service. Herbert Bloch, the great historian of Montecassino, has already provided a sketch of Peter as a man immersed in the Roman past and classical learning.[6] As Bloch noted, Peter's interest in the past was reflected in another part of his career, this time as a masterful forger, willing to prepare any text that might give his abbey an edge over competing ecclesiastical institutions.[7] Chief among Peter's forgeries was the creation of a papal bull which purported to show that the abbey of Glanfeuil, on the Loire, had long been a dependency of Montecassino.[8] Paul Meyvaert, too, noted Peter's agility and eagerness in documentary forgery and in laying deliberately false claims, especially when attempting to vindicate Montecassino's claim to be the resting place of Benedict.[9] Other, more recent verdicts on Peter have been similarly scathing.[10] Graham Loud saw Peter as one significant figure in a wider scheme of a "propagandist" Cassinese historical tradition.[11] More recently, Sarah Whitten, while not necessarily making claims for Peter's intellectual

5 *Chronica monasterii Casinensis*, MGH SS 34. On the difficulty of separating Peter's work from that of Leo, see William D. McCready, "Leo of Ostia, the Montecassino Chronicle, and the Dialogues of Abbot Desiderius," *Mediaeval Studies* 62 (2000): 125–60.

6 Herbert Bloch, *The Atina Dossier of Peter the Deacon of Montecassino. A Hagiographical Romance of the Twelfth Century* (Città del Vaticano: Biblioteca apostolica Vaticana, 1998), 15-28.

7 Herbert Bloch, "The Schism of Anacletus II and the Glanfeuil Forgeries of Peter the Deacon of Monte Cassino," *Traditio* 8 (1952): 159–264, esp. 182.

8 Bloch, "The Schism," 192.

9 Paul Meyvaert, "Peter the Deacon and the Tomb of St. Benedict," *Revue Benedictine* 65 (1955): 3–70, at 32.

10 For example, I. S. Robinson, Review Article: "Montecassino in the Central Middle Ages," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 42:2 (1991): 259–82, at 280: 'Peter's literary activity was devoted to exalting the reputation and extending the territorial possessions of his abbey; and to this end he resorted to forgery'.

11 G. A. Loud, "Abbot Desiderius of Montecassino and the Gregorian Papacy," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 30:3 (1979): 305–26, at 326.

achievements, has argued that Peter can be useful to historians. Peter's choice to create certain kinds of documents allow us to appreciate what was worth taking the time to forge in this period, and what held political importance.[12]

Where Peter dodges the charge of forgery, he often verges on plagiarism. The general historical consensus is that Peter was by no means as intellectually accomplished as those earlier Cassinese figures he wrote about, lacking both their intellectual skill and spiritual insight. Meyvaert examined Peter's commentary on the Rule of St Benedict and concluded that it showed many borrowings, little sign of intellectual originality, and only a limited sense of organization: "since he has no real personal contribution to make Peter can only achieve this end by borrowing continuously from other sources. But no real intelligible pattern emerges from this plagiarism; to read through these pages does not really 'make sense', for they are not the work of a normal mind".[13] H. E. J. Cowdrey, who considered Peter briefly in his picture of the "golden age" of the abbey under Desiderius arrived at a similar conclusion.[14] For Cowdrey, Peter was considerably less accomplished than the Cassinese writers of the mid-eleventh century. His gift to posterity was the preservation of documents testifying to that short-lived period of flourishing under Desiderius. Some of the information Peter offered was useful, but, fundamentally, "his writings contain little that is by any stretch of the imagination of spiritual or religious value. In form and substance alike his writings cast a melancholy light upon the state of the abbey whose leading figure he was."[15] In historiographical terms, Cowdrey's view is particularly important. It supports and reflects a

12 Sarah Whitten, "Remembering, Illustrating, and Forgetting in the Register of Peter the Deacon," *Designing Norman Sicily: Material Culture and Society*, ed. Emily A. Winkler, Liam Fitzgerald, and Andrew Small (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2020), 207–21.

13 Paul Meyvaert, "The Exegetical Treatises of Peter the Deacon and Eriugena's Latin Rendering of the Ad Thalassium of Maximus the Confessor," *Sacris Erudiri* 14 (1963): 130–48, at 134.

14 H. E. J. Cowdrey, *The Age of Abbot Desiderius: Montecassino, the Papacy, and the Normans in the Eleventh and Early Twelfth Centuries* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 227–8.

15 Ibid., 227.

view that by the mid-twelfth century, Montecassino's intellectual energies were spent.[16] That waning of intellectual energy went hand-in-hand with a decline in the abbey's political prominence, particularly after the dramatic confrontation between Pope Honorius II and Abbot Oderisius in the 1120s. In the following centuries, the abbey became a repository for texts, rather than producing works of its own.[17]

The text I examine here, *De viris illustribus casinensis coenobii*, is one of Peter's shorter works. It contains forty-seven chapters, each a brief description of a monk of Montecassino and a list of the works he wrote, edited, or translated. The text moves in chronological order, running from Benedict (c.1) to Peter himself (c.47). The chapters include several distinguished political figures, though Peter purports to include them for their contributions to intellectual life, not their public standing. The unifying factor is that each had been a monk of the abbey. Several had gone on to hold the highest office: Pope Stephen IX (c.17); Abbot Desiderius, subsequently Pope Victor III (c.18), and Gelasius II (c.45). Other prominent Cassinese figures include Alfanus, Archbishop of Salerno (c.19) and multiple bishops (cc. 25, 32, 33, 34). Several abbots of the abbey—though certainly not all—are commended for their writing.[18] There are also Cassinese monks who did not achieve high ecclesiastical office but whose intellectual reputation in the medieval world is well known: for example, Alberic, the celebrated grammarian and rhetorician (c.21), and Constantine the African, the author and translator of medical treatises (c.23).

16 Rennie, *Destruction and Recovery*, chapter 2, in which the narrative moves sharply from a period of flourishing under Desiderius in the late eleventh century to disrepair and decline in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries.

17 This might further be linked to a line of argument which sees the twelfth century as a period of intellectual ossification for monastic traditions, where debate surrounding the liberal arts and the pursuit of theology had moved into the schools.

18 In addition to Benedict himself: Simplicius (c.5), Bassantius (c.11), Bertarius (c.12), John (c.15), Odiserius I (c.28).

