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Thesis of Doctoral Dissertation

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Attitude towards Nature in the Monastic Literature of the Cistercians and the Eremitic Orders
in the 11th and 12th Centuries

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Indication of the subject. The thesis analyses how in the 11th and 12th century the revival of eremitism and its spirituality have influenced the view towards the world of nature in Western Europe. It is worth investigating the relationship between monks and nature in the period, often referred as the “renaissance of eremitism” not only because of the importance of the natural environment in the everyday life and asceticism of the hermit monks, but also because the 12th century brought a widespread interest in observing nature.

In Roger Sorrell’s opinion Cistercians and the hermits were the precursors of Saint Francis of Assisi’s approach to nature. The mendicant orders affection to the nature is well known, this topic has been in the focus of the medieval researches since the 19th century, the historians investigated it from different points of view. Nevertheless the Cistercians and eremitic orders relationship with nature has been a much more neglected part of the medieval researches. However in the recent years, with the development of the landscape and environmental archaeology the notion of the monastic landscape has appeared. The characteristic features for monastic landscape can be observed principally in the case of Cistercian monasteries, but a systematic survey hasn’t been published, the studies present either the spiritual or the material aspect of the topic.

The structure of the thesis. In the first main chapter of the thesis the historiography, the antecedents and the historical context of the topic are presented. In *The birth and the migration of the topoi/ motives* we sum up the most important motives of the landscape representation in the monastic hagiography. These are the *locus horribilis* of the desert fathers, the *locus amoenus* from the classical literature, and the Eden from the Old Testament. We also analyse the historical context: the revival of the eremitism in 11th and 12th century in the Occident. In *The desert myth of the Cistercians* we review the academic opinions about the role of the *locus horribilis* topos in the first Cistercian documents. This chapter is one of our methodological basis.

In the 3rd chapter we examine the development of the landscape representation in the monastic hagiography from the desert fathers to Saint Bernard of Clairvaux.

As the structure of the thesis is partially based on the *structure-communitas* hypothesis of Victor Turner, we arranged the 4th (*The Horrible Wilderness and the Saving Forest*), the 5th

(*Landscape and Legitimization*) and the 6th (*The Heavenly and Earthly Harmony*) main chapters according to the mentioned historical anthropological hypothesis.

In the 4th main chapter we examined the lives of the spontaneous hermit communities in the wilderness. These groups form a spontaneous *communitas*, which confronts with the structure. The most significant feature of this *communitas* is the spatial *liminality*.

In the 4th main chapter we analyse the role of the landscape representation when hermit groups turn into monastic orders. In *Divine Will* we analyse how the hagiographical sources expressed God's will in the setting of the monastery. The landscape which was chosen by God's will is the symbol of the foundation of a monastic community. However the legitimate role of the chosen landscape can originate from its *liminal* aspect. In the part which deals with the *Transformation of the landscape* we represent how the monks transformed the landscape where they settled. The wilderness became fertile agricultural area thanks to their colonization works. This kind of works also expressed the transformation of the spontaneous community of the hermits into a monastic order.

The 6th chapter, *Heavenly and Earthly Harmony*, analyses the relationship between the founded monastery and nature. In this chapter most of the examined sources are not hagiographical ones, we analyse chronics, letters, an autobiography, and a landscape description from the monastic literature of the 11th and 12th century.

From the next chapter on we do not follow the theory of Turner, but we give a "bird's-eye view" of the topic, presenting various, "non-monastic" opinions. In the 7th chapter we mention that the clergymen of the English royal court often criticised the economical activities of the Cistercian Order. At the end of the 12th and at beginning of the 13th century Gerald of Wales and Walter Map considered that the land acquiring politics of the Order was very harmful. In their works the landscape representation became the rhetorical tool of the criticism. From the works of the secular clergymen we get a more detailed description of the Cistercian colonisation than from the monastic narrative sources. But according to their opinion the woodland assertion was much more harmful than useful.

In the last, 8th chapter, *The Hermit and the knight* we summarize the most important aspects of the relevant bibliography to show the attitude towards nature and the figure of the hermit in the chivalric romances.

