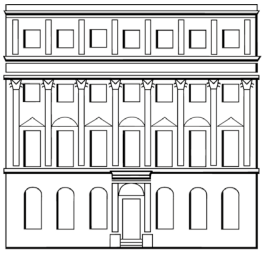

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ARTICLE

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EFFICIENT AND WISE? ELDERLY ABBOTS IN ENGLISH BENEDICTINE MONASTERIES IN THE FOURTEENTH AND FIFTEENTH CENTURIES: THE CASE OF ST ALBANS ABBEY

ÉLISA MANTIENNE

I. Introduction

From May 1366 onwards, Thomas de la Mare, abbot of St Albans, regularly excused himself from Parliament due to infirmity caused by illness and old age.[1] He was then in his fifties, weakened by the plague he had contracted at the beginning of the 1360s.[2] His case is exceptional because his chancery kept writing such letters for thirty years until his death at the age of 87 in 1396.[3] During all these years, St Albans Abbey, one of the biggest monasteries in England, had an abbot who felt old and ill enough to use it as an excuse not to go to Parliament. It was not always the case that old age was associated with illness and incapacity; indeed, it cannot be summarized solely as a bodily condition as it is also a 'social and behavioral syndrome', dependent not only on one's physical condition, but also on the perceptions held by the person in question and their entourage.[4]

Much has been written in historiography about the perception of old age and cycles of life in the Middle Ages, and how it varied

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[1] The National Archives, Kew (hereafter TNA), SC 10/29 1423, proxy letter from St Albans Abbey, 26 Apr. 1366; Phil Bradford and Alison McHardy (eds.), *Proctors for Parliament: Clergy, Community and Politics,* c.*1248–1539*, 2 vols. (Woodbridge, 2017–18).

[2] James G. Clark (ed.) and David Preest (trans.), *The Deeds of the Abbots of St Albans: Gesta abbatum monasterii Sancti Albani* (Woodbridge, 2019), 913.

[3] David M. Smith, Vera C. M. London, David Knowles, et al. (eds.), *The Heads of Religious Houses: England and Wales* (Cambridge, 2001–8), vol. iii: *1377–1540* (2008), 62–3.

[4] Joel T. Rosenthal, *Old Age in Late Medieval England* (Philadelphia, 1996), 1.

depending on social groups, the period concerned, and the context.[5] Whereas legally old age often started between 60 and 70, this general tendency must be juxtaposed with demographic studies and the specificities of some professions, or the fulfilment of duties for a community, such as in monastic or royal offices.[6] For instance, abbots were in most cases elected in their forties or fifties.[7] This could seem a rather advanced age when we consider that in premodern England, the average life expectancy of a 25-year-old was around 50 to 55.[8] Thanks to better living conditions, however, and because they often lived apart from the community, a privilege that decreased the risk of infection during epidemics, abbots had a higher life expectancy than the rest of the community. Hence, there were two kinds of 'elderly abbots': first, those who had been elected as young, mid-career monks and who outlived the rest of the community, and second, abbots elected in their old age. Compared to the general population of England, 50 was an advanced age, but among abbots—provided they were healthy—it was not considered particularly old.

The literature on the demographic and social aspects of old age is extensive, but elderly members of the church have not received as much attention as they deserve, especially members of monastic communities.[9] In Benedictine houses, arrangements for the care of ill and

[5] See e.g. Shulamith Shahar, *Growing Old in the Middle Ages*: '*Winter Clothes us in Shadow and Pain*' (London, 1997), 12–35; Isabelle Cochelin and Karen Smyth (eds.), *Medieval Life Cycles: Continuity and Change* (Turnhout, 2013).

[6] For broader reflections on this subject, see Pat Thane, *Old Age in English History: Past Experiences, Present Issues* (Oxford, 2000), 24–7.

[7] Martin Heale, *The Abbots and Priors of Late Medieval and Reformation England* (Oxford, 2016), 45–8.

[8] See Shahar, *Growing Old*, 32 (on the general population); Alan J. Piper, 'The Monks of Durham and Patterns of Activity in Old Age', in Caroline M. Barron and Jenny Stratford (eds.), *The Church and Learning in Later Medieval Society: Essays in Honour of R. B. Dobson* (Donington, 2002), 51–63; John Hatcher, Alan J. Piper, and David Stone, 'Monastic Mortality: Durham Priory, 1395–1529', *Economic History Review,* 59/4 (2006), 667–87; and Barbara Harvey, *Living and Dying in England, 1100–1540: The Monastic Experience* (Oxford, 1993), 127–9, 142–4.

[9] On priests and clerics, see Kirsi Salonen, 'What Happened to Aged Priests in the Late Middle Ages?', in Christian Krötzl and Katariina Mustakallio (eds.), *On Old Age: Approaching Death in Antiquity and the Middle Ages* (Turnhout,

elderly monks were recorded in customaries, statutes of the order, or chapter ordinances; they exempted the ill and infirm from fulfilling their duties and allocated them a special place, often in the infirmary.[10] When too old or too ill to rule, abbots and priors enjoyed similar benefits. Some of them were allowed to resign, as has been discussed in studies of Benedictine and Cistercian communities.[11] Although old age does not necessarily go hand in hand with disease, disability, and senility, the probability of such problems arising increases with age. This article is a study of old age as a time of greater risk of abbatial incapacity. It sheds light on how religious communities assessed such situations, and how they were handled when the time came.

The rich documentation available for the Benedictine community of St Albans makes it a pertinent case study for the following reasons. Part one of this article discusses the narratives and archival traces that survive from this major English house, which offer evidence of what it meant for a monastery to have an elderly abbot. This was the

2011), 183–96 and Nicholas Orme, 'Sufferings of the Clergy: Illness and Old Age in Exeter Diocese, 1300–1540', in Margaret Pelling and Richard M. Smith (eds.), *Life, Death and the Elderly: Historical Perspectives* (London, 1991), 52–61.

[10] See e.g. William Abel Pantin, *Documents Illustrating the Activities of the General and Provincial Chapters of the English Black Monks 1215–1540*, 3 vols. (London, 1931–7), vol. i. 81–2, vol. ii. 48–9, 86; Richard B. Dobson, *Durham Priory, 1400–1450* (Cambridge, 1973), 78; Harvey, *Living and Dying*, 87–88; Riccardo Cristiani, 'Integration and Marginalization: Dealing with the Sick in Eleventh-Century Cluny', in Susan Boynton and Isabelle Cochelin (eds.), *From Dead of Night to End of the Day: The Medieval Customs of Cluny* (Turnhout, 2005), 287–95, at 292–3; and Joan Greatrex, *The English Benedictine Cathedral Priories: Rule and Practice,* c.*1270–1420* (Oxford, 2011), e.g. 290–2 on episcopal visitation as an occasion to remind the priors of cathedral priories of their duties by the sick. For a summary of the issue, see Elma Brenner, 'The Medical Role of Monasteries in the Latin West, *c.*1050–1300', in Alison I. Beach and Isabelle Cochelin (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Medieval Monasticism in the Latin West* (Cambridge, 2020), 865–81.