At first glance, the *De viris illustribus casinensis coenobii* appears rather slight, taking up only 41 columns in the Patrologia Latina.[19] An autograph copy of the text survives in the manuscript known as Codex Casinensis 361.[20] The precise genesis of the text and the extent of Peter's contribution is a murky question. Peter's predecessor and teacher, Guido, is likely to have been the author of a substantial part of the text; and Peter goes as far as acknowledging Guido's contribution in the prologue.[21] Exactly what kind of additions or insertions Peter made to the text inherited from Guido remains an open question (as it is with Peter's additions to the Cassinese chronicle begun by Leo of Ostia). As ever with Peter, the concern is that he takes credit for the work of his predecessors, then minimizes their contributions in his reporting. Guido does merit an entry in the *De viris illustribus casinesis coenobii*, although his chapter is much shorter than the entry Peter wrote for himself.[22] It seems unlikely that we will ever be able to separate Guido's work from that of Peter. It is a question which can be put aside for the purpose of discussion here, which is focused on examining where the text sits within other examples of writing in the *de viris illustribus* genre. In what follows, I refer to the text as Peter's work. It certainly bears his stamp.

The genre *de viris illustribus* was a model of writing which had originated with Jerome, but its roots can be traced further back, to classical and late antique literary biographies. In the form utilized by Jerome, it provided a catalogue of Christian authors, ranging from St Peter (c.1) to Jerome himself (c.135).[23] Along the way, Jerome took in authors such as the four evangelists, Polycarp, Irenaeus, Cyprian, and Hilary of Poitiers. The text ranged widely

19 PL. 173, cols. 1009-50. Much of the space is occupied by footnotes where the editor of the Patrologia provides a full citation for the texts which Peter refers to. I regret that I have not been able to consult a more recent Italian edition and translation of the text: *De viris illustribus casinensibus*, ed. Giuseppe Sperduti (Cassino: Studi Storici Medioevali, 1999).

20 On this manuscript, see Paul Meyvaert, "The Autographs of Peter the Deacon," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 38 (1955): 114–38.

21 *DVIC*, PL.173.1010A.

22 *DVIC*, c. 41, PL.173.1044-45. Guido's role and contribution discussed more thoroughly in William D. McCready, "Abbot Desiderius, Alberic of Montecassino, and the Writing of the 'Dialogi de miraculis Sancti Benedicti'," *Journal of Medieval Latin* 9 (1999): 102–20, esp. 109.

in geography, too, naming figures from across the late Roman empire. Each entry provided some brief biographical information about the illustrious figure, a list of their notable writings, often with some detail about the content of those texts, and/or about the style in which they had written. Jerome's purpose is articulated explicitly in his prologue: he sought to demonstrate the intellectual substance and heft of early Christianity, cataloguing men who were admirable both for their personal virtue and also for their contribution to Christian learning. Jerome's work was continued and updated, first by Gennadius of Massila in the late fifth century, who added another 99 chapters, and subsequently by Isidore of Seville, whose catalogue contains thirty-three further entries.[24]

As I have written elsewhere, the genre *de viris illustribus*, largely dormant for much of the earlier middle ages, enjoyed a significant revival of interest in the twelfth century.[25] Along with Peter's contribution, we have extant works by the Benedictines Sigebert of Gembloux (c.1030-1112) and Wolfger of Prüfening (c.1100-c.73), as well as a text by Honorius of Autun (c.1080-c.1140).[26] These texts were, as far as can be established, conceived of and written independently of each other. They seem to reflect a shared feeling among twelfth-century authors that lists of famous men and intellectual authorities were in need of updating. Their composition also reflected the cataloguing of monastic libraries and an expanded interest in different kinds of knowledge which could be considered under "Christian" learning. Like Peter the Deacon, Sigebert and Wolfger came from monasteries that exercised

23 *Hieronymus liber De viris inlustribus. Gennadius liber De viris inlustribus*, ed. Ernest Cushing Richardson (Leipzig, J.C. Hinrichs, 1896).

24 Isidore broke with the model established by Jerome and Gennadius, by choosing not to conclude with an entry listing his own writing. The final chapter in his work belongs to Maximus, Bishop of Zaragosa. For the text, see *El "De viris illustribus" de Isidoro de Sevilla*, ed. Carmen Codoñer Merino (Salamanca: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 1964).

25 "Cutting out the Camel-Like Knees of St. James: The De Viris Illustribus Tradition in the Twelfth-Century Renaissance," *Historical Research* 94, no. 264 (2021): 191-212.

26 The identity of Honorius, as well as his exact location, is a subject of controversy. Honorius' text is closer to Jerome's than that of Sigebert and Wulfger, and because of his ambiguous identity, cannot be located in a specific monastic context, so I refer to it only occasionally in this article. For the text: Honorius of Autun, *De luminaribus ecclesiae,* PL. 172.

significant influence in their respective regions, and, accordingly, both men looked to emphasize the intellectual legacy of their institutions. However, Sigebert, Wolfger, and Honorius all composed texts which ranged across the Christian world. Their list of authors included figures who had not pursued monastic careers, but instead combined writing with ecclesiastical office in the Church hierarchy and/or service at Christian courts. All three of these authors—Sigebert, Honorius, and Wolfger—offered a view of the Christian literary and intellectual world which was as broad as that of Jerome: encompassing illustrious authors from North Africa, the Iberian peninsula, and the Greek-speaking East, as well as the lands of North-Western Europe.

In the breadth and variety of their subjects, Sigebert, Wolfger, and Honorius steered close to the legacy of Jerome.[27] This was, in part, the very purpose of the catalogue as imagined by Jerome in late antiquity. Beyond its practical value in introducing Christian students to the most important authors and constructing a Christian canon, the *de viris illustribus* served an apologetic purpose. It magnified and emphasized the vitality of Christian learning as well as its geographical and intellectual breadth. For Jerome, it had shown how Christian scholars had attained preeminence in every meaningful intellectual competition.

Peter's catalogue, which draws *only* on figures who had been monks of Montecassino, does not offer the same geographic variety. This may be a straightforward observation, but the implications of this choice have not properly been appreciated. Peter's text was less a contribution to the genre *de viris illustribus* than a contradiction of its purpose. By appending the phrase "casinensis coenobii" to that title, he was creating an oddity. This was a genre which had been created (and then revived) to tell the history of the accomplishments of a universal Christian church. It was now transformed by Peter into a vehicle for a local,

27 See especially Delphine Viellard, "La réception du De viris illustribus de Jérôme chez Sigebert de Gembloux," *Les réceptions des Pères de l'Église au Moyen Âge. Le devenir de la tradition ecclésiale*, ed. Rainer Berndt and Michel Fédou (Münster: Aschendorff Verlag, 2013), 137–49.

bounded, history of Montecassino. There was no obvious precedent for doing so. In his prologue, Peter gives no indication of the potential contradiction in his prologue, where he simply casts himself as a successor to Jerome (primarily) and (in a more minor fashion) Gennadius and Isidore. We should then ask: what did Peter hope to achieve?