Sources. Most of the sources of the thesis are from the narrative literature of the Cistercians, the eremitic orders and the Benedictines. Our main narrative sources are hagiographical writings, giving detailed information about everyday life of the Middle Ages, and these sources express the monastic mind and spirituality in the best way. Susan Bratton pointed out that the monastic hagiography is one of the best, but the least unexploited group of sources for the analysis of the concept of nature in the Middle Ages. Taking into consideration all these, we have to rely on the hagiographical sources. The saint's lives and the legends present first of all the ideas of sainthood (martyrdom, virginity, asceticism) so the information and motives are subordinated to these ideals, but at the same time landscape and nature are also parts of the descriptions.

The *vitae* in the 12th century often served as the legitimate sources of the "new orders". That's why the hagiographers emphasize the virtues of self mortification and voluntary poverty, so they usually described barren and deserted landscapes which were suitable for the ascetic way of life. Most of the analysed *vitae* are the lives of the founders of the "new orders" in the 11th and 12th century. Together with these sources we also turned to the *vitae* of lonely hermits, like Godric of Finchale, and early medieval saints, like Saint Fiacre, in case they were written in the 11-12th century.

The role of landscape description is very important in the early Cistercian documents, the *Exordium Cistercii* and the *Exordium Parvum* depicts Cîteaux as a *locus horribilis*. The aim of these sources was to legitimate the recently founded Order, against the accusations of the contemporary clergymen leading the papal curia. That's the reason of the deserted landscape which is very suitable for the ascetic life of *milites Christi*.

The chronics usually represent the monastic landscape as an earthly Paradise. William of Malmesbury depicts the fertile lands of the abbey of Thorney, Guibert de Nogent in his autobiography describes the surroundings of the monastery of Nogent. Ordericus Vitalis in his *Historia Ecclesiastica* refers to the heavenly places of the Cistercian monasteries. The letters of the monastic authors also present the monastic landscape as the beautiful Garden of Eden. Saint Bruno praises the beauties of the monastery in Calabria and he states that the delights of nature refresh the soul of the exhausted monks. Gilbert of Hoyland, a Cistercian abbot from the 12th century depicts the abbey of Byland in one of his letters he also writes that sights and sounds of nature refresh both soul and body. Although the letters in the Middle Ages were much more public writings than in the later centuries, in these sources the authors could

express better their personal opinion. For that reason we suppose that these landscape descriptions testify the author's affection toward nature.

The mystical literature of the Cistercians is full of lively descriptions of gardens, flowers, fields, vineyards and other natural beauties. Saint Bernard of Clairvaux wrote an unfinished commentary on the Cantic of canticles, his spiritual successors continued his work. The mentioned Biblical episode takes place in a delightful garden. The commentators may have used their personal observations in the creation of the mentioned images besides the classical and biblical rhetorical elements.

The monastic archaeology and topography as well as the analyses of the place names make possible the exact study of the relationship between landscape and the new orders. The framework of the thesis doesn't permit to extend the study of archaeological sources, nevertheless we set up a control group with the place names of the monasteries. The name giving for the monasteries was determined by both the ideals of the Order's and the geographical particularities. We compared the place name evidences of the Cistercians and the other "new orders" in a comparative study. This study indicates the differences and the similarities between the two groups from other aspects than the narrative sources.

Methods. As to the methods we use in the case of the narrative sources we worked on the topographic and chronologic analysis of the hagiographical motives. In some chapters we searched thoroughly the narrative sources in the framework of case studies. One of our case studies is the presentation of the foundation of the monastery of Tiron from the *vita* of Bernard of Tiron. In this chapter we tried to seize how the hagiographer represents landscape from various aspects in order to emphasize the ideal of the *vita*.

In some cases we followed the development of the hagiographic motives in the landscape representations, meanwhile in other parts of the thesis we compared fragments of sources of the same period. There are chapters where we analysed the hagiographic motives following the terms of academic literature, while in other cases we set up our own categories. One of these is the *Locus amoenus surrounded by the locus horribilis*.

The economic and social changes in Occident in the 12th century transformed also the concept of nature. Jacques Le Goff supposes that in the symbols of the chivalric literature there are allusions to the woodland assertion of the period (grands défrichements).

