MONASTIC READING IN THE CISTERCIAN VISIONARY TEXTS OF THE XIIITH CENTURY

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The history of reading and writing is largely determined by the modern understanding of these practices. The practice of modern reading is perceived by society as a part of everyday life. Modern cultural settings suggest that reading is a practical activity, whereas monastic reading was primarily a sacred activity. Two important aspects of monastic reading arouse interest in the present-day academic community: first, reading is viewed as an essential part of the contemplative monastic life; second, reading is viewed as a process of visually decoding written text, which involves sense perceptions, including sight and sound. The second aspect remained under scientific discussion for a long time. The purpose of my research is to determine the place and role of reading aloud and reading silently in everyday monastic life, predominantly using the example of the Liber revelationum of Richalm of Schöntal. That work is not a theological treatise; it is a conversation about the difficulties of monastic life, caused by demons, the need for constant struggle with them, and the methods employed in this struggle. Sources of this type contain extensive material on the monastic life of the Cistercian Order, and the peculiarities of Cistercian spirituality.

I would like to say a few words about the development of historical viewpoints on monastic reading in modern historiography. In the Middle Ages, the process of reading was rarely described, but reading aloud, in early medieval texts, is often synonymous with singing. So, for quite a long time in history, there existed the opinion that reading aloud was the main and most widespread mode of reading in Antiquity and the Middle Ages. In actual fact, the general practice of reading aloud can be taken for granted only after a period when singing and reading aloud were understood as synonymous. International scholars actively disputed this point of view. New arguments for the prevalence of reading aloud have been suggested by Paul Saenger, who insisted on the psychophysiological inability of ancient people for quick, silent reading because of the absence of word boundaries in written Latin and Greek. These reasons were brought into question by Nikolay N. Kazansky, however, who showed that reading, as a process, does not depend on the writing system. Currently, the faultiness of the contraposition of both types of reading is considered to be the most adequate opinion. Reading silently and reading aloud coexisted in Antiquity and the Middle Ages because they had different functions. The Russian researcher, A. Gavrilov, well known in European historiography, carried out the important and laborious work of gathering ancient testimonies which proved the frequency of silent reading in ancient Greece and Rome. I will mention just a few obvious examples. In Xenophon's Symposium (4.27), the attractive boy, Kritoboulos, is looking through a book together

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1 Paul Saenger, Space between Words: The Origins of Silent Reading (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997).
with Socrates, and at the same time, Socrates is touching Kritoboulos' head and shoulder with his body. If there had only been one technique of reading aloud in Antiquity, it would be difficult to explain such a situation and position. Charmides was a witness of that episode and he understood, without any special intellectual work, that mutual silent reading served as a devout pretense for bodily contact. Silent reading was also widespread because of the shortage of copies of books. In the 2nd century BCE, passwords in the Roman army were shown on wooden plates, without being spoken. Silent reading was also needed in the practice of stenography, which was invented by Marcus Tullius Tiro, the freedman and secretary of Cicero, and was first put to use in 63 BCE. In modern historiography on the Middle Ages, reading is usually regarded as a part of the combined practice of lectio-oratio-meditatio, which is why reading itself is underexplored. For example, Jacques Leclercq, the famous researcher of Cistercian reading and spirituality, paid more attention to the spiritual practices of mysticism than to the technique of reading, or its place and implementation in monastic communities.

Christian reading combined both techniques from its very beginning. The classic example of silent reading in the early Middle Ages is a passage from Book VI of St. Augustine’s Confessions (6.3), which concerns the author’s spiritual mentor, Saint Ambrose of Milan. Here, Augustine is distressed because opportunities to ask Ambrose advice for his difficult spiritual problems were very rare, for even when Ambrose was alone and had free time, he devoted these moments mainly to silent and concentrated reading. Augustine describes such a moment in detail, permitting no doubt that Ambrose really read without speaking. Augustine, however, notes this fact not because it was unusual or awe-inspiring, but because of his personal hurt feelings. He suspected that Ambrose intentionally payed no attention to the young Augustine because he knew about his student’s obvious sympathy for Manichaeism.