The monastic author who wished to write a "local" history of his own monastery and its traditions had much more straightforward models than the *de viris illustribus*. The most obvious vehicle was a chronicle—a text that would allow the role of one particular institution to be emphasized within a longer history of the universal church. Countless twelfth-century authors adopted this mechanism. Perhaps the best known to modern Anglophone readers (and students of medieval history) is Orderic Vitalis, who imagines the history of the church as a sprawling, growing vine, and who chooses to write about one particular branch of it: his own monastery of St Evroult.[28] Similarly, a Benedictine author who wished to take a "biographical" approach and emphasize the deeds of great men could utilize the framework of the *gesta abbatum*. In that model of writing, a clear chronological structure was provided by the succession of abbots, with the opportunity to comment on their achievements (material, spiritual, intellectual) and their development of the home institution.

Indeed, medievalists are much more familiar with thinking of the development and expansion of the chronicle and the *gesta abbatum* as characteristic examples of monastic writing in the central middle ages. Much has been written about the eager adoption and extension of the chronicle by monastic institutions seeking to defend their rights.[29] As many medievalists have demonstrated, chronicles could be used to present a coherent and clarifying narrative of monastic history; to link a present institution to its earlier predecessors and

28 Orderic Vitalis, *The Ecclesiastical History*, ed. Marjorie Chibnall (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969–80), VI, 554.

29 There is an extensive body of scholarship on this topic. See, in particular, R. W. Southern, "Presidential Address: Aspects of the European Tradition of Historical Writing: 4. The Sense of the Past," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 23 (1973): 243–63.

saints; to make claims about rights over land or relics; to help an institution in competition with rivals; to impose order on the apparent chaos of the created world and help discern patterns in the unfolding of sacred and secular history. A near-contemporary case in point might be Sharon Farmer's comment on what the monks of Marmoutier were doing with their history in the twelfth century. They sought to establish a continuous narrative, a succession of events, buildings, and abbots which ran all the way back to St Martin.[30]

Montecassino already had its chronicle. The work Peter embarked on did not offer the same potential for creating a coherent or full chronology. The catalogue of men in a *de viris illustribus* text moves forwards in time, but rarely locates its individual subjects in a particular historical context. One illustrious figure could have lived at the same time as the figure who preceded him in the catalogue, or the two could be separated by several decades. Peter does, occasionally, provide some information which helps to locate these Cassinese figures relative to each other, sometimes noting that one figure succeeded another as abbot (e.g. c.5). But this is certainly not enough to offer a clear history of the monastery. For that, one would have to turn to the chronicle. Nor does the *De viris illustribus casinensis coenobii* record every abbot or officeholder produced by Montecassino. It mentions only those whom Peter deemed to have produced a work worthy of note. However, this may also have represented one advantage of this form. The criterion for inclusion in the *de viris illustribus* was the production of an important scholarly work. It thus offered a broader scope than a chronicle or *gesta*. Those who had not achieved high office, or about whose careers Peter knew little, were still eligible for inclusion. This may be one reason for the appeal of the genre: it allowed Peter to look beyond the abbots, saints, and administrators of the abbey. He could demonstrate that Cassinese achievements ran all the way through the institution, from the greatest office holders to "ordinary" monks.

30 Sharon A. Farmer, *Communities of St Martin: Legend and Ritual in Medieval Tours* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), ch. 6, esp. 181–2.

We can best understand the *De viris illustribus casinensis coenobii* as a product for the consumption of an internal audience at Montecassino. It served as a guide to some of the texts in the abbey's library.[31] It would have held only limited utility outside the walls of Montecassino, not least because—with the exception of a few luminaries—most of the authors on the list would not have been widely known. Unlike the lists of Sigebert and Wolfger, it lacked familiar reference points or the names of the most widely read authors of the twelfth-century, figures such as Gregory the Great, Bede, Rabanus Maurus, or Remigius of Auxerre. While it was not much use as a teaching tool beyond Montecassino, it would have had considerable utility in promoting consciousness of the long line of Cassinese scholars who had gone before.

Another of Peter's short works helps further illuminate his purpose and intention. The *De ortu et obitu justorum coenobii casinensis* ("On the life and death of the just men of the monastery of Montecassino"), is also a catalogue of the famous sons of Montecassino.[32] This text too begins with Benedict, and contains 68 brief biographies, listed in chronological order. This work describes not scholars but men of outstanding virtue (including three saints, who receive extended entries, with *vitae* inserted within the main text). There is some overlap between the two catalogues (for example, Benedict, Paul the Deacon, and Pope Victor II feature in both). The *De ortu et obitu* similarly makes sense as a work intended primarily for internal consumption, as a way of fostering a corporate coenobitic identity within the abbey, as well as providing young monks with virtuous models for imitation.[33] In this work, Peter pays particular attention to where these virtuous figures are buried. There are two reasons for this. The first is to support Montecassino's claim to be the burial place of Benedict, a claim

31 A purpose I discuss further in "Cutting Out."

32 *De ortu et obitu justorum coenobii casinensis*, PL. 173.1064–1114.

33 This text, too, is Peter's distinctively Cassinese variation on an earlier model, Isidore of Seville's *De ortu et obitu patrum*, describing the lives, deaths, and burial places of biblical patriarchs.

contested by the abbey of Fleury, which also positioned itself as the possessor of his relics.[34] Peter knows exactly where the Benedictine bodies are buried, and locates Benedict himself in Montecassino, next to his companions and his sister Scholastica.[35] More broadly, noting that several Cassinese monks were buried in the daughter houses they founded or the bishoprics they ruled demonstrated the long reach of the abbey, and Montecassino's eminent position in the wider world. Even if their burial places were not observable in the daily routines of movement around the monastery, their virtue was worthy of commemoration.

The local and the universal church

Peter had a detailed knowledge of Jerome's *De viris illustribus*.[36] A brief analysis of the language and phraseology shared by the two texts demonstrates just how closely Peter modelled his work on that of Jerome. There are compelling parallels between two texts; equivalents are not found in the works of Sigebert or Wolfger. Peter twice uses the phrase "vir egregius" to describe monks of Montecassino—Benedict (c.1) and Mark, Benedict's disciple (c.3). The same term is used by Jerome to describe the apostle Luke, Irenaeus, Pontius, Methodius, and Serapion. The phrase is not used at all by Sigebert, and by Wolfger only once as "doctor egregius" (c.37). Likewise, Peter follows Jerome in making use of the descriptor "vir divertissimus" on several occasions.[37] Much like Jerome, Peter draws links between his figures by describing one illustrious man as the disciple of another.[38] Jerome had

34 See Amalia Galdi, "S. Benedetto tra Montecassino e Fleury (VII-XII secolo)," *Mélanges de l'École française de Rome - Moyen Âge* 126:2 (2014).

35 For Scholastica, *De ortu et obitu*, c.3.

36 Francis Newton's work discusses the difficulty of establishing exactly which texts of the Church Fathers were present and being copied at Montecassino in the later eleventh century. Nonetheless, we know that there was significant interest in Jerome, represented by two eleventh-century manuscripts, MC 93 and MC 94, although neither of these includes *De viris illustribus*. Francis Newton, *The Scriptorium and Library at Monte Cassino, 1058-1105* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 24-5.

