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**THE ORIGINAL
SIGNIFICANCE OF
THE GUNZO LEGEND
AT CLUNY**



Janet Marquardt

The story of the vision of Gunzo, retired abbot of Baume, is included in three accounts of the life of St. Hugh of Cluny. Around the year 1080, when Gunzo was old and dying in Cluny's infirmary, St. Peter appeared to him one night and gave him the measurements for a larger church, promising him seven more years of life if he would convey the message to his superior, Abbot Hugh. A version of this story was written sometime after 1100 in a record of the miracles during the abbacy of Hugh; there is no recorded author.¹ A second account was written about 1120 by Gilon, biographer of St. Hugh.² The third was adapted from earlier sources (including the *Vita* by Gilon) in an account of Hugh's life, written in 1121, by Hildebert, bishop of Le Mans.³

Gunzo has been regarded by subsequent historians, foremost among whom is Kenneth Conant, as the designer/architect of Cluny III.⁴ I believe that this arises from a misunderstanding of the sources.

In the anonymous *Miracles* account and in Gilon's life of Hugh, the story of Gunzo's vision is preceded by a passage emphasizing Abbot Hugh's continuing accomplishments for Cluny in his old age:

At victor animus floridi Patris pristinorum memor virtutum, ampliora templi fundamenta quam fuerant, in Cluniaco tunc locare disposuit, consuetas naturae leges viritum transgrediens, quod sagaci insistens studio mirifice mancipavit effectui. Cumque propinquaret occasui, aulam Imperialem nascentibus filiis inchoavit, et de vita exiturus, ingressuris hospitium praeparavit ad Apostolici culminis dignitatem. Affuit tamen stimulus qui eum fortiter pupugit, et adurgere compulit architectum nostrum timide commorantem.⁵

But the triumphant spirit of the still flourishing Father [Hugh], remembering his powers of old, then decided to make the foundations of the church in Cluny larger than they had been, transgressing the usual laws of nature one by one. Pursuing this goal with keen zeal, he captured it and put it into effect in a marvelous way. And when he was nearing his end, he started an imperial hall for the infant sons, and when he was about to depart from life he prepared for those to come a hospice to the honor of the high apostle [St. Peter?]. But a stimulus came which pricked him strongly and made our architect, who was hesitating timidly, rise up.

In Gilon the narrative proceeds as follows:

Nam beatus Petrus quemdam veteranum infirmum elegit, per quem spiritum ejus excitaret ad agendum quod decebat. Vocabatur ille Gunzo de abbate factus claustralis et psalmista praecipuus....⁶

For blessed Peter chose a certain sick old man through whom to arouse his spirit to do what was fitting. He was called Gunzo, an abbot who had become a monk and a distinguished psalmist....

In the *Miracles* account it continues thus:

Nam quidam Abbas Monasterii cui Balma vocabulum est, Gunzo nomine, vir magnae simplicitatis et honestatis, de Abbate factus claustralis, dum aliquando gravi langore paralysis Cluniaci deficeret, ita ut ad extrema iam se devenisse crederet, quadam nocte vidit sibi assistere ipsos Apostolos Petrum et Paulum, cum protomartyre Stephano....⁷

Now when a certain abbot of the monastery called Baume, a man by the name of Gunzo of great simplicity and nobleness of character, whom the Abbot [Hugh] had admitted to the monastery [Cluny], was wasting away at Cluny in some kind of grave prostration from a stroke, such that he already believed himself to be at death's door,

he saw one night by his bedside the actual apostles Peter and Paul, with Stephen the first martyr....

Kenneth Conant has understood the phrase *architectum nostrum* to refer to Gunzo.⁸ This misinterpretation derives from insufficient attention to its context. The sentence in which these words occur follows an enumeration of Hugh's construction projects in the monastery and refers to his hesitancy to begin expansion of the abbey church as well. Neither Gilon nor the author of the *Miracles* account introduce Gunzo into the narrative until the following sentence. Thus, *architectum nostrum* refers to Hugh, to whom it is applied in recognition of his leadership in the conception and realization of Cluny III.