[11] Greatrex, *The English Benedictine Cathedral Priories,* 297–8; Martin Heale, '"For the Solace of their Advanced Years": The Retirement of Monastic Superiors in Late Medieval England', *Journal of Medieval Monastic Studies*, 8 (2019), 143–67; id., *Abbots and Priors*, 98–9; Dobson, *Durham Priory*, 110–13; and Amelia Kennedy, '"Do Not Relinquish your Offspring": Changing Cistercian Attitudes Toward Older Abbots and Abbatial Retirement in High Medieval Europe', *Radical History Review,* 139 (2021), 123–44.

case at St Albans for most of the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. Though not framed as a weakness in monastic discourses, old age represented a time of potential problems for the monastery. The second part addresses one such problem: old age is often accompanied by illness and senility, and both these weaknesses could be dangerous if they were incorrectly handled by the monastic superior and his entourage. The third part argues that—at least in the larger monasteries—the problem raised by an abbot's illness and old age was not so much the lack of a supervisor to ensure the smooth running of the abbey, but the lack of a representative to defend its interests.

II. Old Age among Abbots in St Albans: Discourses and Facts

St Albans Abbey had been a great centre of chronicle-writing since the time of Roger of Wendover and Matthew Paris in the thirteenth century. During the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, two major figures emerge: the precentor Thomas Walsingham and the abbot John Whethamstede.[12] Some testimonies of life in the community of St Albans and on the abbots survive in the historiographical works of these authors, and in those of other less well-known or anonymous monks. The scarce references to the advanced age of the abbots in these narratives show that it was not openly addressed as a problem in the domestic texts.

Thomas de La Mare, John Moot, John Whethamstede: Three elderly abbots

Thomas de la Mare was around 40 at the time of his election in 1349, but, as mentioned in the introduction, he was ill and quickly came to be presented as old in the sources.[13] One can only guess at John

[12] C. Esther Hodge, 'The Abbey of St Albans under John of Whethamstede' (Ph.D. thesis, University of Manchester, 1933); Richard Vaughan, *Matthew Paris* (Cambridge, 1958); James G. Clark, *A Monastic Renaissance at St Albans: Thomas Walsingham and his Circle, c.1350–1440* (Oxford, 2004).

[13] James G. Clark, 'Mare, Thomas de la (*c.*1309–1396), abbot of St Albans', in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004–), online edition accessed 30 Oct. 2021 (hereafter *ODNB*).

Moot's age when he replaced de la Mare in 1396 and died of pleurisy in 1401.[14] By the time he was elected, he had occupied various offices in the monastery over the previous forty years, which means he could have been 60, if not older. He had been cellarer during the 1350s, before assuming the office of prior from the 1360s.[15] The account of his election does not mention his age, only his great experience in spiritual and temporal matters.[16] After his death, two young abbots were elected: William Heyworth, who resigned in 1420 to become bishop of Coventry and Lichfield, and his successor John Whethamstede, who was not yet 30 at the time of his election. He resigned in 1440. When his second abbacy began in 1452, he was around 60, and he ruled the monastery until his death in 1465.[17]

In each of these examples, old age was probably perceived in very different ways. The age and health of John Moot are not mentioned in the monastic sources we have except for his last and sudden illness, whereas Thomas de la Mare had been seriously ill for thirty years—his poor health is a leitmotiv in the chronicle of his abbacy—and John Whethamstede was infirm for the last decade of his second abbacy and regularly referred to his own physical condition in his register.[18] However, he does not explicitly allude to the problems his age raised for the monastery, which is only logical if we consider that he was the author of the narrative. The case of the *Deeds of*

[14] Henry T. Riley (ed.), *Gesta abbatum monasterii S. Albani*, 3 vols. (London, 1867–9), iii. 451. The translation of the *Gesta abbatum* by David Preest in *Deeds of the Abbots* does not cover John Moot's abbacy.

[15] Ada Levett, *Studies in Manorial History* (Oxford, 1938), 167–8. The proxy letters from series SC 10 in the National Archives further narrow down the dates given by Levett, as John Moot is mentioned as prior in the letter dated May 1366 (SC 10/29 1423). It is possible that his nomination as prior followed the deterioration of Thomas de la Mare's health after the Second Pestilence at the beginning of the 1360s.

[16] Riley (ed.), *Gesta abbatum*, iii. 432.

[17] James G. Clark, 'Whethamstede [Bostock], John (*c.*1392–1465), scholar and abbot of St Albans', in *ODNB*; Smith (ed.), *Heads of Religious Houses*, 63.

[18] Henry T. Riley (ed.), *Registra quorundam abbatum monasterii S. Albani, qui saeculo XVmo floruere*, 2 vols. (London, 1872–3), i. 322, 420, 473. John Whethamstede personally oversaw the writing of the various accounts of his abbacies; see David R. Howlett, 'Studies in the Works of John Whethamstede' (Ph.D. thesis, University of Oxford, 1975).

the Abbots of St Albans is more complicated. This domestic chronicle was compiled from various other chronicles by Thomas Walsingham during Thomas de la Mare's abbacy. Walsingham's text ends in 1381, but the chronicle was taken up by other monks, who compiled a continuation of de la Mare's abbacy along with narratives about his successors John Moot and William Heyworth.[19] Though the authors of the continuation are generally full of praise for Thomas de la Mare, both he and John Moot are occasionally criticized in these texts. Had their old age been a real problem for the monastery, therefore, the chroniclers would have probably discussed it more than they did.[20]

Even though elderly abbots were a reality in St Albans, few documents produced at the abbey during this time mention the subject. Neither the rule of St Benedict nor other Benedictine constitutions contain much about the question of old monks; the rule of Benedict merely states that it may be adapted to children and aged monks (chapter 37).[21] In St Albans, an ordinance was passed under Abbot Roger de Norton (in office 1263–91) so that old priors who 'could not any longer properly attend to their spiritual and temporal duties should be called back to live in their mother house, like knights who had done their service'.[22] Decades later, the constitutions of Thomas de la Mare mentioned the question of age in a very different context: he forbade elderly monks from studying philosophy in Oxford because they were less able to learn:

> Likewise, although old age flourishes in wisdom and is venerable, as [old people] are however generally more obtuse than

[19] Thomas Walsingham compiled the *Deeds* from the abbacy of Hugh de Eversden until the death of Thomas de la Mare. The attribution of the continuation of de la Mare's life is uncertain. James G. Clark, 'Thomas Walsingham Reconsidered: Books and Learning at Late-Medieval St. Albans', *Speculum*, 77/3 (2002), 832–60, at 844–6; Clark (ed.) and Preest (trans.), *Deeds of the Abbots*, 16–21, 759–931.