37 Jerome: cc. 40, 71, 77. Peter: cc. 10, 20.

38 For example: Jerome: cc. 8, 17, 19; Peter, cc. 3, 5, 12.

been found of using the term "praeclara" (splendid, distinguished, outstanding) to praise his authors. Peter does the same, and the borrowing is near identical in places. For example, Jerome describes Ammonius (c.55) as "inter multa ingenii sui et praeclara monumenta… opus composuit." Peter praises Autpertus (c.15): "inter multa et praeclara ingenii sui monumenta… composuit."[39] Peter also follows Jerome in using the construction "sepultus est in…" to conclude several entries.[40] The phrase is employed only once by Wolfger (c.109), and not at all by Sigebert, who generally omits information about place of burial. The utility for Peter in discussing the resting place of his figures may have been to offer a tangible demonstration of how far (geographically) Cassinese influence extended: monks of the abbey who rose to be bishops or popes and were buried in other cities represented the abbey's presence in the wider world. Cumulatively, these parallels and borrowing suggest that Peter was looking to transpose Jerome's claims about the ancient church to Montecassino.

We can appreciate just how far the *De viris illustribus casinensis coenobii* departed from the "rules" of the genre when we compare Peter's work to that of Isidore, a text with which he was familiar and mentions in his prologue. Isidore's text took regional/local particularism further than Jerome or Gennadius. His list of illustrious Christian writers includes a significant portion of Iberian figures, though—crucially—not to the exclusion of representatives of other Christian regions of the world. Isidore's Iberians include his brother, Leander, Bishop of Seville (c. 28), Martin of Braga (c. 22), and Maximus of Zaragoza (c. 33). But Isidore also looked eastwards and southwards, and Iberian figures were set alongside figures from North Africa (Dracontius of Carthage, c. 24, Licianius of Carthage, c. 29) and Gaul (Hilary of Arles, c. 16; Avitus of Vienne, c. 23), as well as Pope Siricius (c. 3), John Chrysostom (c. 6) and John of Cappadocia (c. 26). Looking at Isidore would not have given Peter the model for a purely "local" version of the *de viris illustribus*.

39 This is a phrase not used by Wolfger or Sigebert.

40 Jerome: cc. 1, 2, 7, 9, 54, 91. Peter: cc. 15, 17, 18, 19.

What seems to have made the *de viris illustribus* model appealing to other monastic authors of the twelfth century was the opportunity it offered to place authors from their own monasteries, and their own masters and colleagues, within a long tradition of the worthies and fathers of the universal church. Take, for example, Wolfger of Prufening's *De scriptoribus ecclesiasticis* (c.1170).[41] Wolfger mixes the towering figures of early medieval Christianity with some more "local" talents. His catalogue includes Gregory the Great (c. 8), Ambrose of Milan (c. 11), and Cassiodorus (c. 16). However, the final entry in Wolfger's list of 119 worthies is Botho of Prüfening, a monk of Wolfger's own monastery. Indeed, as Wolfger's list nears his present, he integrates a number of authors from his own region such as Ulrich of Regensberg (c.110). There is a preponderance of authors from the wider region (perhaps reflecting the make-up of the library at Prüfening and the circulation of texts), including Rupert of Deutz (c.118) and Gerald of St Blasien (c.116). The benefit to Wolfger, of course, lay in the opportunity to place men of his own monastery in the same pantheon as Gregory the Great and other patristic giants. By addressing the wider history of the church, and, in doing so, burnishes the reputation of more local authors with connections to his monastery. The same move had been accomplished by Sigebert in the early twelfth century, who took an equally broad view of Christian intellectual history, but peppered the list with the names and biographies of authors who had been monks of the influential Benedictine house at Lobbes, with which Sigebert himself had a close association.[42] In short, the *de viris illustribus* was not a particularist genre, as it was understood in twelfth-century Benedictine houses. To that end, both Wolfger and Sigebert included an entry for Benedict, founder of Montecassino and

41 For the text, see Francis Roy Swietek, "Wolfger of Prüfening's 'De scriptoribus ecclesiasticis': A critical edition and historical evaluation," (PhD thesis, University of Illinois, 1978).

42 For the text: Robert Witte, *Catalogus Sigeberti Gemblacensis monachi de viris illustribus* (Bern: Herbert Lang, 1974). For example: c.127, Ratherius, monk of Lobbes and later Bishop of Verona; c.136, Fulquinus, abbot of Lobbes; c.137, Herigerus, abbot of Lobbes; c.138, Adelboldus, monk of Lobbes and bishop of Utrecht; c.142, Olbertus, abbot of Gembloux.

author of the Rule (Wolfger c.20, Sigebert c.31).[43] To do otherwise would have represented an omission in a list of foundational authors for medieval monastic readers. For both, promotion of their own houses was achieved by setting them within a framework of church authors.

Peter's text begins with Benedict and makes no reference to any figure before him. Peter's vision is narrow, so that even notable figures who enjoyed close relations with the abbey but who were not themselves monks of Montecassino do not receive an entry. For example, Peter Damian, who had maintained a close relationship with Desiderius and carried on a correspondence with the abbot and his monks, receives no entry.[44] This narrowness of focus may have been the product of a desire to honor Benedict; the same desire is seen in other Cassinese writing and art in this period. In any 'universal' work on the Christian church, there was a potential danger that Benedict's contribution to monastic history might be overshadowed, or the saint become one among many, rather than playing the unique foundational role which Peter allotted him. Sigebert, for example, does describe Benedict as "Pater monachorum," but he was not the only provider of a monastic rule in Sigebert's text. Sigebert also described other individuals who could claim an important role in shaping monastic life, such as Caesarius, abbot of Lerins (c.119), and Benedict of Aniane (c.62), who ordered and harmonized multiple rules, combining that of the Fathers and of Benedict himself. In Peter's text, there are several monks who are praised for building on Benedict's legacy—for example, by writing a life of Benedict or a series of verses on his deeds. But all

43 Sigebert also included another significant Cassinese figure, Paul the Deacon (c.70), author of the *Historia Langobardorum*.

44 On Peter Damian's relationship with Montecassino, see Emily Bannister, "'A Monastic Ark Against the Current Flood': the manuscripts of Peter Damian at the Abbey of Montecassino," *European Review of History* 17:2 (2010): 221–40, and John Howe, "Peter Damian and Montecassino," *Revue Bénédictine* 107 (1997): 330-51. Those letters are: 49, 82, 86, 90, 95, 102, 106, 119, 126, 127, 159, 160, 161. Ep. 126 (c.1065) is Peter's answers to Alberic's questions on biblical interpretation. By contrast, Peter Damian had received an entry in Sigebert's catalogue (c.162).

are products of Montecassino, and none builds on—or goes beyond—Benedict's legacy. There is no danger of Benedict being outdone or outcompeted.