Kenneth Conant has inferred, from Gilon's description of Gunzo as a "distinguished psalmist" (*psalmista praecipuus*), that the retired abbot of Baume was a trained musician; he asserts that, in designing a building with the detailed regular proportions of Cluny III, "such mathematics as are involved would obviously not be beyond a trained medieval musician...."⁹ Conant believes that Gunzo would probably have been familiar with Vitruvius' *De Architectura*, since it contains a chapter on music (V.iv);¹⁰ some of the proportions of Cluny III are based on Vitruvius. Conant's argument rests on faulty assumptions, however. A monk who was renowned for his soloist finesse in the performance of the chant, even if he were the leader of the cantors (the group of trained singers), was not necessarily a *musicus* or musician (someone versed in the theoretical science of music).

Finally, if Gunzo was given only seven more years to live in 1080, it is difficult to credit him with the building of a church which was only started in 1088, that is, one year after he presumably died.

The core story which the three sources have in common may be understood as evidence, not for the identification of the designer of Cluny III, but for a different concern: justification of the project to build a larger church. Thus the story found its way into Abbot Hugh's biographies. Its purpose is therefore similar to that of the *Miracles of the Virgin*, written at the time of the rebuilding of Chartres Cathedral.

The Gunzo story is based on a hagiographic model for the prophetic vision foretelling the exact time left to a holy person's life. A similar legend can be cited from Eddius Stephanus' *Vita Wilfridi Episcopi*. Bishop Wilfred, after lying for four days and nights in a

coma at Meaux in France, awakened and told his companion that the archangel Michael had appeared to him and promised him four further years of life if he would build a church in honor of St. Mary-ever-Virgin.¹¹ The similarity to the Gunzo story is striking: a divine messenger appears to someone who is dying and promises a set number of years of life if a building program is undertaken.

In Hugh's biography the story is part of a larger section on the abbot's architectural accomplishments. It takes place at the time when the monastery was being expanded, and it justifies the expensive program of building a new basilica. All three sources state that Hugh does not want to undertake such a large project. St. Peter must make a divine request for a larger church. He expresses his anxiety over the crowded conditions of the monks: "...the crowding of my sheep is a serious matter to me—enclosed as they are within the walls of that sheepfold at Cluny, the place chafes them..." (*grauem mihi esse mearum pressuram ouium, quas intra septa Cluniacensis illius ouilis inclusas, locus urit angustior....*)¹² He promises to provide all the necessary materials and shows Gunzo the exact, enormous dimensions of the new structure by means of measuring ropes, admonishing him to commit all the details to memory.

The fact that the messenger in this story is St. Peter himself, rather than the more traditional angel, is important. He was the patron of Cluny and, along with Saints Paul and Stephen who appear together with him in the anonymous *Miracles* account, received the dedication of the High Altar in Cluny III. This version of the story is illustrated in the manuscript of c. 1180 from St. Martin-des-Champs, a Cluniac priory: St. Peter is shown with the measuring ropes, explaining the numbers to the sleeping Gunzo, while St. Paul and St. Stephen assist him.¹³ Gilon and Hildebert eliminate Paul and Stephen in retelling the story, and instead concentrate on Peter's personal concern for his crowded flock.

These passages recall God's instructions to Israel in Isaiah 54.2-3: "Enlarge the limits of your home, spread wide the curtains of your tent; let out the ropes to the full and drive the pegs home; for you shall break out of your confines right and left."¹⁴ In the previous chapter, the people are described as "sheep."¹⁵ God promises Isaiah that foreign kings will provide the funds to rebuild the walls and precious materials for the glory of the sanctuary.¹⁶ At Cluny, where St. Peter promised the necessary materials, the third abbey church was erected mainly through the lavish donations of the kings of England and Spain. The Spanish contributions began in 1073 after St.