[20] The continuation has a more 'partisan tone' than the text by Thomas de la Mare (Clark (ed.) and Preest (trans.), *Deeds of the Abbots*, 16), but its author is prepared to 'record his failures as well' (ibid. 925). These failures are not attributed to old age; see Riley (ed.), *Gesta abbatum*, iii. 416–19.

[21] Shahar, *Growing Old*, 103–5.

[22] Clark (ed.) and Preest (trans.), *Deeds of the Abbots*, 527–8.

> the young in intellectual matters, and less able when it comes to the study of philosophy . . . we decide that in the future, men of great age will not be sent to the *Studium* to study philosophy.[23]

More important than this diminished capacity for learning, an elderly abbot brought with him the prospect of an abbatial vacancy. The problems of these periods of transition between two abbots are discussed at length in the domestic narratives, but did not prevent the monks from taking the risk of electing old men to lead the community. In 1235, for example, John de Hertford could not travel to Rome to have the pope confirm his recent election in person 'because of his old age and bodily weakness and the dangers of the journeys'.[24] In an addition to Matthew Paris's contemporary chronicle, the fourteenth-century chronicler Thomas Walsingham describes how John de Hertford was mocked in Hertford and St Albans for 'riding like an old man' on his way to the monastery: '"Look at that!" they cried. "That old man, who is already worn out, thinks he will be abbot."'[25] Did Walsingham add this part to Matthew Paris's narrative because of a particular interest in the question of the abbot's age? The answer is unclear; the story aims to underscore de Hertford's virtue, and the question of old age is ancillary to the chronicler's purpose. The abbot's age is not mentioned again in the narrative, and he is praised for his abbacy, which lasted twenty-eight years. However, such a long term of office was the exception, not the rule. Before we consider the possible difficulties that could arise under the rule of an elderly abbot, we must first examine the risk of recurring vacancies.

[23] Riley (ed.), *Gesta abbatum*, ii. 463: 'Item, cum licet se sapientia vigeat, et venerabilis sit senectus, sunt tamen communiter ingenii obtusioris quam juvenes, et at studendum in philosophicis minus apti . . . statuimus ut futuris temporibus senes in aetate provecti pro philosophia addiscenda ad Studium non mittantur.' (Translation my own; this passage is not translated in Clark (ed.) and Preest (trans.), *Deeds of the Abbots*.)

[24] Clark (ed.) and Preest (trans.), *Deeds of the Abbots,* 437. He was probably 'past middle age' at the time of his election (ibid. 437 n. 18). See also Riley (ed.), *Gesta abbatum*, i. 312.

[25] Clark (ed.) and Preest (trans.), *Deeds of the Abbots*, 446; Richard Vaughan, 'The Election of Abbots at St Albans in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries', *Proceedings of the Cambridge Antiquarian Society*, 47 (1954), 1–12, at 3.

Abbatial vacancy

Due to John Moot's advanced age at the time of his election in 1396, the abbatial seat became empty again just five years later, in 1401. This was a burden for the monastery. During the interregnum, numerous financial levies were taken from the abbey, not least because permission to hold an election (*congé d'élire*) had to be obtained from the king, just as the new abbot needed to be confirmed by the pope.[26] The journey to Rome was a source of considerable expense, and the monastery was deprived of its leader for several weeks.[27] The abbots tried to limit these burdens: Thomas de la Mare secured an important charter from the king that lessened the consequences of vacancy for the monastery by converting the large fees paid to the crown during vacancies into a regular annual sum. The charter also stated that 'the prior and the convent should have and hold the tenure of the abbey, that is, of all its temporalities', and gave the prior and the monks full powers of administration over the monastery (with some exceptions).[28] De la Mare obtained from the pope the privilege of not having to travel to Rome to confirm his election (for which the

[26] Vaughan, 'The Election of Abbots at St Albans', 5–8.

[27] John de Berkhamsted was the first newly elected abbot of St Albans to travel to Rome in 1290; the previous abbots sent proctors instead. This obligation for abbots of exempt houses to travel to Rome dated back to the Fourth Lateran Council; see ibid. 7. On the expenses incurred by Thomas de la Mare, see Clark (ed.) and Preest (trans.), *Deeds of the Abbots,* 776–7.

[28] Quoted from ibid. 887; see also *Calendar of the Patent Rolls Preserved in the Public Record Office*, pt. v: *Richard II*, 6 vols. (London, 1895–1909), vol. vi: *1396–1399* (1909), 545. Thomas Walsingham considered the charter important enough to reproduce its whole content in the general chronicles; see Wendy Childs, John Taylor, and Leslie Watkiss (eds.), *The St Albans Chronicle: The* Chronica Maiora *of Thomas Walsingham*, 2 vols. (Oxford, 2003–11), i. 378–81. The charter is not referred to in the main version of the *Deeds of the Abbots*, and only the continuation mentions the commutation of the thousand marks payable for each vacancy to a yearly payment of fifty marks. Perhaps we can explain this lack of interest through the conditions surrounding the chronicle's compilation. The *Deeds of the Abbots* stops with the narrative of the 1381 revolt, so the compiler may have chosen to omit certain details from the year 1380 in favour of narrating at length the spectacular events that happened in the monastery and its vicinity.

monastery had to pay the pope the annual sum of twenty marks).[29] Thanks to this, the succession of vacancies in 1396–1401 may have been less expensive for the monastery.