Ambrose of Milan has left an extensive epistolaric heritage. One of his letters to bishop Sabinus of Piacenza contains advice about how to compose written texts and speeches. Ambrose recommends re-reading what is written for the purpose of checking the sound of the sentence. In this case, reading could be either silent or aloud, but it is not the most important detail in this advice. Here, Ambrose actually opens the question of a disparity between written and oral texts. “Speech is faster than hand,” so he thought. Sentences should be weighed up with the view to their phonation and conformity to a highly written style. Therefore, text did not imply vocalization.

Early Christian philosophy contains references to silent reading. According to Clement of Alexandria, Jesus Christ is the Logos, but in the diversity of its meanings, the Word is of primary importance in that it should be read deeply within the soul of each person. Such inner reading and exegesis is closely connected with silence and calmness. Basil of

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Caesarea expressed the same opinion in relation to monastic asceticism, the essential parts of which are vigil, prayer, and keeping silence. The appearance and development of monastic reading, per se, were conditional on the availability of various sacred scriptures. Even in the first centuries of Christianity, the number of Christian texts recommended for pious people was quickly growing. At that time, these texts included not only scripture, but also vitae and martyrorum (early Christian biographies, and tales of persecution and martyrdom). This is clear in consideration periods of persecution in the Roman Empire and, thereafter, the increasing number of Roman Christians who suffered martyrdom. Especially dramatic cases inspired appropriate texts. Christian Antiquity is the era of the first saint martyrs, whose Christomimetic deaths contributed to recruitment of new members into Christian communities. It also seems to be symptomatic that we can find in martyrorum some metaphors associated with books and the writing process itself. The 5th century Latin poet, Aurelius Prudentius, in his work *Peristephanon liber* (Crowns of Martyrdom), compares the bloody wounds of martyrs with purple ink, which transforms them into “inscripta Christo pagina” (pages inscribed by Christ). I will provide one small example: Eulalia screams in the culminating moment of her torment, “Scriberis ecce mihi, Domine. / quam iuvat hos apices legere / qui tua, / Christe, tropaea notant!”


\[10\] Since Apollinaris Sidonius, the word apices means also, “manuscripts, letters”.


\[14\] “Illum vero qui constitutus in tempore mentis cum clamore supplicat, aut aliquid horum quae praediximus, e faubussuis emittit aut praecipue oscitationibus praevenitur, dupliciter peccare pronuntiat: primo quod nomen et ipsa sacrum loquitur / purpura sanguinis eliciti,” (Thy name is being written on me. How I love to read these letters, for they record thy victories, O Christ, and the very scarlet of the blood that is drawn speaks the holy name). Here the motif of *imitatio Christi* is obvious. Martyrs’ bodies are like the Gospel; they testify the self-sacrifice of Jesus and therefore they become corporeal books of spiritual exploits.

One of the main theorists of the monastic *coenobium* is John Cassian the Roman, who visited many Egyptian cloisters in order to implement the experience, ideas, and practices of Eastern monasticism in the Western Church. John Cassian pays much attention in his *De coenobiorum institutis* to monastic reading. Each monk in his cell must be diligently occupied with reading, manual labour, and silence. These three virtues are not separated in the text: “[obedience], which they prefer not only to manual work, reading, silence, peace in the cell, but even to all virtues.” Reading and praying should be done chiefly in silence because only full calmness maintains proper concentration and diligence: “And the one who prays aloud or coughs during the prayer, yawns, sighs, and so on, they repeat their sin twofold. First, he is to blame for the fact that he himself carelessly brings a prayer to God and, secondly, he prevents the other from praying with zeal.” John Cassian does describe the custom of reading aloud in the
refectory, which was widespread in Egyptian and Cappadocian monasteries. The main reason for the imposition of such reading activity, however, is not the intensification of prayer, but in order to prevent idle twaddle during the meal. Cassian points out that, unfortunately, meals were often associated with feasting and empty chatter, which must be eradicated: “The current habit in the cloister—reading during the meal of the brothers—was introduced not in Egypt, but in Cappadocia, where it was established not so much for spiritual occupation, as for keeping from idle conversation, which is usually surrendered during feasts.” So, we could conclude that collective reading is, in fact, reading aloud because it performs a function of collective praying. Actually a lector not only prevents talk among the brethren, but also fills the space with grace. Another writing of John Cassian, *Collationes patrum in scetica eremo*, seems to be significant as well. Here, the author mentions some potentially dangerous consequences of reading and reflection. In his conversation with one of the abbas, he raises the problem of arrogance, which afflicts inexperienced monks. He writes that while reading and meditating, brethren should keep in mind that without humility such practices arouse vain pride.