In short, Peter's text was, in many ways, an inversion of the fundamental form of the *de viris illustribus* genre. He chose not to interlace the history of his abbey with figures from elsewhere. His models provided him with a universal story of the church and the different forms of knowledge mastered by Christian writers and scholars. In response, he designed a narrative internal to Montecassino. Appreciating this fact alerts us to two further intellectual choices made by Peter. The first is his attempt to recreate the diversity of intellectual interests seen by Jerome (and others) across the Christian world *within* the walls of Montecassino. The second is Peter's choice to privilege the coenobitic, rather than eremitical, dimensions of religious life at Montecassino.

The world within Montecassino

One of the distinctive claims often made for Montecassino in its eleventh-century apogee is that—beyond any other Benedictine abbey—it prized secular learning. Indeed, Robinson has gone as far as to suggest that there was something peculiarly Cassinese about the blending of sacred and profane knowledge encouraged by the intellectual conditions of the abbey.[45] The implication is that the leaders of Montecassino valued intellectual prominence more than piety; that all kinds of learning were valued. Reading Peter's *De viris illustribus casinensis coenobii* does not immediately rebut that charge. Several entries explicitly praise knowledge of "secular," "humane," or "liberal studies."[46]

45 Robinson, "Montecassino in the Central Middle Ages," 273. A similar argument is expressed by Cowdrey, who suggests Montecassino prized learning over spirituality in the age of Desiderius, and who has informed a broader view that the abbey's policies under Desiderius were characterized by pragmatism.

46 For example: Pandulf of Capua (c.26) described as "divina saecularique litteratura eruditus;" John the Deacon (c.38), "divina et humana scriptura peritissimus;" Bernard (c.37) "liberalibus studiis optime eruditus."

However, Peter's text cannot be used as evidence for a uniquely Cassinese sensibility. The claims Peter makes for studies which extend into the realms of "secular" knowledge can be found in any work in the *de viris illustribus* genre. Jerome had included a smattering of secular forms of learning in his catalogue. Jerome's description of Origen, in particular, is revealing here. Origen's mastery meant that he gave classes on secular literature to students (c.54). But he did so with the intention of bringing them to Christianity. Another figure, Diodorus of Tarsus (c.119) had skill, but because he lacked a knowledge of secular learning, he could not develop his works to claim the highest crown. In other words, even Jerome (who was often nervous about the dangers of secular learning) was willing to admit that Christian mastery of such topics was worthy of admiration in certain circumstances.

The same principles were adopted by Sigebert of Gembloux in his addition to the genre. Sigebert, like Peter, praises the accomplishment of Christian scholars in disciplines beyond the strictly theological. Praise of the liberal arts was far from a distinctively Cassinese phenomenon. Indeed, Sigebert's text recognizes the ambiguity in the designation "secular." He describes Boethius (c.37) as a writer who straddled this apparent divide, his works being set "an inter seculares, an inter ecclesiasticos scriptores." Other authors too, in Sigebert's catalogue, are distinguished for learning that is not strictly monastic: Fortunatus (c.45) achieved accomplishment in the liberal arts, as did Berengar of Tours (c.154), who was especially distinguished in dialectic; the emperor Justinian (c.46) is included for his legal codifications; and Olbert, Abbot of Gembloux (c.142), was admired for his knowledge on subjects both human and divine. Sigebert had taught and been master of the monastic schools, first at St Vincent at Metz and latterly at Gembloux, and certainly took an interest in what "secular" learning could contribute to religious life. Wolfger of Prüfening likewise admires the strength of Christian scholarship in the liberal arts and the foundation it provided for

religious learning: Gregory the Great was brought up in "disciplinis liberalis" from boyhood;[47] Aldhelm was as accomplished in the liberal arts as in religious knowledge.[48] It is hard, then, to see in the *De viris illustribus casinensis coenobii* anything more than a continuation of claims that had long been made about the Christian church's mastery of classical learning. It may be that such claims rang truer for late eleventh-century Montecassino than other monasteries in other periods; nonetheless, the assertion itself was one of longstanding.

What is instead striking about Peter's text is the attempt to reconstitute within the confines of Montecassino the breadth of learning which Jerome (and others) had found across the Christian world. For Jerome, the diversity of Christian learning had been part of the apologetic point of the text: it served rebut the claim that Christianity was the unsophisticated pursuit of simple rustics. Jerome thus assembled a catalogue of scholars of every sort, and explains how Christian philosophers could beat pagans at their own game. For example, in the figure of Didymus the Blind (c.109) Jerome noted a Christian scholar who had mastered both dialectic and geometry, subjects which even those with sight struggled to learn. But this approach presented both an opportunity and challenge for Peter: for the text to follow the model of Jerome, he was obliged to show the same breadth of learning within a single monastery.

Montecassino did not lack for authors of religious verses and hymns, hagiographical *vitae* and *passiones*, sermons, and letters. But Jerome's authors had demonstrated knowledge across almost every category of writing known to the Latinate early medieval world. Thus, across the history of Montecassino, Peter manages to find a sufficient number of scholars to represent all the liberal arts. He employs specific terms in order to signal this to his readers, almost "ticking off" different categories of learning. It should go without saying that that

47 Wolfger, *De scriptoribus ecclesiasticis*, c.8, 121.

48 Ibid., c.30, 133–4.

scheme of the liberal arts was one with which Peter would have been very familiar—indeed, familiar to most literate monks of this period. It could be found it many early medieval works: Martianus Capella's *Marriage of Mercury and Philology*; the second book of Cassiodorus's *Institutes*, as well as Isidore of Seville's *Etymologies*. Monks of Montecassino were influential in the eleventh-century development and teaching of the liberal arts: figures such as Alberic, the author of an *ars dictaminis* (c.21), and Lawrence of Amalfi (although Lawrence does not feature in Peter's list).[49]

Those seven arts were defined as: grammar, rhetoric, dialectic or logic, arithmetic, music (encompassing both poetry and song, according to Isidore), geometry, and astronomy. Each of these categories (and others) is well represented within Peter's text, mastered by multiple monks. For example, *historia*, a category which medieval readers would classify as a branch of rhetoric, was composed by Laurence (c.6), Paul the Deacon (c.8), Erchempert (c.14), John (c.15), Amatus (c.20), Leo of Ostia (c.30), and Guido (c.41). Astronomy (in the sense of the study and measurement of the movement of the planets) was practiced by Alberic (c.21), Constantine the African (c.23), and Pandulf of Capua (c.26). The theological learning of Montecassino was represented in Bertarius (c.13), the author of a book of sentences, as expert in the New as in the Old Testament; Bruno of Segni (c.34), whose biblical commentaries are listed individually, and Landulf "Parvulus" (c.40), whose works are described as "subtilissima exercitatione."

