BERNARD’S LIFE AND WORKS: A REVIEW

Brian Patrick McGuire

Practically all of Bernard of Clairvaux’s writings and actions have been discussed and questioned by scholars.¹ Except for his death on 20 August 1153, many of the central dates in his life are still being discussed. In what follows here I will give a chronological overview of Bernard, but without going into the detail that a full-fledged biography would require.

Ever since Bernard’s lifetime his admirers and detractors have been trying to capture the essence of his charisma and influence. His friend William of Saint Thierry more or less completed what became the first book of the Vita Prima, Bernard’s hagiography, before his death in 1148, five years before Bernard’s death.² The author of the second book of this work, Ernald of Bonneval, was abbot of a Benedictine house near Chartres, and it is likely that Ernald began his task before Bernard’s death.³ The second book concentrates on Bernard’s involvement in the papal schism between Innocent II and Anacletus but also shows Bernard as miracle worker, moving from place to place in Aquitaine and Italy with crowds of the poor and lame seeking his assistance.

Books Three to Five of the Vita Prima were written by Geoffrey of Auxerre, the Paris scholar who was won over by Bernard’s preaching and joined Clairvaux.⁴ As one of Bernard’s secretaries, Geoffrey was close to his master during the last years of his life and did his best after


² J.-P. Migne, ed. Patrologia cursus completus, series latina (PL), 22 vols (Paris, 1844–64), 185:225–66. See the subscriptio added at the end of Liber 1, after the death of William, by Burchard, abbot of Balerne, col. 266–67. See also the article by E. Rozanne Elder in this volume.

³ PL 185:225–302. Adriaan H. Bredero, Etudes sur la “Vita Prima” de Saint Bernard (Rome, 1960), esp. pp. 109–116. Christopher Holdsworth has kindly pointed out to me that Ernald may have been selected for this task because as head of a monastery in the diocese of Chartres, he was “well informed about the doings of Geoffrey bishop of Chartres and Theobald of Blois, who both play a considerable part in Book Two.”

Bernard’s death to secure his canonization, which took place in 1174. Geoffrey did not follow the more-or-less chronological structure of the first two books of the *Vita Prima*. He sought to provide a general portrait of Bernard in terms of his appearance and effect on people. At the same time, however, he dealt with Bernard’s involvements in the controversies of his time, such as his attack on Abelard. In Geoffrey’s own words, contained in the Preface to the third book of the *Vita Prima*: “First of all are pursued those matters which especially pertain to the way of life, customs and teaching (*habitum, mores, atque doctrinam*) of the blessed father; secondly the many good actions (*virtutes multas*) performed by him are articulated. Thirdly the work is finished with the good ending to his life.”

In spite of modern studies on the composition of the *Vita Prima* we have long lacked a critical edition. Scholars still make use of the edition made by Jean Mabillon in the 17th century, reprinted by J.-P. Migne in 1855. The *Fragmenta*, the early draft of Bernard’s life prepared by Geoffrey of Auxerre (also known as the *Vita Tertia* and used by William of Saint Thierry), has a fairly recent edition, and now at last the *Vita Prima* is appearing in a critical text. Otherwise there is a *Vita Secunda* by Alan of Auxerre, who criticized his predecessors and said they were too wordy and not trustworthy. But his work is nothing but an anthology of the *Vita Prima*, which leaves out unpleasant sections, such as the description of Bernard’s stomach ailment.

Finally there is the *Vita Quarta*, drafted about 1180 by John the Hermit, who made use of Bernard’s cousin Robert for some new materials about the saint. Here we see a transition from hagiographical materials to *exemplum* literature, as when Bernard is remembered for telling

---

6 PL 185:302.
8 Contained in PL 185:469–524. See the prologue, col. 469: “…nos ex eadem narratione nonnulla omittentes… breviore perstringimus schedula… Primo quod scriptorum, tametsi vera sint, prolinitias onerosa solet esse legentibus.” Bredero dates the composition to between 1167 and 1170. See “Etudes” (note 3 above), p. 139, n. 9.
9 PL 185:531–50. An initial letter to Herbert, archbishop of Sardinia (col. 533–34), places the work sometime after 1180.