CHAPTER FOUR

VITA ACTIVA

This chapter focuses on the growth of the Cistercian order in the Languedoc from c. 1130 up to the end of the Albigensian Crusade (1209–1229). From the 1140s onwards, the Cistercians of the Languedoc engaged in increasingly conflictual confrontation with heterodox religious movements. Under the papacy of Innocent III (1198–1216), Rome came to perceive the Cathars as a threat, to the point of launching a crusade against them that relied heavily on the support of the Cistercians. The crusade had a major political, social and religious impact on the Languedoc, and also significantly affected the Cistercians' place within it. This crusade and its implications form the immediate background of the architectural developments I analyse in subsequent chapters. I argue that the building activities that took place in Cistercian abbeys following the dramatic events of the crusade served the white order as a major vehicle for expressing its role in society. An understanding of this architecture therefore requires an exploration of the Cistercians' engagements and of how they tried to make sense of them. The Cistercians' conflictual entanglements reveal that the active life could play a central role within the order. It also offers us a window into the social and spiritual consequences of the Cistercians' status as reformers and intercessors.

This chapter traces the most significant of the Cistercians' engagements, focusing on their contributions principally as agents of the papacy in the domains of ecclesiastical reform and the fight against heresy. It will become apparent that the white order in many ways epitomised the dialectic of the contemplative and active lives that was embedded within the Western monastic tradition. The vita activa in Cistercian monasticism certainly denoted a wide range of activities, many of which did not

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1 Although all twenty-nine male Cistercian houses of the Languedoc were founded within the twelfth century, the growth of the order continued throughout most of the thirteenth century; see Biget et al. (1986: 320–27).

2 There is a vast literature on the complex developments leading to the Crusade, its course and implications. For studies that devote particular attention to the Cistercians, see Biget (2000), Hamilton (1999), Zerner (1998), Vicaire (1969) and Congar (1958).
necessarily pertain to social interactions, such as manual labour. When Cistercian sources refer to the active life, it is not always clear what particular commitments they refer to, but as will become apparent, social interactions could be included as a legitimate activity. The regular cycle of habitual relations with lay people, especially those tied to their charitable and intercessory commitments, are studied in relation to their spatial settings in Part III. The focus on the extreme end of the spectrum in this chapter, namely the regular interventions outside the monastic enclosure that were high-profile in both political and popular terms, helps us to situate the regular cycle of ordinary, everyday interactions within the Cistercians' wider role as reformers that was powerfully perceived, sometimes even violently, by monks as much as the societies they were part of.

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When Conrad of Eberbach stated that the foundation and spread of the Cistercian order marked a regeneration of Benedictine monasticism as a whole, his claim was based on good evidence. The white order did indeed present a harbour for a great variety of monastic communities seeking a reformed way of life. Overall, about one third of the 650 all male abbeys established by the Cistercians by c. 1350 were incorporated rather than founded from scratch. Scholars have been able to show in some detail how in the Languedoc, as well as in the neighbouring region of the Limousin, the advent of Cistercian abbeys in southern France did not present a *tabula rasa* with regard to the pre-existing monastic landscape. Seventeen of the twenty-nine abbeys established in the Languedoc in the twelfth century existed as hermitages or monasteries before they became affiliated to the white order. The congregations called into life by Robert of Abrissel (d. 1116) and especially by his disciple Gerald of Salles (d. 1120), were to form the core of the future network of Cistercian houses in the Languedoc. Cluny too had spread to the Languedoc through this process of assimilation and integration. The Cistercians therefore stood in strong continuity with the spread of the preceding Cluniac reform to the Languedoc, just as Conrad of Eberbach had indicated in his genealogical account.