Peter made decisive and important choices about how to present Montecassino's learning. Quite clearly, he intends it to encompass all the liberal arts and their allied disciplines. Knowledge is displayed to its greatest cumulative effect. That same desire to highlight

49 For a comprehensive overview of Alberic's works, see Paul F. Gehl, *Monastic Rhetoric and Grammar in the Age of Desiderius: The Works of Alberic of Montecassino* (PhD thesis, University of Chicago, 1976).

On Lawrence: Francis Newton, "Lawrence of Amalfi's Mathematical Teaching," *Traditio* 21 (1965): 445–9 and John O. Ward, "Lawrence of Amalfi and the Boundary between the Oral and the Written in Eleventh-Century Europe," *What Nature Does Not Teach: Didactic Literature in the Medieval and Early-Modern Periods* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2008), 305–43. More generally on the liberal arts in the abbey, R. Weiss, "The Study of Varro at Montecassino in the Middle Ages," *Medium Aevum* 16 (1947): 27–31.

Montecassino's role in developing and fostering the liberal arts is written into the Montecassino chronicle (a text which Peter had a hand in), in an entry recording all the books which Desiderius ordered copied for the abbey's library.[50]

The *De viris illustribus casinensis coenobii* is remarkable for how complete a picture of learning Peter strives to present. Most Cassinese monks were distinguished not in a single discipline but in multiple branches of the arts. Even Benedict (c.1) was the author not only of a rule, but also composed sermons. Paul the Deacon (c.8) is claimed as "philosophia eruditus," the author of hymns and versus, homilies, an exposition of the Rule, as well as a "historiam valde luculentiam." Alberic is praised for his work on the *dictaminis*, but also in music, astronomy, and dialectic—that is to say, at least four parts of the liberal arts (c.21).

The figure of Constantine the African (Constantinus Africanus) then becomes a particularly interesting figure in this discussion. Constantine is described again in terms of his mastery of several liberal arts (and even some beyond the scope of the trivium and quadrivium). In 'Babylon', Constantine had studied "grammaticam, dialecticam, physicam, geometriam, arithmeticam, mathematicam, astroniam," in addition to his skills as a *medicus*. The entry for Constantine therefore covers five of the seven liberal arts. The role Constantine plays in Peter's catalogue is not unlike that of Origen in Jerome's *De viris illustribus* (c.54). While Jerome pays most attention to Origen's theological contribution, he notes that his status and reputation is enhanced by his further expertise in other areas, namely dialectic, geometry, arithmetic, music, grammar, and rhetoric, and philosophy. Origen and Constantine together represent specialists—authorities in their chosen field (theology and medicine, respectively)—yet who also have a command of adjacent subjects. While medicine itself was not one of the liberal arts, it could be considered an adjunct to it (again, demonstrating the

50 *Chronica monasterii Casinensis*, III.63, 746–7. Herbert Bloch, "Monte Cassino's Teachers and Library in the High Middle Ages," *Settimane di studio del Centro italiano di studi sull'alto medioevo* 19:2 (1972): 563-605, at 599. Bloch's article should now be read in conjunction with Newton, *The Scriptorium and Library.*

range of Cassinese scholarship). Isidore in the *Etymologies* had argued that though medicine was not included as one of the seven liberal arts, it belongs to them.[51] The practitioner of medicine required knowledge of all those liberal arts in order to be successful. Such a logic might well have appealed to Peter when putting together his catalogue.

Constantine the African has recently become a figure of intense interest for medieval historians interested in the translation of Arabic medical and philosophical knowledge to Latin Christendom and for what his experiences reveal about transcultural interactions in eleventh-century southern Italy.[52] Yet Peter does not present Constantine as an unusual figure —he is learned but his learning and expertise is in keeping with the long-lived traditions of Montecassino. Constantine is one remarkable individual in a pantheon. As much as Peter praises Constantine, he does not present the knowledge as out of the ordinary: at most, it is an expansion of what Montecassino has long practiced. Indeed, Peter notes that several other monks of Montecassino were accomplished in the medical arts. John "Medicus" (c.35), a disciple of Constantine, who added to his master's works, c.24 for Atto, the translator of Constantine. It might strike us just how easily Peter believed he could fit this medical (Arabic) knowledge into a pattern of Cassinese history—integrated, part of a smooth unfolding of intellectual tradition.

The monastic and the eremitical

As noted above, twelfth-century authors regarded Benedict as a distinguished author as much as a spiritual leader. Peter was not unique in this; Sigebert and Wolfger both view Benedict's *Rule* as an important text in Christian history, and accordingly include the saint in

51 Isidore, *Etymologies*, ed. W. M. Lindsay (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1909), 4.ix.1.

52 For example: Erik Kwakkel and Francis Newton, *Medicine at Monte Cassino: Constantine the African and the Oldest Manuscript of His Pantegni* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2019); Charles S. F. Burnett and Danielle Jacquart (eds.), *Constantine the African and 'Alī Ibn Al-'Abbās Al-Maǧūsī: The Pantegni and Related Texts* (Leiden: Brill, 1994).

their catalogues. However, there is a small, but potentially revealing difference between Peter's treatment of Benedict and the two other texts. Both Sigebert and Wolfger note that Benedict wandered as a hermit before he took up the life of a monk at Montecassino.[53] Both speak of Benedict as first belonging to an eremitical tradition. That phrase (and that part of Benedict's life) is not mentioned in Peter's account. Instead, he describes (in some detail) Benedict's arrival at the site of Montecassino, casting out (and converting) pagans, and then constructing a monastery there.

In the *De viris illustribus casinensis coenobii* we can see Peter choosing to praise a coenobitic tradition rather than an eremitical one. Peter places great emphasis on the status of "monachus" as the qualification which unites all his illustrious authors—whether or not they later left Montecassino, whether or not they attained high ecclesiastical office. Even though he has clearly established in his prologue that the purpose of his text is to describe only monks of Montecassino, numerous figures are introduced as "Casinensis monachus," as if to underscore this point. On a crude reckoning, the term "monachus" (in different forms) is used over 25 times in the short text; the term "coenobium" is used at least 30 times. There is only one mention of the solitary, as opposed to the communal, life: in describing the early life of Desiderius (i.e. Pope Victor, c.18), Peter describes him as seeking the wilderness (*eremum petiit*) as a young man. But that desire was satisfied when he became a monk of Montecassino, and entered its institutional structures. Similarly, for those who did not enter the monastery as oblates, Peter presents them as seeking Montecassino and finding in the coenobitic life what they most prized. This, for example, is the narrative applied to

53 Wolfger, c.20, Sigebert c.31. As Swietek demonstrates in his introduction (53), Wolfger's account closely follows the *Chronicon* of Frutolf.