Peter's miraculous release of Alfonso VI from prison. In 1077, Alfonso doubled his father's gold offering toward feeding the monks in return for intercessory prayer. It must have been this money which was the actual stimulus behind Hugh's decision to go ahead with the plans for a larger church. When construction had begun, in 1088, Alfonso initiated payment of vast sums specifically for the building of the church.¹⁷

Other biblical references tie the story of Gunzo's vision to the tradition of the Jewish temple. The prophet Ezekiel sees a vision of a celestial city. An angel with a rope and measuring rod instructs him to carefully note everything about the plan of the temple as it is revealed to him and take it back to the people to carry out.¹⁸ Here God even gives exact instructions for the division of the land for the sanctuary.¹⁹ The layout is similar to the plan of King Solomon's temple, another project undertaken upon orders by God.²⁰

There are other instances in the Old Testament where God specifies measurements for building ventures—for example, the instructions to Noah for constructing the ark,²¹ and to Moses for the Tabernacle.²² In the New Testament, John's *Revelation* recounts a vision similar to Ezekiel's, in which the angel shows John the dimensions of the celestial city by using a measuring rod; unlike the other instances, this describes an existing celestial structure and not one to be built by man.²³

When God asks men to build earthly structures for him, he provides detailed designs or appoints someone with instilled divine understanding of the project. This insures the building's appropriateness for his needs; it "measures up" to divine standards. In justifying Cluny III, the Gunzo story includes these divine instructions for the architectural plan.

Aside from Gunzo the visionary and Hugh the responsible abbot, only one other person is mentioned in connection with the construction of the third abbey church. This is Hézelon, a nobly born teacher of superior abilities who left the cathedral chapter of St. Lambert at Liège to enter the monastery at Cluny in 1088. Two sources refer to Hézelon. Peter the Venerable wrote a letter sometime between 1136 and 1145 to the bishop of Liège in which he named Hézelon as one of Cluny's three most valuable men from that town. Peter said of Hézelon:

Quorum primus multo tempore pro ecclesia ad quam uenerat, laborans, singulari scientia et praedicabili lingua non solum audientium mores

instruxit, sed et corporalem nouae aecclisiae fabricam, quam aliqui uestrorum uiderunt, plus cunctis mortalibus post reges Hyspanos et Anglos, construxit.²⁴

The first of these, working for a long time for the church to which he had come, not only instructed his hearers' characters by his singular learning and outstanding eloquence, but also constructed the physical body of the church, which some of you have seen, more than all other mortals after the kings of Spain and England.

Jacques Stiennon interpreted this passage to mean that Hézelon directed the building of the abbey church as its master architect.²⁵ Indeed, in a biographical record from the College of Cardinals at Liège, Hézelon is praised for his learning and eloquence, and for his direction of the construction of the new large church "as architect."²⁶ The wording so closely resembles the letter of Peter the Venerable that we may surmise that it has been adapted from that source. However, Peter's statement about Hézelon's contribution can be understood differently than the Liège source interprets it. Peter mentions Hézelon in the same vein as the kings of Spain and England, who made the building of the church possible through their monetary donations. Hézelon is described in Peter's letter as an eloquent speaker. Stiennon finds evidence that in September, 1095, just one month before the consecration of Cluny's main altar by Pope Urban II, Hézelon was out raising funds in Oltigen.²⁷ It seems likely that it was this fundraising that Peter was referring to when he placed Hézelon's contribution alongside the financial aid of the two kings. The master architect of Cluny III remains unknown.

The biographical record from Liège also recounts that Hézelon composed a biography of Hugh. This information is probably derived from Hildebert's *Vita* of Hugh which says that Hézelon and Gilon wrote earlier accounts. Conant suggests that Hézelon was the author of the anonymous *Miracles During the Abbacy of St. Hugh*.²⁸ The story of Gunzo's vision from this account may have been used by Hézelon as part of his fundraising campaign. We have seen that it was apparently written in justification of the financial aspect of the project to build a new church. The miracle would have generated a sympathetic response from the surrounding populace, who were aware of Cluny's consecration to Saints Peter and Paul. June 29, their feast day, was the day that dues were collected from Cluny's domain, so that those subject to the order already associated economic obligation with those saints. St. Peter was also on record as miraculously stimulating large donations for Cluny from the king of Spain.