Even with these precautions, however, the new abbot had to spend a great deal on his installation, as implied in this passage from the chronicle of William Heyworth's abbacy: 'to avoid the costs incurred by newly appointed dignitaries, he left the monastery for some time'.[30] Moreover, there was always a risk that external parties would try to take advantage of gaps in abbatial power at the expense of the abbey. During Thomas de la Mare's illness, when there was a risk that the abbatial seat would fall vacant, rumours circulated that the pope intended to appoint someone close to the Roman Curia as head of the monastery; and fifty years later, some royal servants tried to take advantage of the vacancy preceding John Whethamstede's second election.[31]

Reasons to elect an elderly abbot

Despite the burdens that the death of an abbot and the subsequent vacancy of power placed on a monastery, it is possible that the charters and privileges bought by Thomas de la Mare removed any potential prejudices against the election of John Moot, an experienced but already old man. His extensive experience is presented as an asset, and a prior was made abbot in one third of the elections held in thirteenth and fourteenth-century St Albans.[32] Forty years later, when the monks chose to elect another old man (though probably not quite

[29] Clark (ed.) and Preest (trans.), *Deeds of the Abbots,* 887; quoted in Riley (ed.), *Registra*, i. 78.

[30] Riley (ed.), *Gesta abbatum*, iii. 494: 'ad evitandum sumptus qui noviter in dignitate constitutis evenire solent, monasterium per aliquod tempus deseruit.' (Translation my own.)

[31] Clark (ed.) and Preest (trans.), *Deeds of the Abbots,* 929: 'This was done to avoid what usually happens when death is discovered to be imminent, namely even the good people making light of the matter, and the bad ones too freely making havoc of the goods and the rights of the monastery.' See also Riley (ed.), *Registra*, i. 78.

[32] Riley (ed.), *Gesta abbatum*, iii. 432; Clark (ed.) and Preest (trans.), *Deeds of the Abbots*, 928–9; Vaughan, 'Election of Abbots at St Albans', 5.

as old as John Moot), they knew that he had experience not only as obedientiary, but also as an abbot. Even so, there seem to have been discussions surrounding his election, as Whethamstede was not the only candidate.[33]

A comparison can be made with the patterns of election in another Benedictine establishment: the Cathedral Priory of Durham, whose priors were usually past 50 at the time of their election between 1351 and 1478.[34] One possible explanation is that the problems encountered during vacancies of the priory were smaller than those of an abbey. Unlike at St Albans, the election was not subject to papal or royal approval, leading to considerable savings in time and money. Moreover, the disputes between the bishop of Durham and the chapter at the beginning of the fourteenth century were laid to rest, and the powers of the custodian of the priory appointed by the bishop were limited during the fourteenth century. Even though interregna were a dangerous time for the community because of external pressure on their temporal and spiritual rights, electing a new head of the community seems to have been easier than at St Albans.[35] The prospect of regular vacancies was not such a problem, and so older, more experienced monks were chosen, whereas the monks of St Albans seem to have preferred younger abbots such as William Heyworth or John Whethamstede (during his first term) after two consecutive elderly abbots. However, the accounts of abbatial elections in St Albans give very few details concerning age as a reason for the choice of abbot. When age is mentioned, it is not generally commented upon, as we saw in the account of John de Hertford's election mentioned earlier. One exception is the description of John Whethamstede's second election, when the prior addressed the monks with these words:

> indeed, there is no equal battle, where the minority struggle against the majority . . . where the young start a fight against the old; or the ignorant against the wise. They are indeed older than you, they are wiser than you, they are three times more

[33] Riley (ed.), *Registra*, i. 5–9.

[34] Dobson, *Durham Priory*, 89 (incl. n. 2). The prior John Wessington (in office 1416–46) was 45 at the time of his election and appears to have been young compared to his predecessors and successors.

[35] Ibid. 82–4.

> than you, and therefore with all their strength, in matters concerning election, they are mightier than you.[36]

An old abbot was expected to have experience and wisdom, and this was particularly valued in 1452 after the disastrous abbacy of John Stoke.[37] Although the chroniclers of St Albans never explicitly present old age as a burden for the monastery, alternative views can be found in narratives from other Benedictine houses. Jocelin of Brakelond wrote about the discussions that took place before the election of Abbot Samson of Bury St Edmunds (1182). Every monk had a different opinion about what the profile of the next abbot should be, and age was taken into account: 'One man . . . was excluded from consideration by some of our senior monks on the grounds that he was a junior. The young monks said that the senior monks were elderly and infirm, and incapable of governing the abbey.'[38] In the end, however, an elderly monk was elected, and the chronicler stressed the experience and wisdom that come with old age.

III. Ill and Senile Abbots

Though not always well documented, disability and senility were probably common among abbots and priors. When they list the situations in which abbots were exempted from some of their duties, the thirteenth-century statutes of the Black Monks mention first physical infirmity and weakness, and then the needs of the monastery's administration.[39] Indeed, only a minority of monastic superiors

[36] Riley (ed.), *Registra*, i. 9: 'non enim est pugna aequalis, ubi pauci dimicant contra plures; satisque de raro subsequitur victoria, ubi juvenes certamen ineunt contra senes, aut inscii adversus sapientes. Sunt enim seniores vobis, sunt sapientiores vobis, sunt in triplo plures vobis, et propterea ex omnibus viribus, quod actum electionis, vobis potiores.' (Translation my own.)

[37] Clark, 'Whethamstede [Bostock], John'.

[38] Jocelin of Brakelond, *Chronicle of the Abbey of Bury St Edmunds*, trans. Diana Greenway and Jane Sayers (Oxford, 1989), 11–14 (quotation at 14). Samson was 47 at the time of his election (ibid. 36). See also Antonia Gransden, 'Samson (1135–1211), abbot of Bury St Edmunds', in *ODNB*.

[39] Pantin, *Chapters of the English Black Monks,* i. 9, 35, 65, 232.

resigned in late medieval England, and this decision was not an easy one. Attitudes to resignation could vary: there were no provisions for this in the Benedictine rule, and some monks considered it a neglect of duty. This point of view was shared by the chronicler Thomas Walsingham in St Albans, who disapproved of Abbot Thomas de la Mare's attempt to resign.[40] Hence, even a very weak abbot could stay in office for months or years, waiting for his death or a resignation. In the case of Prior John Wessington of Durham, for example, it took six years before he decided to resign. Wessington even discussed his health in his own letters; however, it was not presented as the immediate reason for the change in leadership of the priory, as suggested by Richard Dobson.[41] In St Albans, too, mentions of physical disability and senility are frequent, but rarely explicitly referred to as a problem by the chroniclers. Rather, they concur with the model of 'virtuous aging' that Amelia Kennedy describes in the case of Cistercian abbots, with the abbot providing both 'spiritual guidance' for the community and a model of virtuous suffering and death.[42]

Attitudes to illness

Old age proved to be more problematic when abbots were ill. Because of his health problems, Thomas de la Mare considered himself old from the beginning of his time as abbot. At the end of the 1350s he wanted to resign and serve God as a mere monk, 'asking for no more than any ordinary brother, despite his lengthy labours, his old age and his former high position'.[43] A few years later, during the Second Pestilence, he was prostrated by plague and suffered painful ulcers,

[40] Heale, '"For the Solace of their Advanced Years"', 144–5 n. 11 and 150. See also Kennedy, '"Do Not Relinquish your Offspring"', 128–33 on the situation in the twelfth-century Cistercian order. She argues here that the order's view on resignation evolved in the thirteenth century because of the 'growth and bureaucratization' of the order: incapable abbots were more frequently asked to step down (ibid. 126).

