

## 66.05 The founding of Fontevrault and the status of brethren

Evelyn Baker

The double order of Fontevrault was founded by the Blessed Robert of Abrisel in Brittany, born there in about 1047. He studied in Paris, became chancellor of the University of Paris, was ordained, and became vicar-general at Rennes in 1089. At the invitation of Bishop Sylvester of Gerch he set about reforming the See; in so doing he made enemies and had to flee when the bishop died, becoming a hermit in Craon Forest in 1095. His reputation was such that he was not allowed to live the solitary life and in 1096 he founded the monastery of La Roe for the many disciples attracted to him. That same year he was appointed Preacher by Pope Urban II and attracted huge crowds.

In 1099 he founded the double Benedictine monastery of Fontevrault under an abbess for the many postulants that La Roe could not accommodate; Robert had attracted nearly 3000 would-be religious. Bishop Baldric of Dol insisted that no one was refused admission to these two settlements, each harbouring up to 300 women. All were welcome: the poor, feeble, sinners, lepers, the helpless, and fallen women. The female side of Fontevrault was dedicated to St Mary Magdalene. The woman who supervised the whole of this enormous gathering of religious was Hersende de Montsoreau of Champagne; this strong-minded woman was succeeded as abbess by Petronilla de Chemille from 1115 to 1149, and then from 1149 to 1155 by Isabella of Anjou, the widow of William Audelin, Henry I's only legitimate son. Kerr believes that Isabella may have advised Henry over his claim to the throne of England, and it may have been Henry's idea to colonise houses of Fontevrault here (Kerr 1999, 60). Given the example of such women of high birth, others flocked to join, and the abbey became wealthy. However, by the end of the 12th century the nuns were gaining their livelihood through manual work and the abbey was in debt.

Houses were founded by the dominant ladies of the region for female contemplatives with secondary communities of priests and lay brothers attached. The brethren who came to England to convert the existing manorial estate of Leighton into a monastic grange were dedicated to serving the abbess and her nuns, and would strive to maximise its profits to be sent back to the mother house. The prior, in his role as procurator, although dealing with the highest level of society in the land, was also the servant of the abbess.

In the early days the abbess was never chosen from among those who had been brought up in the abbey, but from among those who had experience in the world. This eminently sensible rule is thought to have come from Petronilla. The Rule was drawn up by Robert in 1116 or 1117, and was basically Benedictine. Fontevrault was different from the other double orders, both male and female, being Benedictine; necessarily, it had to cover the requirements of running a double order. Basic to this was the strict separation of the sexes; even a dying nun had to be carried into the church to receive the last sacraments to avoid male intrusion into the nuns' living quarters. The male monastery of St Jean de l'Habit was placed at some distance from the Grand Moustie, the nuns' convent, the hospital and lazaretto of St Lazare and the Madeleine for penitent women. With the Gilbertines the male house followed the rule of St Augustine and the head of the Order was the Master or Prior of All, not attached to any one house, but with absolute power over all. The Brigittines were all under the *Regular Salvatoris*, an adaptation of the Augustinian rule; each house was independent under an abbess, but the nuns were forbidden to interfere with spiritual matters with the priests. In a world that was male-dominated, even misogynist, this arrangement of rule by women over men was truly remarkable; the male side of

the Order was, in all things except for priesthood, subservient to the abbess; early Anglo-Saxon monasteries were well known for this feature and contemporary chroniclers did not think it worthy of mention (Kerr 1999, 60). While this caused resentment and rebellion in later years, particularly in the 15th century, the abbess wielded enormous power. With special royal protection she was reliant only on the king and his council for civil matters and on the pope and his *curia* for spiritual guidance. In terms of running the monastery, administration covered both male and female needs equally, though the separation of the sexes meant that even the scraps from the monks' tables were 'carried to the nuns' door and there given to the poor'. The male side could not receive a postulant without the permission of the abbess, and a fugitive but penitent monk 'shall ask pardon of the Abbess and through her regain the fellowship of the brethren'. As we can see from the documents, it was the abbess and her convent who took all the decisions. The monks were men

who of their own free will have promised to serve the nuns till death in the bonds of obedience, and that too with the reverence of due subjection ... they shall lead a common conventual life with no property of their own, content with what the nuns shall confer upon them.

#### Abbesses of Fontevrault up to 1477

1. 1115–49: Pétronille de Chemillé
2. 1149–55: Mathilde d'Anjou. Fille de Foulques V d'Anjou et Erembourge du Maine (daughter-in-law of Henry I)
3. 1155–80: Audeburge de Haute-Bruyère
4. 1180–89: Gilles ou Gillette
5. 1189–94: Mathilde II de Flandre
6. 1194–1207: Mathilde III de Bohême
7. 1207–08: Marie de Champagne (ou de Bourgogne)
8. 1208–09: Ala ou Alix de Bourbon
9. 1209–18: Alix de Champagne
10. 1218–28: Berthe
11. 1228–44: Adèle ou Alix de Bretagne
12. 1244–65: Mabile de la Ferté (ou de Blois)
13. 1265–76: Jeanne de Dreux (de Brenne)
14. 1276–84: Isabeau Davoir
15. 1284–1304: Marguerite de Pocey
16. 1304–42: Aliénor de Bretagne. Fille du duc Jean II de Bretagne
17. 1342–49: Isabeau de Valois. Fille de Charles de Valois et demi-sœur du roi Philippe VI de France
18. 1349–53: Théophanie de Chambon
19. 1353–73: Jeanne de Mangey
20. 1373: Adélaïde de Ventadour

**21.1373-93: Éléonore ou Aliénor de Parthenay**

**22.1393-1431: Blanche d'Harcourt**

**23.1431-51: Marie d'Harcourt 1431-34 (schisme abbatial): Marguerite de Beaufort de Montmorency, abbesse non reconnue par le pape**

**24.1451-57: Marie de Montmorency**

**25.1457-77: Marie de Bretagne, sœur du duc François II et cousine du futur Louis XII**