PRIDE GOES BEFORE A FALL:
ALDHELM’S PRACTICAL APPLICATION OF
GREGORIAN AND CASSIANIC CONCEPTIONS OF
SUPERBIA AND THE EIGHT PRINCIPAL VICES

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Abstract: The Anglo-Latin author, Aldhelm, occupies an important place in the history of the reception and transmission of the Cassianic and Gregorian schemes of the principal vices. He knew the pertinent works of both earlier authors and in the prose version of his De virginitate, Aldhelm apparently attempted to combine or reconcile the two. In the later, metrical version of De virginitate, however, he abandoned any attempt to merge the two schemes and chose to portray the Cassianic organization of the vices with no further mention of Gregory’s contribution to the idea. Understanding Aldhelm’s choice requires a careful consideration of his own background, ideas, and conception of the audience for whom he wrote the De virginitate. Such an understanding will help explain why Cassian’s order of the principal vices endured in Anglo-Saxon England into the eleventh century despite the greater influence and authority of the writings of Gregory the Great.

The eight principal vices (out of which grew later conceptions of the seven deadly sins) were first recorded by Evagrius in his writings on the practice of solitary asceticism that had developed during the fourth century CE in the regions of Egypt and Syria. Evagrius referred to the vices as λογισμοί (thoughts), mental tendencies that would lead to sin if not overcome and that had to be rooted out by ascetic discipline.¹ This psychology of sin was introduced to the Christian lands of western Europe in writing by John Cassian in his Conferences and Institutes, which he produced in the early fifth century after emigrating from the east and settling in Gaul, where he established two monastic communities, one for men and one for women, in Marseilles. The reception of ascetic practice in Gaul before the early 400s CE had not

been encouraging, but the tide of opinion was turning when Cassian arrived in Marseilles:

Augustine in Africa, Martin in Gaul, Paulinas of Nola and Ambrose in Italy, Priscillian in Spain, had by their prowess and reputation sanctified asceticism in the eyes of a section of the population. But the movement had not fully captured the loyalty of the leaders of society as a whole. Not only the unsympathetic pagans but sporadic Christian opinion denounced the monks as irresponsible and bizarre wretches.²

In a time when Benedict of Nursia had yet to write his famous Rule and monastic observance was by no means uniform nor even particularly well-defined in western European lands, Cassian’s works met the need for a fundamental theology of asceticism in the Latin west and the need for firsthand instruction from one who knew the customs of the fathers of Syria and Egypt. Through the Institutes and Conferences, Cassian contributed to the growing conception of what ascetic practice might look like beyond the boundaries of Syria and Egypt, especially cenobitic asceticism, or the observance of ascetic life in community with others instead of as a solitary hermit.

Despite receiving criticism from Cassiodorus and Prosper of Aquitaine for the semi-Pelagian views expressed especially in Conference 13, Cassian’s writings on cenobitic monastic practice were recommended by Cassiodorus (with a caveat regarding Cassian’s teaching on grace and free will) and later in the Rule of Benedict of Nursia.³ The pall of Cassian’s apparent semi-Pelagian stance in opposition to the teachings of Augustine of Hippo on the matter of grace, however, was enough to:

make Augustinians suspicious and to begin requests for modified editions of the Conferences. . . . Nevertheless both semi-Pelagian and Augustinian writers of the fifth and sixth centuries had read [Cassian]; and the demand for epitomes and expurgation proves that in spite of these disadvantages his ascetical theology was meeting a long-felt need.⁴

The numerous extant manuscripts of Cassian’s writings on ascetic practice testify to the continued popularity of these works throughout the Middle Ages.⁵ It comes as no surprise, then, to find that manuscripts of Cassian’s works followed the monks, Roman and Irish, who

³ Ibid., 171.
⁴ Ibid., 170–71.
⁵ Ibid., 162.