[41] Dobson, *Durham Priory*, 111.

[42] Kennedy, '"Do Not Relinquish your Offspring"', 126.

[43] Clark (ed.) and Preest (trans.), *Deeds of the Abbots*, 796; he was then around 50. He had already fallen ill during his journey to Rome at the time of his election; this may be a sequel to that episode.

fevers, and other symptoms.[44] His weakness increased considerably during the last seven years of his life: he was virtually paralysed, and his illness and infirmity are described at length and in detail using phrases borrowed from martyrdom narratives.[45] A similar level of detail is given by John Whethamstede when he describes his own bodily condition at the time of his second election: 'colic and stones, incontinence and kidney disease, old age and senility'.[46]

Both narratives convey the idea of strength, as the abbots' sufferings did not prevent them from carrying out their duties at least until the last few months of their lives, as in the case of de la Mare.[47] On the contrary, the author of the continuation of the *Deeds of the Abbots* even managed to find some advantages for the abbey: 'Even in his great weakness he [Thomas de la Mare] made his monks . . . still more loyal and hard-working . . . and all the nobles showed him greater goodwill than when he was in his usual vigorous health.'[48] It is difficult to know whether or how the abbot's state of health contributed to a change in the nobility's attitude towards him. Various noblemen visited the abbot on his deathbed, and numerous entries are recorded in the abbey's *Book of Benefactors* from the 1370s onwards.[49] As James Clark has shown, the abbacy of Thomas de la Mare coincided with an effort to attract lay people to join the abbey, especially noblemen, and the revival of the fraternity of St Albans was one way to achieve this.[50]

[44] Ibid. 913, 929.

[45] Ibid. 913, 928–31.

[46] Riley (ed.), *Registra*, i. 9: 'dictumque patrem, quamvis multum renitentem, multaque etiam, ac multifaria, videlicet *colicam et calculum, diampnem et nephresium, senectam et senium*, diemque dierum instantem novissimum, pro se in suam excusationem opponentem, nihilominus rursus eligerent' (I have translated the emphasized text above). On the uses of the word *senium* and the connection between age and mental decline, see Shahar, *Growing Old*, 16–18, 39.

[47] Clark (ed.) and Preest (trans.), *Deeds of the Abbots*, 913–15.

[48] Ibid. 922.

[49] Ibid.; British Library, Cotton MS Nero D VII, Benefactors' Book of St Albans Abbey; James. G. Clark, 'Monastic Confraternity in Medieval England: The Evidence from the St Albans Abbey *Liber Benefactorum*', in Emilia Jamroziak and Janet E. Burton (eds.), *Religious and Laity in Western Europe, 1000–1400: Interaction, Negotiation, and Power* (Turnhout, 2007), 315–31.

[50] James G. Clark, 'Selling the Holy Places: Monastic Efforts to Win Back the People in Fifteenth-Century England', in Tim J. Thornton (ed.), *Social Attitudes and Political Structures in the Fifteenth Century* (Stroud, 2001), 13–32.

However, this phenomenon cannot be directly attributed to Thomas de la Mare's old age as a number of motives led nobles to apply for the privilege of fraternity, such as the prestige of the monastery or their devotion to the abbey's patron saint.

Whereas direct proof of people's goodwill towards Thomas de la Mare is difficult to find, some individuals tried to take advantage of the abbot's illness to the detriment of the monastery. In the late 1370s a suit was brought by the monastery against John Chiltern, a neighbour and relative of Thomas de la Mare who had occupied a manor and some tenements that belonged to the monastery, but refused to pay the annual sum he owed.[51] In the narrative of this protracted conflict, which started in the 1360s, the outlawed Chiltern is said to have returned to England from exile in order to stage a counter-attack, taking advantage of the passage of time and the deaths of some important allies of the abbot.[52] De la Mare fought back, taking Chiltern to court over unpaid debt. To avoid having to pay, Chiltern lied and pretended that the abbot was dead. 'Although then greatly debilitated by sickness', Thomas de la Mare had to be carried on a litter to London to defend his case before the Common Bench and to prove that he was still alive.[53] This example stresses the strength and courage of an abbot who defended the rights of his community for as long as he physically could, and who carried out his duties despite his sufferings.[54] Similar remarks are to be found in John Whethamstede's register in 1456: the abbot was unwell, and his state of health seems to have worsened the following year. Nonetheless, he petitioned Henry VI to secure the donations the abbey received from the king. Unlike Thomas de la Mare, he did not travel to London in person, delegating the case first to the prior and then to another representative in the capital. However, he prosecuted the long and arduous matter until its end, just as de la Mare had done.[55]

[51] Clark (ed.) and Preest (trans.), *Deeds of the Abbots,* 808–12.

[52] Ibid. 811: 'So seeing that the abbot was now destitute of friends or overcome by old age, he determined to return.'

[53] Ibid.

[54] Ibid. 913.

[55] Riley (ed.), *Registra*, 256, 264–5. In this narrative, Whethamstede is determined to resolve the matter despite his old age and illness. In 1460, he was still active in defending the interests of the monastery; when letters were no longer sufficient, he sent representatives (ibid. 357–9).

The importance of virtue and good counsel

The chronicles of the abbacies of de la Mare and Whethamstede stress the strength and courage of the abbots, who are held up as examples for others.[56] Their virtue not only helped them to endure unbearable illness, but also prevented them from becoming a burden to the other monks even when they were ill or senile, like de la Mare. In his case, old age was indeed associated with the loss of intellectual capacities and a return to the 'state of innocence', to quote the author of the continuation of the *Deeds of the Abbots*:

> By now God's soldier had served his time. He was worn out, even senile, emptied of strength and feeling by his crippling illnesses, and indeed reduced to the state of innocence and therefore dependent on the care and advice of others.[57]

The second defence against illness and senility was good counsel, as the example of Thomas de la Mare underlines. The abbot was well cared for—in the first instance by God, but also by the monks and especially the prior, to whom he transferred the administration of the monastery when he became too old and too ill.[58] This is a crucial point: an old leader was not a problem as long as he was not senile (which does not seem to have been the case for de la Mare until 1394), and when senility came, he needed good counsel. However, the chronicler of John Moot's abbacy presents a less idyllic image of the transfer of power between de la Mare and Moot: Moot 'deceitfully stole the government and the tutelage from him [de la Mare] and from the whole monastery, and for two years, while he [de la Mare] was still alive, he [Moot] administrated in accordance with his own will.'[59] De la Mare's main counsellor therefore did not seem so selfless to some of the monks.

