

# A monk going mad

JOHN GILLINGHAM

Richard Landes

RELICS, APOCALYPSE, AND THE  
DECEITS OF HISTORY

Ademar of Chabannes, 989–1034  
404pp. Harvard University Press. £34.95.  
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A thousand years ago, in 996, as the Christian world approached the end of its first millennium, a boy called Ademar was placed in the monastery of St Cybard at Angoulême. There and at the richer neighbouring abbey of St Martial at Limoges, he became a monk and the most prolific writer of his generation: historian, liturgist, musician, forger. In 1033, the millennium of Christ's Passion, he left for Jerusalem, never to return. Did he go to await the Apocalypse and Christ's second coming? Or did he go as a pilgrim doing penance for all the lies he had told, faking document after document in his obsessive determination to prove that St Martial of Limoges had not been just another local saint – as most people thought – but a cousin of Simon Peter and the apostle sent by Christ to Gaul? Probably for both reasons, writes Richard Landes, who has spent so long in seat 14 of the Salle des Manuscrits in the Bibliothèque Nationale that he believes that he can see not only Ademar's hand where other palaeographers have failed to do so, but also far more deeply into Ademar's mind than any earlier historian has ever done. And what he has uncovered, he believes, is the autograph record of a monk going mad.

According to Landes in *Relics, Apocalypse, and the Deceits of History*, Ademar's apparently quiet life was shattered by three crises in the late 1020s. In 1027, he was disappointed when a lesser man was appointed abbot. In 1028, the Count of Angoulême died in mysterious circumstances, and his heir, alleging witchcraft, pinned the blame on four women whom he tortured and put to death. Ademar knew that, in truth, the new count's wife had poisoned her father-in-law, but chose to write an "official" history of the episode, lending the weight of a scholar's learning to murder and its cover-up. At this point Ademar, perhaps troubled by the way he had sold out, moved to Limoges and devoted his talents to the newly flourishing cult of St Martial the Apostle. Here on August 3, 1029, just as the new liturgy was to be given its first performance with Ademar in a starring role as impresario, composer and soloist, the cup of triumph was

snatched from his lips by the loud denunciations of a Lombard monk, Benedict of Chiusa, who cried out that to perform the new liturgy would be the equivalent of dumping shit on the altar. If they went ahead, he would report the sacrilegious fraud to Pope John XIX. In the furious shouting match that followed, Benedict won the acclaim of a noisy, jostling and sceptical crowd. The next day, a humiliated Ademar returned to Angoulême. There he wrote up an account of the debate to make it seem that he won, arguing coolly while the red-faced Lombard stomped and screamed. But everyone knew he had lost. So, to preserve his own threatened sense of self, he plunged into an orgy of fantasy. Defeated in the present, he plotted victory in the future. One of his many forgeries was a letter from John XIX in support of Martial's apostolic claim. This he planted in documents, Easter tables, which no one would need to consult until 1063. And in time, just as he had planned, the crazy monk turned the tables on the rational crowd, Martial was recognized as the apostle of Gaul, at any rate in Limoges, from c 1100 until the nineteenth century.

That Ademar was a forger has long been known. Historians have generally assumed that he was an ordinary sane forger, acting like hundreds of others in this period, faking documents



Spanish rendering of "The Adoration of the Magi", first half of the twelfth century; from *The Medieval Treasury: The art of the Middle Ages in the V & A*, edited by Paul Williamson (247pp. Victoria and Albert Publications. Paperback, £14.99. 0 948107 38 3)

to promote the interests of an ecclesiastical community. Landes's case, obsessively argued in an extraordinary book, full of complex palaeographical and codicological analysis and shot through with vivid phrases, is that Ademar's forgery was driven by private needs rather than community interests. Obviously his interpretation is highly conjectural, as he himself admits. It could not be otherwise when the argument depends either on Ademar's silences – as, allegedly, in the first two crises; or, as with the crisis of 1029, on what a mad but cunning liar chose to say – for there is no other evidence at all. Part of Landes's case is to link Ademar's private anguish with the troubles of the times, the "millennial" decades between the 990s and the 1030s when both heresy and anti-Semitism emerged in the Christian West. He sees Ademar's history of these years as a litany of prodigies and calamities, and thus as a "reflection of the apocalyptic tenor of the age". Here Landes, 1,000 years later, maintains his own belief – against the wet-blanket school of historians – that people such as Ademar were much agitated by the approach of the first millennium.

Undeniably there was something odd about Ademar. Consider this passage:

Even though some brutes and wimps say it is a sin that we preach him as an apostle, I Ademar, in the presence of the Saviour who is going to judge the living and the dead and the world by fire, I declare that if the glory of God or of Martial himself is offended in any way that he be preached an apostle, then in this very hour, the sixth of the day, now, in this moment of time as here alone in the church I write this, let me die.

Christ is everywhere.

Christ wishes me to live.

It is pleasing to Christ that we should preach Martial as an apostle.

O elders of the fathers to whom I write this letter, put an end to the drunken blasphemies of the Lombard.

I hope that Richard Landes does not feel as cross as this about those ordinary historians who respond sceptically to his fascinating conjectures.

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