Constantine the African.[54] While hermits and the eremitical life are not well represented in other works in the *de viris illustribus* tradition, they are somewhat more visible.[55]

This communal rather than institutional focus might be somewhat surprising, given earlier Casinese tradition. Southern Italian monasticism in the earlier middle ages had operated in a "mixed" fashion, where an individual in his lifetime might move through both coenobitic and eremitical modes of life. The boundary between the two models of religious life was porous. As Ramseyer has observed, "solitary and communal forms of monasticism co-existed peacefully in the region, and no reform movements arose to promote one form over the other."[56] Montecassino—more so than the Benedictine houses at Gembloux or Prüfening—sustained a particular interest in the solitary life.[57] Before Peter, at least two of the abbey's leading eleventh-century figures had worked to build hermits who lived close to Montecassino into the religious and intellectual life of the monks. Leo of Ostia and Desiderius himself had viewed it as quite possible to move between the institutional center of the monastery and the surrounding "wilderness."

The *Dialogues* of Desiderius, for example, offer multiple examples of hermits who lived in proximity to, or in some association with, Montecassino, particularly Gumizo and John, who lived a solitary life, maintaining anchoritic discipline.[58] Book 2 of the *Dialogues* also describe the solitary vigils and prayers that these hermits maintained outside the confines of Montecassino.[59] For Desiderius, this eremitical mode of living seems to have been viewed as

54 *DVIC*, c.23, PL. 173.1034B: "Casinese coenobium petiit, atque a Desiderio abbata libentissime susceptus monachus factus est."

55 For example, Sigebert mentions distinguished writers who wrote about hermits: Paul the Deacon (c.70) and Widukind of Corvey (c.129), who wrote a life of Paul, "the first hermit."

56 Valerie Ramseyer, "Questions of Monastic Identity in Medieval Southern Italy and Sicily (c.500-1200)," *The Cambridge History of Medieval Monasticism in the Latin West*, ed. Alison I. Beach and Isabelle Cochelin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 399–414, at 403.

57 For what follows, see Cowdrey, *Age of Abbot Desiderius*, 89.

58 Desiderius, *Dialogi de miraculis Sancti Benedicti*, MGH SS 30.2, 1115–51. For Gumizo, I.6, 1120–1; for John, I.7, 1121.

59 Ibid., II.11, 1132.

entirely compatible with the life lead within the precincts of Montecassino. The two were complimentary, one the extension of the other. Desiderius' abbacy at Montecassino also coincided with Peter Damian's interest in the abbey, and his promotion of the solitary life as the quickest and most effective path to God. It is likely that Peter Damian's praise of eremitical solitude and his exhortation to living a more restricted, limited life, following the solitary practices of hermits, were being copied, read, heard at Montecassino in the eleventh century.[60]

The nature of the *De viris illustribus casinensis coenobii*, however, is to emphasize that participation in the communal life of the abbey was the highest possible calling. Hermits play no part in the intellectual tradition of Montecassino. An emphasis on the production of texts, of course, almost inevitably excluded most practitioners of the eremitical life. Those figures might have some connection with Montecassino, but, if they did not record their spiritual insights in writing, they could easily fall out of institutional memory and commemoration. The *de viris illustribus* tradition—not just in the hands of Peter, but in all authors who engaged with it—necessarily attended to matters of writing and codification. Part of its purpose was to introduce readers to authors whose works were significant, foundational, and likely to be accessible to them. That did not leave much space for those whose teachings were transmitted through personal contact and charisma. We might see this as connected to other (longer-running) trends in twelfth-century intellectual life, and the gaining of ground of written tradition over the oral. Those who were worthy of commemoration were those who had the resources to write, and who possessed a network to preserve, copy, and disseminate their writings. Moreover, in the *De viris illustribus casinensis coenobii*, Peter draws attention to the scholastic productivity of his authors—writing across multiple genres, producing innumerable sermons, letters, and hymns. The *de viris illustribus* model was not very

60 Bannister, "'A Monastic Ark'."

compatible with celebrating lonely anchoritic achievement. We need not, therefore, see this as a deliberate exclusion of hermits due to animus on Peter's part. Nonetheless, the effect of Peter's composition was to define Montecassino as a literary, literate community—not just of readers but of writers.

Nonetheless, when it comes to Peter's own views, we may glimpse some attempts to downgrade eremitical practices scattered across other writings. Charles Hilken has suggested that Peter's contribution to the Montecassino Chronicle demonstrates a preference for communal over solitary life, and a value placed on coenobitic monasticism, valuing membership of an institution and adherence to its rules over ascetic solitude.[61] This is only briefly hinted at. A similar tendency can be seen in the *De ortu et obitu*, in which Peter repeats the message that monks from the abbey only chose to pursue a solitary life at times of great disaster and when the corporate body was persecuted and threatened by terrible mismanagement (e.g. c.30). He also notes that a few figures from Montecassino did, for short periods, live as hermits, before returning to the communal life and being buried within monastic institutions (c.32, c.35). If we were to see Peter as less sympathetic to eremitical models than the eleventh-century writers of Montecassino, this would place him in a wider stream of changing attitudes in southern Italy. The accommodation between solitude and communal life was starting to decay, as certain monastic institutions became larger, wealthier, and took a sharper view of institutional administration.[62] While this was not the end of a mixed practice of coenobitic and anchoritic life, it was a move away from it, at least in part.[63]

61 Charles Hilken, *The Necrology of San Nicola Della Cicogna* (Toronto: Institute of Pontifical Studies, 2000), 18.

62 Ramseyer, "Questions," 409–10.

63 Ibid., 412.

Conclusion: Peter, Cowdrey, and the View from Montecassino

Let us now consider the historiographical implications of the above reading of Peter's text. The *De viris illustribus casinensis coenobii* is the primary (sometimes sole) source of biographical information about many Cassinese writers—even though the information it provides is often scanty. For example, it tells us almost all we know about Amatus of Montecassino, author of *The History of the Normans*, an important source for the Norman conquest of Sicily.[64] The same is true of Constantine the African. The biographical information we have for Constantine derives from Peter's account, an account which has been pored over and unpicked by historians, suggesting where it may exaggerate and misrepresent.[65]

Quite clearly, we are dealing with a work very carefully primed to present an image of Cassinese intellectual dominance—both geographically, in southern Italy, but also across the different kinds of learning in the Christian world. That, perhaps, is no surprise; anyone working on Montecassino in this period is attuned to the grandiose claims made for the abbey. What is more difficult—and thus more of a problem—is to determine how we as historians make use of the *De viris illustribus casinensis coenobii*. No other institution produced such a document. That might, in itself, tell us something about the distinctiveness of production at Montecassino. The cumulative effect of the text was intended to demonstrate the breadth and depth of Cassinese knowledge. That learning which Jerome had gathered by looking across the whole antique church, Peter could locate in a single abbey.