[56] Clark (ed.) and Preest (trans.), *Deeds of the Abbots,* 913*:* 'he continued tirelessly to care for the monastery which was his task and repeatedly by his example to stir up others, even the indolent, to do the same.'

[57] Ibid. 908.

[58] Ibid. 909.

[59] Riley (ed.), *Gesta abbatum,* iii. 463: 'regimen seu tutelam ipsius et totius monasterii cautelose surripuit, et pro libito suae voluntatis, ipso vivente, per biennium ministravit.' (Translation my own.)

The importance of virtue and good counsel in government more generally, and not only in case of monastic administration, is revealed in Thomas Walsingham's depiction of the last years of King Edward III (*r.* 1327–77). In the narrative for 1376–7, the old king is represented as weakened, senile, poorly advised by sycophants, and blinded by his love for his mistress Alice Perrers. The general impression is one of a glorious king who had been able to exercise self-control throughout most of his life, but who submitted to excess—notably carnal excess—in his final years.[60] The result for the chronicler is that 'as he moved towards old age and went down the sky to his sunset, the happy events were gradually driven out by his sins and grew fewer, while many unfortunate and unlucky disasters mushroomed in their place.'[61] There is a resemblance between monastic and royal power: in the hands of a senile man, power could result in catastrophe when the ruler and his entourage lacked virtue and were no longer able to restrain their passions. Next, we must go beyond the chronicles and examine the archives in order to see the reality of life at a monastery under the control of an old and possibly senile abbot.

IV. Administering the Monastery under an Incapable Abbot

When the head of a religious house was no longer able to carry out his duties, the situation could be handled in various ways, and the abbot or prior in question could be allowed (or asked) to resign. Episcopal visitations were occasions when problems in the administration of a community could be pointed out; when these problems were attributed to the inability of the abbot, bishops could act as decision-makers.[62] In some other cases, coadjutors could be appointed. St Albans is a case apart: it belonged to the category of monasteries exempted from the bishop's jurisdiction. No episcopal visitation could remark on the

[60] James G. Clark (ed.) and David Preest (trans.), *The* Chronica Maiora *of Thomas Walsingham, 1376–1422* (Woodbridge, 2005), 32–3. Ibid. 33.

[62] See e.g. Greatrex, *The English Benedictine Cathedral Priories*, 298 on the resignation of the archbishop of Ely during a visitation by Archbishop Arundel in 1401. In the Benedictine order, the visitations made by other abbots of the order were also an occasion to point out failings.

problems raised by the administration of an incapable abbot.[63] In this case, a progressive internal delegation of power took place informally at first, before being made official by privileges acquired directly from the pope and the king. These internal arrangements were not enough to prevent the consequences that the long-term absence of the abbot could have for the community and for the monastery's place in the realm.

The delegation of power

In the largest houses, the abbot was the master of a community whose daily administration was handled by numerous lay and monastic officers. Some of these were obedientiaries, who were granted manors to cover the costs of their office.[64] They were chosen by the abbot, who symbolically gave them the keys of their office. So much for the theory; in practice, officers operated largely independently, had their own staff, and were accountable to the whole chapter. The illness or senility of the abbot does not therefore seem to have been a major problem for the running of the community. Moreover, even when they were healthy, abbots were often away, whether taking care of the business of the monastery, attending royal or ecclesiastical convocations, or visiting one of their manors.[65]

In case of the death, illness, or absence of the abbot, the prior of the monastery (or the subprior in case of a priory) generally took the lead and administered the community.[66] What might have started out as a temporary solution turned into a long-term situation during Thomas de la Mare's abbacy. His infirmity lasted for decades, meaning that

[63] On external control of a religious house, see e.g. Alastair Dobie, *Accounting at Durham Cathedral Priory*: *Management and Control of a Major Ecclesiastical Corporation, 1083–1539* (Basingstoke, 2015).

[64] Riley (ed.), *Gesta abbatum,* iii. 425, 480. On Benedictine officers and obedientiaries, see Greatrex, *The English Benedictine Cathedral Priories*, 160–236; Barbara Harvey, *The Obedientiaries of Westminster Abbey and their Financial Records,* c.*1275–1540* (Woodbridge, 2002); and Dobie, *Accounting at Durham Cathedral Priory*, 28.

[65] David Knowles, *The Religious Orders in England*, 3 vols. (Cambridge, 1948–59), vol. ii: *The End of the Middle Ages* (1955), 252–3; Heale, *Abbots and Priors*, 59–61, 155 ff.

[66] Dobson, *Durham Priory*, 83.

the power and influence of Prior John Moot grew considerably, and the continuation of the *Deeds of the Abbots* explicitly describes some of the privileges and possessions restored under de la Mare's abbacy through the prior's actions.[67] The same chronicler explains that when de la Mare became too ill,

> he handed over, according to his wishes formed long ago in the days of his health, the temporal and the spiritual care of the monastery, with the approval and at the urging of the monks, to his pupil, the prior John Moot, who was the leading candidate because of his experience and hard work in most of the internal and external major offices.[68]

This transition was probably made easier by an important privilege obtained from Pope Boniface IX in 1394, during de la Mare's infirmity.[69] It stated that when abbots of St Albans were ill or absent, priors could absolve the monks, admit novices, and exercise the abbot's full jurisdiction over spiritual and temporal matters, among other things. This privilege, obtained two years before de la Mare's death, cost more than a thousand marks. The trouble and expense gone to in order to obtain such a right implies that abbatial illness and senility had been a problem at times in the past. Indeed, some of the abbot's powers could not easily be transferred to others; there were both legal and tacit limits to the delegation of his authority. De la Mare was not expected to resign, so other expedients had to be found. This expansion of the prior's role in cases of abbatial incapacity was at first a temporary answer to the particular situation of Abbot de la Mare, but it became permanent with this papal document.

However, the office of prior was not the only one to be affected by the abbot's situation. The register of Thomas de la Mare, compiled by

[67] Clark (ed.) and Preest (trans.), *Deeds of the Abbots*, 909 (manor of Westwick–Gorham).