Questions and answers. One of our main questions is that are there any similar references to the transformation of the concept of nature in the monastic narrative sources of the 11-12th century? Dominique Chenu asserts that the 12th century men showed special interest towards nature. Massimo Montanari alleges that with the expansion of the agrarian civilisation man becomes more and more distant from the nature. Alfred K. Siewers in his work *Strange Beauty* asserts that the intensive physical relationship with nature started to waste in the 12th century, and the symbolic concept of nature superseded it, the intercessor of this spiritual tendency was the Cistercian Bernard of Clairvaux.

. According to our researches in the hagiographic literature the transformations about the concept of the nature appear indirectly. The old topoi and motives receive new semantic contents. In the hagiographies the landscape description emphasizes the ideal of the *vitae*, and with the changing of the ideal the landscape often undergoes a transformation. While the landscape in the age of desert fathers was the device of the lonely ascetic life, in the age of new hermits it expressed not only the self mortification of the holy men, but the harmony of monastic community as well. That's why the monks represented their surroundings as an earthly Paradise.

The motive of the taming of the wild animals appears first in the *Vita Antonii* in the 4th century, and symbolises the holy man's power over nature. In the 11th and the 12th century new hagiographical elements completed this motive. The topos of hermit and the hunter extends on a wide range. This motive refers to the differences between the landscape utilization of the nobility and the monks. In this period appears the motive of caring about the birds and smaller animals, which will reappear later with Saint Francis's affection for nature. In the Cistercian hagiography the hermits not only tame the wild animals, but they transform the wilderness into a fertile agricultural area with the help of the domesticated stags and wolves. The topos of the wild animal's yoking comes from the Irish and Celtic hagiography, but the Cistercians filled it with new semantic contents, this motive may refer to the vigorous agrarian expansion of the Order.

The hagiographical sources of the thesis do not verify Montanari's hypothesis. Most of the founders of the "new orders" spent a part of their life in the forests as hermits. According to the 12th century *vitae* their life in the wilderness was very similar to that of early medieval hermits. The attitude towards nature is much more positive. In the hagiographical sources the

forest is the refugee and retreat for the hermits. It provided food, shelter and living place to the dwellers. These sources suggest that the hermits lived in strong relationship with nature.

The two most important motives which appear in the letters, chronics, and other landscape descriptions of the period are the recognition that nature is both beautiful and useful, and the sources underline the human efforts in transforming the landscape. We can catch the changing of the paradigm most directly in the letter of Gilbert of Hoyland's (a Cistercian abbot) in the description of the surroundings of Byland abbey.

An important question of the thesis is how did the hermit orders, and Cistercians appreciate their own works in transforming the landscape?

The role of the *locus horribilis* is similar in the early Cistercian documents and in the sources of other eremitic orders. The Cistercian hagiography does not exalt much more the motive of woodland asserting as the sources of the eremitical orders. Every community of hermits which settles in the forest asserts the narrower territory of the chosen site, cuts wood for the building of the new monastery, but there are rare allusions to the *grands défrichements*. The *vitae* of Robert of Knaresborough and Saint Kentigern were written by Cistercian authors in the 12th century, in these texts appears the motive of the ploughing wolves and stags, which may refer to the Order's agrarian expansion, but these episodes also express the taming of the wilderness by the work of the hermits.

Some orders – especially the Cistercians – had determined opinion about settlement and the ideal landscape. According to Sorrell's opinion the Cistercians and the hermit's concept of nature was very similar, but the former regarded much more significant men's work in transforming landscape and the importance of using the new technologies to subdue nature. With the help of the technical knowledge human beings became the part of the creation. Our research aimed to answer the question whether there were any differences between the concept of nature of the different orders: the Cistercians, the hermit orders, and the Benedictines.