We must therefore be careful in understanding the implications of Peter's interventions for a "golden age" of the abbey in the late eleventh century and—just as importantly—how that

64 See the comments in the introduction to Amatus, *The History of the Normans*, ed. and trans. Prescott N. Dunbar and G. A. Loud (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2004), 10.

65 See, for example, Monica Green's discussion of what Peter knew about Constantine's authorship, and the reliability of his information: Green, "The De Genecia Attributed to Constantine the African," *Speculum* 62:2 (1987): 299–323.

period was remembered in the first half of the twelfth century. H. E. J. Cowdrey viewed the abbacy of Desiderius as precisely such a time of intellectual flourishing. This is a verdict hard to dispute; it was in this period that the scriptorium reached is prolific intellectual zenith, and the abbey's political significance is attested by a trio of Cassinese popes between 1057 and 1119.

Peter provides medievalists with a useful way into that golden age. Much of Cowdrey's depiction of the detail of that golden age utilizes the evidence of the *De viris illustribus casinensis coenobii*, at least as its starting point.[66] Peter represents a sizeable proportion of the footnote evidence to support Cowdrey's picture. Cowdrey runs through a series of biographies, listing Cassinese monks and their works, and using Peter as a starting point in order to emphasize the variety in the intellectual achievements of Montecassino in that period, and its cumulative weight, diversity, and number.[67] I am not suggesting that this was a work of invention; many of the texts mentioned by Peter survive in their own right or are attested elsewhere. However, we should recognize that as early as the twelfth century, self-conscious attempts were already being made to characterize the intellectual activities of Montecassino. It was Peter—not modern historians of Montecassino—who first joined these texts together, who offers us a list of authors and their works, explaining into which category each author or text might fall. He imposed coherence on the materials of Montecassino. By employing the *de viris illustribus* form, Peter sought to emphasize the coherence of Montecassino's intellectual program, stressing continuity across time, and finding the prefiguration of eleventh-century learning in the eighth, ninth, and tenth centuries. Peter did not merely compile a set of biographies intended to record the great and the good of his abbey; through the arrangement of his text, he offered an argument about the liberal arts at

66 See Cowdrey, *Age of Abbot Desiderius*, esp. 21-5.

67 Later sections in Cowdrey's book, discussing the connections between Cassinese monks and the reform papacy, are also dependent on the *DVIC* (though not exclusively), e.g. 98, 100.

Montecassino. The *De viris illustribus casinensis coenobii* is therefore a text to be handled with care (of course one could say that about any medieval text); but that is all the more appropriate here given it belongs to (and transforms) a particular genre of medieval writing.

Peter's project, however, was subtly different from those intellectual enterprises undertaken during the time of Desiderius. We might think of it not as a self-confident statement of Cassinese dominance, but as an attempt to regain lost ground. Peter knew all too well how far Montecassino's political star had fallen in his own lifetime. Peter had been a strong supporter of Abbot Oderisius II, raised to the abbacy in 1123. Montecassino had benefited from the strength of the relationship between Oderisius and the then-pope, Calixtus II.[68] But with the enthronement of Honorius II in late 1124, relations had soured. Honorius ultimately excommunicated Oderisius and removed him as abbot in 1126. For his support for Oderisius, Peter had been sent out of the abbey, to Atina, only returning after the death of Honorius. Montecassino, gripped by factionalism and violence, was subjected to close papal control and intervention in its election. Indeed, Honorius was not the only figure concerned about the status of Montecassino and keen to limit the ambitions of its leaders; the temporal lords of southern Italy seem also to have been resentful of the abbey's dominance in the region, and the conduct of its abbots.[69]

In such circumstances, and after such disruption, Peter turned to a traditional Cassinese way of asserting the abbey's position—literary production. A reminder of past Cassinese greatness might serve as a continuing example to the present. Thus, on the subject of an eleventh-century "golden age," Peter and Cowdrey would not agree. Cowdrey (in a book which is important and rightly remains influential) saw Peter as a late and minor representative of the abbey's earlier greatness. Peter recorded the intellectual and political

68 Mary Stroll, *Calixtus II (1119-1124): A Pope Born to Rule* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 437-9.

69 See Bloch, *Montecassino in the Middle Ages*, volume 2, 960-4, for a summary of the conflict, and H. Hoffmann, "Petrus Diaconus, die Herren von Tusculum und der Sturz Oderisius II von Montecassino," *Deutsches Archiv für Erforschung des Mittelalters* 27 (1971): 1-109.

achievements of an age of giants; he was its unworthy successor, better suited to editing, compiling, and forging, than competing with the figures whose biographies he catalogued. The point for Peter, however, must have been quite a different one—he had no desire to live at the *end* of such an age (a quite understandable sentiment!). To write a *de viris illustribus* text was to make quite the opposite claim; such a work was meant to proclaim an institution whose strength and vitality would continue far into the future, just as it stretched into the distant past. Peter may have hoped that, after Honorius' death, the abbey might reclaim its political position. The current situation was neither final nor permanent; the age of Montecassino (if not Desiderius) might come again. Presented to the readers of Montecassino (a group which may have included new oblates), the *De viris illustribus casinensis coenobii* allowed those monks to see themselves as part of a heavyweight intellectual tradition which began with Benedict and continued down to their own day. Part of the essence of any *de viris illustribus* text, was the understanding that at some point the list would require updating by a continuator. Each author took the list only as far as he could in his own lifetime. Gennadius had updated Jerome. Sigebert, Wolfger, and Honorius updated the text again for their own times and according to the holdings of their own library. They anticipated the possibility that their works would one day be judged "incomplete". Sigebert's catalogue received a late-twelfth century supplement.[70] Peter may well have expected his work to be one day continued and updated with new and distinguished Cassinese entries, as indeed did happen in the sixteenth century.[71]

This text was not, therefore, in Peter's eyes, a wistful retrospective on past greatness, but an up-to-the-minute list of an ever-expanding catalogue of Christian (Cassinese) achievements—a competitive dialogue of the past with the present. For Peter, there must

70 The text is printed in Nicholas Häring, "Two Catalogues of Medieval Authors," *Franciscan Studies* xxvi (1966): 195–211.

71 The continuation was written by Placidus Romanus, taking the list of illustrious men of Montecassino down to the sixteenth century. This is found in the PL, immediately following the *DVIC*.

have been the hope of continuation, and continued Cassinese prominence. Peter would have denied the title of "golden age" to the eleventh century, because such a label necessarily implied a falling off in intellectual eminence. To the author of the *De viris illustribus casisnensis coenobii*, from the moment Benedict had set down his rule, Montecassino had gone from strength to strength. If there was a golden age, it had begun long ago with Benedict, and Peter was still living in it.

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