[68] Ibid. 928–9. The date of this delegation of power is not precisely known. It might have been after 1394, or perhaps in the very last weeks of de la Mare's life. See also Riley (ed.), *Gesta abbatum,* iii. 463.

[69] William Henry Bliss, J. A. Twemlow, Michael J. Haren, et al. (eds.), *Calendar of Entries in the Papal Registers relating to Great Britain and Ireland: Papal Letters*, 20 vols. (London and Dublin, 1893–), vol. iv: *1362–1404* (1902), 500 (2 Oct. 1394).

his chaplain William Wintershill, bears witness to the many occasions on which abbots could designate proxies, name attorneys, and appoint procurators.[70] Templates of proctors' letters were copied into the register for specific situations in which the abbot could not complete his duties: collecting taxes, attending assemblies, and so on. Among all these many formularies, the 'parliamentary proxy' can be singled out.[71] This excuses the abbot from attending Parliament and gives the names of three people (in this case a monk, a clerk, and a layman) designated to attend in place of the abbot, who was summoned by the king to sit in this assembly as a Lord Spiritual.[72] The documents concerning St Albans in the National Archives series SC 10 indicate that Thomas de la Mare used these letters on a regular basis. As mentioned in the introduction, from May 1366 he sent letters excusing his absence due to illness and infirmity: 'restrained because of numerous weaknesses in my body and inconveniences that come with old age and that are growing daily, I am unable to attend in person.'[73] This became a standard formulation and was copied in most of the letters sent after 1366.[74]

[70] Cambridge University Library, Ms. Ee 4 20. Other letters of proxy can be found in British Library, Harley MS 602 (known as the register of John Moot). On the question of representation, see Anton-Hermann Chroust, 'Legal Profession during the Middle Ages: The Emergence of the English Lawyer Prior to 1400', *Notre Dame Law Review,* 32/1 (1956), 85–140; Laurent Mayali, 'Procureurs et représentation en droit canonique médiéval', *Mélanges de l'école française de Rome: Moyen Âge*, 114/1 (2002), 41–57.

[71] Cambridge University Library, Ms. Ee 4 20, fo. 93r.

[72] On these letters and how they were used, see Bradford and McHardy (eds.), *Proctors for Parliament*.

[73] TNA, SC 10/29 1423: 'multiplicibus corporis mei debilitatibus et incomodis michi ex senio contingentibus et in dies excrescentibus detentus personaliter interesse nequeo.' (Translation my own.) Proxy letters from Abbot de la Mare survive for the parliaments of 1352, 1353, 1354, 1355, 1362, 1366, 1371, 1372 (Feb.), 1373, 1377 (Jan. and Oct.), 1378, 1379, 1380 (Jan.), 1382, 1383 (Oct.), 1384 (Nov.), 1385, 1386, 1388 (Feb.), 1391, 1393, 1394, and 1395 (TNA, SC 10/25 1246; 10/26 1266, 1281; 10/27 1310; 10/28 1376; 10/29 1423, 1436; 10/30 1471; 10/31 1506, 1536; 10/32 1571B, 1589, 1595; 10/33 1632; 10/34 1697; 10/35 1712, 1732; 10/36 1761, 1780, 1799; 10/37 1849; 10/38 1889; and 10/39 1903, 1938).

[74] The register of Abbot de la Mare was compiled at the end of the 1380s, and the letter copied in it as a template is held in the National Archives, SC 10/36 1761 (parliament of 1385), with an explanation that the same phrasing would be used in subsequent letters.

The consequences of these absences are difficult to prove. As was the case for many religious houses whose superiors could not or did not want to attend Parliament, the monastery was still represented by many reliable proctors.[75] Most of them were chosen from the abbey's cellarers, priors, and lay officers.[76] However, it is possible that de la Mare's long illness resulted in a loss of prestige for the monastery, or at least a reduction in importance compared to other English houses. When de la Mare's successor attended Parliament for the first time in 1397, his precedence over the other abbots had been 'usurped' by the abbot of Westminster 'because of the absence for more than a decade of Lord Thomas, the last abbot, owing to bad health, infirmity, and old age.'[77] John Moot had to fight to recover this lost status, and it seems that he attended every parliamentary session until the end of his own abbacy. Despite his efforts, this privilege had been eroded under his predecessor and was lost by his successor William Heyworth.[78] This was not a problem faced by all monasteries, however; it was specific to St Albans because of its coveted place in the institution of Parliament and the authority claimed by its abbots.

A fragile authority outside the monastery?

Although the internal administration of the monastery could be managed despite the physical or intellectual incapacity of the abbot, there

[75] Bradford and McHardy (eds.), *Proctors for Parliament*.

[76] Élisa Mantienne, 'Auteurs, compilateurs, administrateurs: Les moines de Saint-Albans et le pouvoir, années 1350–années 1440' (Ph.D. thesis, Université de Lorraine, 2019), 52–4, 70–8, 503–18.

[77] Henry T. Riley (ed.), *Annales monasterii S. Albani, a Johanne Amundesham, monacho, ut videtur, conscripti, A.D. 1421–1440*, 2 vols. (London, 1870–1), i. 415: 'per absentiam decennalem amplius Domini Thomae Abbatis ultimi, propter corporis invalitudinem, impotentiam, et senium.' (Translation my own.)

[78] Parliaments of Jan. and Sept. 1397, 1399, and 1401; on the last three of these occasions, his presence is attested by his nomination as trier of petitions in the rolls of Parliament. See the relevant records on the website *The Parliament Rolls of Medieval England* (*PROME*), at [http://www.sd-editions.com/PROME/home.html], accessed 14 Jan. 2022. Moot and Heyworth lost their place in Parliament; see Riley (ed.), *Annales monasterii*, i. 414–7 and id. (ed.), *Gesta abbatum*, iii. 435.

were real problems when it came to matters of authority and representation, at least for the greater houses. Heads of communities like St Albans were important figures in England, and their presence in Parliament was one aspect of this. Thomas de la Mare was summoned to royal councils during the 1350s and 1360s, and he presided (with other abbots) over the chapters of the Benedictine monks throughout the 1360s. We have to wait until 1429 before we see another abbot of St Albans in this office.[79] Although he had been entrusted with certain missions by the king and the Benedictine order, after the 1370s his growing inability to travel probably reduced the number of responsibilities he was given. During de la Mare's abbacy, St Albans Abbey may have lost some influence because he could not maintain his position in major institutions or be present in person at royal and ecclesiastical assemblies or at court.[80] The monastery remained important from an intellectual point of view thanks to the other monks, especially university monks.[81] Hence, the problems raised by de la Mare's old age were not insurmountable, but they slowly reduced the position of the monastery in public life in the context of both the competition between the great Benedictine houses of England and the declining role of abbots in the central government of the realm as they were replaced by skilled clerks.[82]

[79] William A. Pantin, 'The General and Provincial Chapters of the English Black Monks, 1215–1540', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society,* 10 (1927), 195–263, at 252–4.