The writings of Cassian on the experience of Eastern monasticism influenced the *Regula magistri*, which was completed in the beginning of the sixth century, in the neighborhood of Rome. It served as the basis for the *Regula Benedicti*, monastic rules composed by Benedict of Nursia in 530 for Monte Cassino, close to Naples. Keeping to the purity of the *Regula Benedicti* would become the main aspiration of Benedict’s Cistercian Order. Chapters 4-7 of the *Regula Benedicti* are devoted to monastic virtues. Thus, in the fourth chapter (Caput 4. Quae sunt instrumenta bonorum operum), there is a reference to reading as one of the most pious activities, “lectiones sanctas libenter audire.” The word usage (audire, to hear) indicates reading technique—sacred texts are to be read by one of the brethren in a good voice, while others should listen attentively to the *voces paginarum* (voices of the pages). In the eighth chapter, however, there is another kind of reading. After *vigilae* (the night worship), monks are insistently recommended to study the Psalms or other sacred texts, “quod vero restat post Vigilias a fratribus qui psalterii vel lectionum aliquid indigent, meditationi inserviatur” (the time remaining after Vigil, those who do not know the psaltery or readings, use it to study it with proper meditations). From the context follows the summary, that such reading is silent and individual. Each monk reads without speaking, because different members of the community could have diverse writings to study. According to the *Regula Benedicti* both techniques should coexist, because they play various roles.

Similar instructions can be found in the main normative document of the Cistercians, the *Liber usuum sacri Cisterciensis ordinis*, which contains a special chapter devoted to monastic reading. It is also mentioned in some chapters that deal with non-liturgical pastimes. In order to minimize any possible free time for brethren, the *Liber usuum* recommends that the brothers occupy themselves with reading. This especially concerns winter, when there are few out-of-doors activities.


Relying on that material, we can summarize that reading itself is closely connected with praying, and they sometimes fulfil same functions. When the function of collective prayer is paramount, reading is performed aloud, but individual reading is chiefly silent. Reading possesses an independent significance, however, because its purpose is not only prayer and self-discipline, it is also involved in the scholastic receipt of wisdom, where texts are intended to teach monks. To all appearances, such knowledge obtained by studying would be less sacral than knowledge received without any mediators, that is, from God in the course of miraculous revelation. The wonderful literacy and wisdom of lay brothers at death’s door would be precisely of that kind.

Transition to lectio-meditatio as the new way of reading and self-education begins a bit later, in approximately the 14th century, in the Franciscan sphere. The treatise Meditationes vitae Christi, composed in 1325, and falsely attributed to Bonaventure, operates with three methods of meditation: cogitatio, imaginatio, and compassio. Here, there is an emphasis on the sphere of imagination. At that time, the main spiritual activity was based on personal imaginative skills. Lectio divina does exist independently, but starting from the 14th century, it is supplemented with imaginatio, which became popular because of its deep intimacy and emotionality.

Richalm of Schöntal speaks about such scholastic reading, without private and concentrated meditation, in his work Liber revelationum. It contains episodes of both voiced and silent reading practices. It was usual to read passages from the Bible during refection. In the second chapter, the author mentions that one of the monks used to sup so loudly while eating that the others could hear him in spite of the loud voice of the lector: “Solet enim, cum pulmentum comedit, sorbere cum cocleari alcius, quam umquam audierim, ita, ut omnes circumcedentes possimus audire; et vos quoque in alia mensa, si adverteretis et si lector mense taceret, immo eciam puto legente mense lectore, si tantum adverteretis” (Whenever he eats soup, he sips from his spoon louder than I’ve ever heard, so that everyone sitting around him can hear. You would even hear it at another table if you paid attention, and if the reader were silent; in fact, even, I think, during the reading of the reader at the table, if only you were paying attention).17 This passage suggests that not only was speaking among brethren not permitted, but that any improper sound was censured.