Thus, it is likely that the Gunzo legend was specifically aimed at fundraising for a building project and was not merely concerned with the artistic details of an architectural enterprise. Gilon and Hildebert used the story in Hugh's biographies in 1120 and 1121. Their insistence that Hugh himself was against the program, but that he acted on divine orders, must have been a pious defense of Hugh against the growing criticism of such an expenditure for an oversized, lavishly decorated basilica which was finally voiced in Bernard of Clairvaux's famous letter of 1124.

Notes

1. "Alia miraculorum quorundam S. Hugonis abbatis relatio ms. collectore monacho quodam ut videtur Cluniacensi," in Martin Marrier, ed., *Bibliotheca Cluniacensis* (Paris: R. Fovet, 1614), cols. 447-461.
2. Gilon, "Vita Sancti Hugonis," in A. L'Huilier, *Vie de Saint Hughues, Abbé de Cluny* (Solesmes: Imprimerie Saint-Pierre, 1888), pp. 574-618.
3. Hildebert, "Vita Sancti Hugonis" in Marrier, cols. 413-438.
4. A few examples from historical and art historical literature are: Kenneth J. Conant, *Cluny, Les Églises et la Maison du Chef d'Ordre* (Mâcon: Imprimerie Protat Frères, 1968), p. 76; Kenneth J. Conant, "Mediaeval Academy Excavations at Cluny, IX: Systematic Dimensions of the Buildings," *Speculum* 38 (January, 1963): 8-11; L. Génévaux, "Un 2m gloire de l'abbaye de Baume: Gunzo, architecte de Cluny III," *Société d'émulation du Jura, Tableau de l'activité de la société de 1959-1964*, pp. 156-161; Noreen Hunt, *Cluny Under Saint Hugh 1049-1109* (London: Edward Arnold, 1967), p. 121.
5. Marrier, col. 457; L'Huilier, p. 605. This passage is identical in the two sources, except for the words *timide commorantem*, which appear only in the text of Gilon.
6. L'Huilier, p. 605.
7. Both the text and the translation are taken from Wolfgang Braunfels, *Monasteries of Western Europe: The Architecture of the Orders*, trans. Alastair Laing (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), p. 240.
8. Conant, *Cluny*, p. 76.
9. Conant, "Mediaeval Academy Excavations," p. 8. Conant makes these same associations with William of Dijon, abbot of S. Benigne: *Ibid.*, p. 11.
10. Conant, *Cluny*, p. 76.
11. Eddius Stephanus, *Vita Wilfridi Episcopi* LVI. The same story appears in Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica* V. 19. A copy of Bede's work was in Cluny's library in the twelfth century: Joan Evans, *Monastic Life at Cluny* (London: Oxford University Press, 1931), p. 101. Bede, however, makes no mention of instructions to build a church.
12. The quotation is from Hildebert (Marrier, cols. 431-2). A similar statement appears in Gilon (L'Huilier, p. 605).
13. Bibliothèque Nationale (Paris), ms. lat. 17716, fol. 43 ro. A drawing of this illustration appears above, on page 55 of this journal.

14. Isaiah 54.2-3, quoted from the New English Bible. Also note that in Isaiah 54.13, the builders are promised instruction by the Lord.
15. Isaiah 53.6. The comparison of the people to sheep here refers to their straying rather than to their crowded living conditions, however.
16. Isaiah 60.3, 5, 10-11, 13, 16.
17. C. J. Bishko, "Liturgical Intercession at Cluny for the King-Emperors of León," *Studia Monastica* 3 (1961): 53-76.
18. Ezekiel 40.1 - 47.6.
19. Ezekiel 45.1-5.
20. I Kings 5 - 6.
21. Genesis 6.14-16.
22. Exodus 25 - 27.
23. Revelation 21.15-17.
24. Peter the Venerable, *The Letters of Peter the Venerable*, ed. by Giles Constable (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1967), p. 229. Letter 89.
25. Jacques Stiennon, "Hézelon de Liège, architecte de Cluny III," in Pierre Gallais and Yves-Jean Riou, eds., *Mélanges offerts à René Crozet*, Vol. I (Poitiers: Société d'études médiévales, 1966), p. 353.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 348.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 353.
28. Conant, *Cluny*, p. 76.

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