[80] The late medieval period in England coincided with renewed attention to the self-representation of abbots. In order to display his full authority, an abbot had to attend in person the various assemblies he was summoned to. His status was thus diminished when represented by proxies, even when he delegated his full power to them. On the question of the self-representation of abbots, see Martin Heale, 'Mitres and Arms: Aspects of the Self-Representation of the Monastic Superior in Late Medieval England', in Anne Müller and Karen Stöber (eds.), *Self-Representation of Medieval Religious Communities: The British Isles in Context* (Berlin, 2009), 99–124.

[81] Clark, *Monastic Renaissance*.

[82] Benjamin Thompson and Jacques Verger, 'Church and State, Clerks and Graduates', in Christopher Fletcher, Jean-Philippe Genet, and John Watts (eds.), *Government and Political Life in England and France,* c.*1300*–c.*1500* (Cambridge, 2015), 183–216; Heale, *Abbots and Priors*, 204–5, 212–26.

Fifty years after the death of Abbot de la Mare, his case can be compared to John Whethamstede's second term. From the late 1450s Whethamstede was seriously ill, but he continued to defend the interests of the abbey, supervising matters from the monastery and sending representatives to London because of his old age.[83] This sometimes led to complications. In 1461, when he sought to defend the abbey's rights to the priory of St Andrew's in Pembroke, his archdeacon represented him in Parliament. As the abbot was 'old, and because of old age and illness, was not in physical condition to be present in Parliament', the archdeacon had to address the chancellor for permission to intercede with the king on the abbot's behalf.[84] Eventually, Whethamstede became so ill that he could no longer receive visitors to the monastery (apparently unlike Thomas de la Mare)—even royal visitors in some cases. In 1459, when Henry VI visited the abbey, Whethamstede was absent 'because of languor and old age' and his prior had to take his place.[85]

When we turn to ecclesiastical relations, we see a contrast with the numerous legacies of Whethamstede's first abbacy. The abbot who had helped Henry V reform the Benedictine orders in the 1420s and who was a member of the delegation to the Council of Pavia–Siena (1423–4) does not appear in the list of prelates and nobles accompanying the embassy sent by the king to the Council of Mantua.[86] Many other factors might explain this, but the narratives from the register suggest that personal meetings with members of the royal government or other ecclesiastics became rarer and rarer as the abbot grew older. It is difficult to precisely assess an abbot's loss of influence. Fewer visits are recorded to the abbot and to his monastery and fewer people entered the fraternity, yet these may also be false impressions arising from a lack of sources. Moreover, not every change that affected the

[83] Clark, 'Whethamstede [Bostock], John'; Riley (ed.), *Registra*, 416.

[84] Riley (ed.), *Registra*, 417: 'senis, et prae senior, ac etiam morbo, in Parliamento adesse non valentis'. (Translation my own.)

[85] Ibid. 324: 'propter languorem and senium'. In 1461 the abbot met the king in a very different context: Whethamstede appeared in person to beg for protection against plunderers during the Wars of the Roses (ibid. 394).

[86] Ibid. 332. The council was summoned in response to the capture of Constantinople by the Ottomans in 1453.

monastery can be attributed to the physical condition of the abbot: Whethamstede's second abbacy took place in a very different political and ecclesiastical context from his first. Hence, one cannot conclude that St Albans was affected by a structural problem created by the incapacity of some of its abbots. Unique to St Albans was the duration of Abbot de la Mare's poor health over several decades. The community continued to be represented externally during this long period, but only by people of inferior rank, such as clerks or monks.

V. Conclusion

This article has presented a case study of a great monastery which could afford to elect elderly abbots in order to benefit from their experience and maturity, despite the associated risks of illness, senility, and imminent death, along with the resultant problems created by an abbatial vacancy. Measures had to be taken in the event that the abbot was unable to rule, and also after his death, in order to ensure a smooth transition of power. The administration of the community could continue under an incapable abbot, but the monastery's external relations might be affected. This was especially the case when a monastery claimed a special place in the ranks of English religious houses. However, it is difficult to determine the impact of this on the rank and prestige of the house compared to other external factors.

Whereas discourses about old age and archival evidence are often studied separately in historiography, the rich documentation that survives for St Albans allows these two aspects to be brought together. Both in theory and in practice at St Albans Abbey, the old age of the monastic superior and the disabilities and diseases that often ensued were not a major problem for the monastery. Each religious community had its own way of dealing with these situations, and what made St Albans unique was its status as an exempt monastery, which prevented bishops from intervening and enabled the community to adapt to the new situation without much external input.

However, further cases need to be examined in order to understand if there were common trends in the way elderly superiors were handled in the Benedictine order, as has been done by Amelia

Kennedy in her work on Cistercians.[87] The rule of St Benedict does not address the question of ageing abbots, but the close connections between Benedictine monasteries, the visitations, and the frequent convening of chapters of the order could lead us to think that there were common patterns in dealing with incapacity among heads of religious houses. As we have seen here, there were many ways to tackle the problem, and although examples of resignation tend to be better researched, the case of St Albans provides an example of an alternative, less spectacular way of adapting to the illness and senility of abbots.

Providing a new angle from which to examine the differences between the houses in a religious order, the study of old age also helps us explore the structures of monastic communities in greater depth. Abbots (and priors) are well-known figures in historiography, and some have been studied in detail, but the connections between them and the rest of the community are sometimes hard to capture.[88] The abbot held a special place within the monastery: he was the wellspring of authority and the external representative of the house. These special roles made him both a key member of the community and at the same time separate from it, often with his own servants and his own lodgings. To study what happened when he was no longer able to govern, along with the consequences of this for the religious house in question, is to throw new light on what the abbot really represented for the community.

[87] Amelia Kennedy, 'Growing Old in a Cistercian Monastery, *c.*1100–1300' (Ph.D. thesis, Yale University, 2000); ead., '"Do Not Relinquish your Offspring"'.

[88] On the separation between abbot and monastery, see the summary in Heale, *Abbots and Priors*, 98.

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