Much more consideration is given to silent reading. Lectio divina is revealed to be one of the most intellectually, physically exhausting and time-consuming activities for monks throughout all generations. The activity requires patience, assiduity, and concentration. Richalm is greatly distressed, because he could hardly find one or two men who enjoy living in the cloister and carrying out spiritual practices: “Inde est, quod in maximo qualibet conventu vix unus aut duo inveniuntur, qui libenter in claustro sedeant, qui libenter interioribus intendant” (That is why in any big monastery there will hardly be found one or two brothers who would be happy to sit in a monastery, who would gladly devote themselves to inner things).18 Some chapters of the book are devoted entirely to lectio divina and its goodness. The historical value of these fragments is very high. They describe the monks’ everyday relation to their offices. They also provide insight into monastic daily practices. Whereas statutes and rules describe in detail the legislative side, that is, how the monks’ lives are to be regulated, including the schedule of all activities, a visionary text such as this informs us how the Cistercians observed their declared high ideals in practice, what kind of difficulties they faced, and what results they achieved. Thus, the brethren of Schöntal try, by every possible means, to delay the time of individual reading, and even prefer other activities that simulate busyness, but when

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18 Richalm von Schöntal, Liber revelationum, 29.
they take the book, because they cannot delay any longer, their faces become melancholic and dull, so that they do not immerse themselves into the essence and wisdom of the scripture for any long duration. In the fault and negligence of his monks, Richalm sees the numerous intrigues of demons. Thus he calls on the monks to be more pious in their readings, not only because of its practical usefulness, but also for the purpose of spiritual struggle against servants of the devil.

It’s important to emphasize that Richalm considers the silent technique to be appropriate for a proper understanding of scripture. When a person reads with the voice, pronouncing various sounds, the inward ear suffers very much and becomes blunt. According to Liber revelationum, reading aloud entails a sort of dissipation into the external world: “Sepe cum lego solo corde et cogitatione, sicut soloe, faciunt me verbotenus et ore legere, ut tantummodo eo magis auferant michi internum intellectum, et eo minus vim lectionis intus penetrem” (Very often, when I read with only my heart and thought, as I usually do, they [the demons] make me read with my lips and in a voice, only to deprive me of inner understanding, so that I can’t penetrate deeper into the meaning of what I read). According to Richalm, reading with only one’s eyes is the best method to dispose the person toward meditation.

The motif of self-dissipation is distinctly presented throughout the entirety of Liber revelationum. Even the medieval editor of the work, frater N. - the monk and interlocutor of Richalm, confesses that they all try to read as rarely as possible, and everyone finds other work to do, instead: “Rari omnino sumus in lectione; unusquisque vadit ad opera sua” (We read very rarely, everyone goes about their business). These vain affairs so swallow up the brethren, that they seem to the monks to be necessary and important. The demons do not even pay special attention to such busy monks, nor do they respect and fear them, since they do not pose strong opposition against the devil’s traps. Evil spirits can confuse human souls and thoughts, and can even physically drag them away from intellectual activity: “Ipsi levant hominem, cum sedet ad lectionem; levant, inquam, aperte et ducent eum foras ad exterius tractanda, et tuntam quasi necessitatem et utilitatem eorum, que tractantur, inducunt, ut putet homo periculum anime sue maximum incurrisse, nisi intendat illis…” (They [demons] lift up the person while he is sitting and reading, lift him up, I repeat, uncovered and drag him into the open to engage in outside activities, and inspire almost such a need and benefit of these occupations that a person thinks that there will be a greatest danger to his soul if he does not commit himself to them…).21

Liber revelationum also contains a particularly new theme in visionary literature. Richalm compares reading with a severe trial—caminus. This seems to be an allusion to the Bible, Proverbs 17:23, which narrates a crucible through which silver must pass in order to prove its purity. Richalm says: “Caminus est lectio, caminus, qui probat omnes” (Reading is the crucible, the crucible tests everyone). Scripture itself, its reading and exegesis, turn out to be the original test that is carried out without regard for human justice. Richalm gives examples of the everyday difficulty of this crucible: first, demons possess monks with a very strong sleepiness; then, they put the hand of each brother under his chin in order to make circumstances most convenient for somnolence.