According to the consulted sources there weren't significant differences between the attitude towards nature of the mentioned orders in the 11th and 12th century. In the chapter called *The Praise of Creation* we presented that the Cistercians, the hermit orders, and the Benedictines all used frequently the elements of *locus amoenus* for describing monastic landscapes. The descriptions painting the landscape as a beautiful earthly Paradise are very

similar in the case of every order. The landscape descriptions of the Carthusian Saint Bruno, the Benedictine William of Saint-Denis, and the unknown Cistercian monk in some fragments of texts are almost the same. Sorrel's conclusions about the Cistercian concept of nature, is based on the description of Clairvaux from the beginning of the 13th century, which is the essence of the Order's approach to creation. We would like to modify the mentioned assertion: the eremitic orders' and the Cistercian's concept of nature weren't completely the same at the beginning of the 13th century, but in the 12th century the similarity was more evident. The manual labour in the surrounding nature, the physical and spiritual transformation of the landscape and praise of the beauties of the created world are important elements in the landscape descriptions of every order. William, a monk of Saint-Denis in the middle of the 12th century depicts the enormous abundance and beauty of nature like the anonym Cistercian author at the beginning of the 13th century. The only difference between the two texts is that the latter emphasizes the importance of human technology in the taming of nature.

We can get to almost the same conclusion through the analysis of the monastic place names, however this group of sources helps us to draw other conclusion. The comparative analysis corroborated the hypothesis of Anselm Dimier, who stated that the Cistercian place names refer to the heavenly beauty, beatitude and light. In our research we concentrated to the proportion of the place names which allude to the natural environment. In the case of the hermit orders the high proportion of the monastery names, which refer to mountain, seems plausible, and it can be explained with the settlement strategies of the Carthusians. But the higher proportion of the place names in the mentioned group which refer to waterside is surprising because most of the Carthusian monasteries were founded in mountains. There are some place names in the Cistercian group which directly allude to woodland assertion, but these kind of names don't appear in the group of eremitical orders. From this place name evidence we may suppose that the Cistercian colonization was more significant than that of the eremitic order's. In both groups there are place names which contain the names of woodland trees. In the case of hermit orders these names are twice as many as in the case of the Cistercians. Most of these plant names appear in the group of the Grandmontine Order, which refers to the strong relationship between the mentioned monks and nature. These conclusions are totally different from those of the hagiographical sources, because in the Grandmontine saint's lives we couldn't find any landscape descriptions.

A lot of our narrative sources record not only monastery foundations, but also the foundation of a new order. What was the legitimate role of the landscape representations in the analysed texts? The academic bibliography states that in the case of the early Cistercian documents the landscape descriptions were one of the most important rhetorical tools of the legitimization of the new foundation. Had the landscape descriptions the same role in the cases of other “new orders”?

The landscape representations in the hagiographical sources usually underline the ideals of the *vitae*, besides the hagiographic function these descriptions often sustain the legitimization of the “new orders”. In the chapter called *Landscape and Legitimization* we analysed the legitimating role of the landscape representations in the narrative sources of the eremitic orders. In the course of the analysis we used the *communitas-structure* model of Victor Turner. We tried to identify the spontaneous communities of the hermits living in the forest with the *communitas*, and the settled monastic foundations with the *structure*. According to our supposition the landscape of the *locus horribilis* is related to the *communitas*, and the *locus amoenus* to the structure. This assumption was verified in the lives of Bernard of Tiron and Romuald of Ravenna.

In some cases the landscape representation exceeds the role of legitimization, and it becomes the rhetorical tool of the criticism of the Benedictine Order. The 11th and 12th centuries revival of eremitism was tightly attached to the Church and monastic reform. The *locus horribilis* descriptions express the strict ascetic life of the members of the eremitic orders contrary to the enervated monastic life of the Benedictines. These sources suggest that the life in the wilderness is much more suitable for observing of the *regula Benedicti*. Most of the hermits of the period in question were Benedictine monks, before they escaped to the “desert”. The contrast of *stabilitas loci* is the wandering way of life of the hermit preachers. In the hagiographical sources the solid stone building of the monastery is substituted by the temporary log huts, the vine, the bread and the abundant diet of the monasteries are substituted by the forest roots and berries.

The *locus amoenus* can also serve as a tool of criticism. William contrasts the peaceful and beautiful landscape of Saint-Denis-en-Vaux with the scandalous and noisy atmosphere of the monastery of Saint-Denis.

