The article investigates the ways in which the *topos* of the Desert, which pervades the literature and *praxis* of early Eastern Christian monasticism, was founded and came to shape the Cistercian imagination. It tracks the evolution of this theme in Cistercian thought from foundation narratives, which appealed to the image of the Desert Fathers to justify the rupture with Benedictine monasticism, up to the mystical undertones of the Desert myth in late twelfth century Cistercian theology. The paper also analyses the uses of the *topos* from legitimising the foundation of the Order and constructing the Cistercian identity to attracting the admiration and generosity of its contemporaries.

In an attempt to make them aware of their corrupted monastic observance, Robert, the subsequent founder of Cîteaux exhorts the monks of the Benedictine abbey of Molesme, advised: ‘Legite gesta sanctorum, Antonii, Macarii, Pacomii…’ [Read the deeds of the saints, Antony, Macarius, Pachomius…]. Molesme had become famous and had accumulated so much wealth that it had fallen away from the pursuit of heavenly goals. Hence Robert’s rebuke for ‘departing from the letter of the monastic rule and [their] failure to follow the rough path of the fathers of Egypt, who dwelt in the Thebaid and Scete and Nitria’.\(^2\) He repeatedly confronts their way of life with that of the Egyptian fathers, who can and should be imitated as examples of virtue. As the congregation of Molesme is not convinced, Robert and several like-minded monks

\(^{1}\) Catalin Taranu’s primary research focus is Old English literature and early Germanic culture, although he occasionally deals with the early history of religious orders and early embodiments of reform. He holds a BA in Philology (English and French) from the University of Iasi (Romania), and an MA in Medieval Studies from the University of Leeds, where he is currently pursuing a PhD thesis entitled ‘Constructing Anglo-Saxon Legendary History’.

go on to found in 1098, in a marshy isolated spot, what would become the cradle of a new spirituality and way of living the perfect life: Citeaux, the New Monastery.\(^3\)

This account contains *in nuce* the attitude and *modus operandi* characteristic of the early Cistercians, indeed all the elements that make them stand out in the bigger picture of the twelfth century reform: a strong aversion towards the corrupt monastic life of their day (usually equated with the Benedictines and especially the Cluniacs), the founding of new houses in the wilderness, their appeal to the monastic ideal shaped by the Desert Fathers of Egypt.\(^4\) But ideologically, the keystone which locks all these elements into position is the myth of the desert. The spectacular evolution of the Cistercian order, from the small community of Citeaux in 1098 to an international network of over 300 houses throughout Europe in half a century is well documented and, as has been observed before, ‘can scarcely be explained by the consideration of natural, historic factors alone’.\(^5\) Indeed, this paper will mainly deal with the manifestations of imagination and mentalities just as much in need of study as the more material, directly documentable, realities of history. Hence, my main line of inquiry will be to analyse the ways in which the fascination with the desert shaped Cistercian ideals and realities throughout the history of the order. In the beginning, it led Robert de Molesme and his fellow reformers into the wilderness in the first place, later, it convinced thousands of people either to join their way of life (as members of the new order), or to support them materially (as founders of houses or donors).

Methodologically, this paper belongs to the study of the imagination ‘as a dimension of history’, more thoroughly practised by the French historiographical school of the *longue durée*, but perhaps


best put to work by Jacques Le Goff. In connection to the Cistercians, this approach was employed to a certain extent in Louis Lekai’s previously referenced study, although not always usefully, and almost never in connection to the desert myth. I chose to focus on the desert as a place of the imagination because it is one of those key themes in which ‘material and social realities were closely intertwined with fancies of the imagination’. This study seeks to make up for the lack of research on the desert and its importance to the Cistercians by sketching a history of the *topos* in the Cistercian intellectual life.

For the Cistercians, the ‘myth of the desert’ involved on the one hand a certain theology of monasticism symbolically codified in the image of the desert itself, austere and otherworldly, a place of temptation but also one where heroic asceticism is at home, and on the other hand, a way of thinking and a vocabulary of asceticism and contemplation that can be traced back to the Desert Fathers. But the myth was used also in more pragmatic ways: to construct a Cistercian identity in opposition to that of Benedictine monasticism, which in time enhanced their attraction towards even more potential novices or benefactors (a point which I will enlarge towards the end of this paper).