It is representative that not just sleepiness, but also sleeplessness is the cause of distraction while reading, both of which are aroused by evil spirits. The logic of the author is as follows: wakefulness has two types, it can be either useful or harmful: “Si vero utiliter noctibus vigilemus in bona meditacione, hoc multum dolent; inutiliter vero nos vigilare gaudent,” (If, however, we are profitably awake at night with good reflections, they suffer greatly because of this; if we are uselessly awake, they are happy).23

19 Richalm von Schöntal, 26.
20 Richalm von Schöntal, 28.
21 Richalm von Schöntal, 29.
22 Richalm von Schöntal, 28.
23 Richalm von Schöntal, 34.
Especially harmful is wakefulness in the night, because then the monks’ thoughts are farthest away from sacred affairs. Instead, they think about sins and are easy game for devils. It is most probable that Richalm himself noticed how the brothers slept with books in their hands during the day, but during the hours of darkness, they were awake. Most frustrating for Richalm is the fact that, in practice, no one really tried to change their spiritual habits for the better.

Richalm himself also suffers from demonic invasions, but in other ways. As we know from the documents of Schöntal, Richalm was an abbot for only a few years before he died. This permits us to assume that he was rather old and suffered from disease. In *Liber revelationum*, he complains about constant pain in different parts of his body. For example, he interprets a physical pain in his shin as the ingenious, demonic method of creating an obstacle to his reading; Richalm sits down because of this pain, but while seated, his soul becomes weak: “ipsi spicula dirigunt in illud, ut non possim stare, sed eam sessum et vacem confabulacioni et protraham oram et avellar a lectione” (they send it [his shin] stings, so that I cannot stand, so I sit down for its convenience, devote myself to the conversation, play for time, and distract from reading).²⁴

Turning to Herbert of Clairvaux, and his *Liber miraculorum*, we must mention that on the whole, it offers less material for discussion. This can be explained in two ways. First, Herbert’s aim was different from that of Richalm. While Richalm makes an effort to explain the impiety of his own monastic community, with demons, and only takes episodes from the everyday life of Schöntal, Herbert gathers stories for his work from many Cistercian cloisters: Himmerod, Grandis Silva, Fontanetum, and so on, until finally he made an intellectual compilation, where the personal opinion of the author is not so clear, in comparison with *Liber revelationum*. Second, general discipline was in good state in Clairvaux, with respect to reading. In that work, there are no episodes which concern reading itself. On the contrary, Herbert speaks about reading in connection with praying, psalm-singing, and meditating. All these activities are conflated. Logically, this means the author wants to stress the essential similarity of them all. In Chapter V, “De abbate, qui solebat in oratione sentire odorem et saporem mire suavitatis” (On the abbot, who is accustomed to sense the scent and savour of marvelous sweetness in prayer), Herbert tells us about this abbot, who perceived that smell and taste “oranti, verum etiam legenti, psallenti, meditanti atque operanti” (during prayer, as well as reading, singing psalms, meditations and works).²⁵ The same combination can be found in other chapters. The scriptures are named in connection with the subject of collective prayer during the mass. Reading arouses Herbert’s interest even more when it concerns lay brothers, often named as the *illiterati*. This can be explained simply by the fact that reading was prohibited for that group of brothers, so that their reading was all the more remarkable. Usually it happened only on one’s deathbed, as a miraculous gift for kindness and piety.

In conclusion, reading can be understood both as a part of monastic education, possessing of its own independent value, and as an inseparable link in the traditional chain of lectio-oratio-meditatio. In Richalm’s *Liber revelationum*, attention is mainly paid to silent, individual reading, whereas in Herbert’s work, reading is integrated into a scheme of praying-meditating. Individual reading is a virtue in itself, goal of which is to humble, discipline, and elevate the spirit, and to direct the thoughts into the inner world and bring the human heart closer to God. Praying-meditating refers to the mystical practices of Christian monasticism, for which the text itself, including the material on which it was written, its signs and sound, were extremely important. Both practices coexisted during the

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²⁴ Richalm von Schöntal, 26.
²⁵ As quoted in Gabriela Kompatscher Gufler, *Herbert von Clairvaux und sein Liber miraculorum: die
12th and 13th centuries because they fulfilled different functions. The common opinion in the scholarly literature, that the Benedictines were oriented toward scholasticism (reading and ratio), while the Cistercians were focused on the mystical knowledge of the Divine and the union with it, suffers from oversimplification, as was shown in this paper, since reading carries educational and disciplining functions, and was not excluded from everyday life. On the contrary, it was given an important meaning.

**Bibliography**