We analysed also from other aspects the role of the landscape descriptions in legitimization. We set up some categories for landscape-handling forms. The deprivation of

nature of its pagan sacrality leads to the Christianization of the landscape. The transformation of the landscape appears in two levels: first is the physical conversion, in other words the colonization, the second is the spiritual alteration of the landscape. In the latter case the monks transform the barren desert into a heavenly place. The best example for the spiritual metamorphosis of the landscape is the case of Clairvaux from the *Vita Prima* of Bernard of Clairvaux. The monastic communities tried to alienate themselves from the secular world, for this purpose they surrounded their properties with strict visible and invisible boundaries. In our analysis we used Martha Newman's hypothesis which states that the Cistercians alienated their landed properties from the secular world through a systematic process. She analysed this process in the cartularies of the Order. We found references to a similar phenomenon in the narrative sources of the white monks and the other hermit orders. Some hagiographic motives allude to the alienation, for example the garden of the hermit is a sacral territory, where secular law is not valid.

We tried to find the answer whether the monastic writers of the 11th and 12th century used their own experiences in the descriptions of the landscapes, or this fragments were only mechanical repetitions of the classical and biblical rhetorical motives. Did the monks observed the beauties of nature?

According to Jean Leclercq the Cistercians and the other monks didn't describe the real environment, they followed exclusively the biblical motives and the classical authors. Meanwhile Etienne Gilson states that the white monks lived in strong relationship with nature and in their works there are a lot of references to the beautiful surroundings of their monasteries. Martha Newman agrees with Gilson, she observes that in the Cistercian mystical literature there are a lot of parallelism between cultivation of the soul and the cultivation of the nature. Most of the monastic descriptions of nature use antic and biblical rhetorical elements, but it doesn't mean that the monastic authors absolutely secluded the perception of nature in their works.

Some of the analysed descriptions present the topography of the mentioned monastic landscape. The description of Clairvaux from the 13th century illustrates all the important details from the estates of the abbey. Maps and engravings from the 18th century corroborate the authenticity of the description.

The evidence of place names also verifies the strong relationship between monks and nature. Especially the high proportion of the tree names allude to this relationship. The white

monks exteriorized the heavenly harmony to their earthly lands, and with their place names they created a heavenly topography. In their mystical literature the white monks described heavenly landscapes with the elements of earthly landscapes. These commentaries are full of lively images of flowers, plants, gardening scenes, and agricultural motives. As a conclusion we can say that the symbolic and the realistic landscape representations don't exclude, but complete each other.

In the thesis we alluded to the mendicant orders' attitude towards nature, we made this outlook in order to call the attention to the continuity of the concept of nature in the Middle Ages. The bibliography also emphasised that the *vitae* of the 11th and 12th century hermits are precursors for Saint Francis's special affection towards the created world. The hermits treated the birds and smaller animals as gentle as Francis, they fed them, and they protected them from hunters, and from cold. The hermits also took as much delight in the beauties of the created world as Saint Francis.

Further research possibilities. The thesis presents the "new order's" attitude toward nature with the help of the narrative monastic sources. We compared the conclusions obtained from the hagiographical sources, chronicles, letters, and sermons with the results of the analysis of the place names. Analysing further groups of sources we could get a wider panorama on the topic. As in the frame of this work we couldn't pay special attention to the iconographical sources, the analysis of the Cistercian miniatures could enrich our knowledge about the monastic approach to nature.

In recent years the landscape and environmental archaeology has become a significant branch of the medieval studies in Britain, the mentioned discipline has established the notion of the monastic landscape, which can be applied successfully in the case of the Cistercians and the other "new orders" The comparison of the results of landscape archaeology and the narrative sources could raise new aspects of the topic. The work of Megan Cassidy-Welch about the Cistercian monasteries of Yorkshire offers an excellent example for this kind of interdisciplinary research of the monastic life. The further analyses of the place names could lead to new conclusions, especially the names of the granges and the estates could supply results, because they were much more connected to the natural environment than the abbeys. Several cases maps, engravings and military survey maps from the early modern period show the medieval aspect of the landscape, consequently they serve as an excellent group of

sources. Among the huge quantity of charters the perambulations of boards there are the most useful sources in the researching of the medieval landscape.