The history of the desert-wilderness as a privileged location is deeply embedded in the history of Christianity and especially that of monastic asceticism. Even in the Old Testament, the desert already had the ambivalent character it would assume in the medieval imagination: despite the difficulties of crossing the desert as described in Exodus, for the Hebrews the desert was a

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7 Le Goff, p. 15.
8 T. Renna, ‘The Wilderness and the Cistercians’, *Cistercian Studies Quarterly*, 30 (1995), 179-89 (only one paper on the same theme I have undertaken) and J. Goehring, ‘The Dark Side of Landscape: Ideology and Power in the Christian Myth of the Desert’, *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, 33 (2003), 437-51 (a rich and useful study of the desert as ideological construct which focuses solely on Late Antiquity, but which provides great opportunities for further research in medieval sources).
9 For a useful and rich introduction to the life (everyday, intellectual and mystical) of the earliest Christians living in the deserts of Egypt, see William Harmless, *Desert Christians: An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).
‘wilderness experienced collectively and the scene of Yahweh’s most important revelation’. Interestingly, this characterisation remains valid even when discussing the monastic desert myth. In Christianity, the desert has multiple layered meanings: it is the place where Christ was tempted by Satan, a dangerous place, the ‘abomination of desolation’ (Mt 24.15), but at the same time it is the Egyptian ‘desert made a city’ by Antony and the first monks. As such, it is the ideal site for marvels, where hermits could prove their mettle in the battle against the Devil and his demons (Lk 8.29). More positively, after conquering the demons without and within, the desert (heremus or desertum) became a kind of paradise where the ascetic could enjoy personal dialogue and ultimate communion with God.

Thus, the desert-wilderness was a powerful metaphor for the medieval imagination at large because it represented values opposed to those of the city, and its uses throughout time reflect the conflict between paradigms of civilization and society on the one hand, and on the other, paradigms of individuality, personal freedom and independence from authority. In the wilderness of the Western forests, which replaced the arid wastelands of the Levant, all could behave as ‘men of nature, fleeing the world of culture in every sense of the word’.

While Le Goff documents the persistence of the topos in the medieval mind, lay as well as clerical, the flight from the world was so much more poignant in the case of monks. For they essentially keep their distance from the world to free themselves from its material cares and distractions, in order to dedicate themselves fully to God, whereby they can eventually attain salvation. In the desert, ‘formal structures and supports crumble; there remains only a veiled God and an open

13 Le Goff, Wilderness, p.52.
The very word *monachus* contained in itself this idea of solitude and separation (at least in the earliest patristic etymologies of the word). According to Jerome and John Cassian (the two most important conveyors of the myth of the Desert and of the Desert Fathers tradition to the West), the etymology of the word was linked to *monos* – meaning alone, solitary, isolated from the common world of people and cities, alone with God. A second interpretation of *monachus* is made by Augustine, who speaks of *monos as one* in the sense of unity between brothers, ‘who should be as one body’, of unity in multitude and sharing solitude, thereby rejecting complete isolation.

These two ideals of the monastic life, present from its very beginnings, have alternatively clashed and complemented each other throughout the history of Western monasticism, but were harmonised in perhaps the most felicitous manner in the Cistercian monastic ideal. This was accomplished by taming the idea of desert, rejecting the complete isolation of the first desert dwellers, while at the same time reinforcing it through the ideal of a shared, essentially interior solitude achieved within a community. It is in this context that Louis Lekai’s statement has to be understood; the success of the Cistercians can be explained by their:

skilful combination of the popular eremitism of the eleventh century with the traditional form of Benedictine (and thus coenobitic) monasticism, as it provided ample opportunity for those yearning for solitude, who were ready to follow the heroic virtues of the Desert fathers, while saving both the

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communal character of monastic life and the absolute authority of St Benedict and his Rule.\footnote{Lekai, Ideals and Reality, p. 228.}

Still, the fascination with the desert myth remained a key element of the Cistercian identity. From the very beginning, Cistercians considered themselves the only ones keeping alive and burning what William of Saint-Thierry called ‘orientale lumen et antiquam illum in religione Aegyptium fervorem’ [the light of the Orient and the ancient fervour of the religious life of the Egyptians].\footnote{William of Saint-Thierry, Epistula ad fratres de Monte Dei, I, 1, in The Golden Epistle, trans. by T. Berkeley (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian Publications, 1971), p. 19.}

This succinct phrase evoked a wealth of images to all those belonging to the Western monastic literary community. Any reference or allusion to the beginnings of monasticism appealed to an almost fabulous mental picture, that of the first Egyptian fathers and their lives of extreme deprivation and isolation, but also unmitigated freedom from any worldly entanglements, which afforded them full involvement in the monastic mission \textit{par excellence} – the contemplation and communion with God. This is, of course, an ideal image which rarely corresponded to the gritty realities of either the first monastic communities in the Desert (rebellion against ecclesiastical authority, popular Evagrian ideas declared heretical, etc.) or the Cistercians ones (the questionable evictions of hermits from lands donated to Cistercian communities, the amassing of riches etc.). Its force, however, lies precisely in its dialectic; the ideal of the Desert was a thing of the idealized past and at the same time of the ideal future to which everyone aspired.

Thus, \textit{orientale lumen} evoked the desire of heaven, martyrdom for the sake of divine love, the angelic life, the primacy of humility, purity, prayer and psalmody, and severe asceticism that was emphasised in the accounts of the Desert Fathers.\footnote{Leclercq, \textit{Témoins de la spiritualité occidentale} (Paris: Cerf, 1972), p. 201.} These were not only the cherished memories of the Golden Age of the beginnings but also the basic elements making up the identity of every monastic community, which, straying however far from these demanding ideals, always longed
for the fervent observance of the Desert Fathers. As one scholar of early monasticism accentuated, ‘if you study the history of spirituality, you will find that each time that there is a spiritual renewal in the Church, the desert fathers are present’.  

Thus, the interest for the Ancient monasticism of the East as it was known from the works of Cassian and Jerome, respectively the *Vitae Patrum* and the *Apophthegmata Patrum*, never waned in the Cistercian imagination, always being nourished through the evocation of an Orient full of wonders. In chapter 73 of his Rule, Benedict himself (the author of the monastic rule all Cistercians at least declaratively adhered to), in spite of his advocacy of the coenobitical life, states modestly that it was intended for beginners: those aspiring to a higher perfection should guide themselves according to the writings of Basil and Cassian, rich in references to the heroic lives of Eastern anchorites.

For the Cistercian Order, the Desert myth had not only theological functions (such as legitimizing the new type of monastic observance from the perspective of the Scriptural and Patristic traditions, by harmonizing it with orthodoxy), but also ideological ones. It helped to define the identity of the nascent community in relation to historical and social circumstances.

For one thing, being in the Desert was a way of distancing themselves from the perceived corruption of traditional Benedictine monasticism and, to some extent, of the whole Church. In this, the Cistercians were not alone. The eleventh and especially twelfth century saw the rise not

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only of a general reform in the Church, but also of experiments with the way of living out the monastic life to the fullest. In the words of Peter Damian, one of the foremost ‘Gregorian’ reformers, ‘it seemed as if the whole world would be turned into a hermitage’. Indeed, these veritable monastic experiments have applied the concept of hermitage to new ways of life. These ‘new hermits’, as Henrietta Leyser famously names them, were not solitaries, traditional hermits, but people for whom solitude had an entirely different meaning (among them were the parents of the new orders: Cistercians, Premonstratensians, Vallombrosans etc.). Indeed, they saw themselves as ‘hermits’, but for them the hermit was no longer a solitary figure in a hut or cave: he belonged to a group of pioneers. It was their yearning for the models from Scripture and the Desert Fathers (the vita primitiva and vita apostolica) which shaped their lives, which gave urgency to their search for a more perfect monastic observance, and ultimately, showed that such an ideal life was possible and feasible.

The following sentence of Aelred of Rievaulx speaks volumes in this regard: ‘no perfection expressed in the words of the Gospel, or of the apostles, or in the writings of the Fathers, or in the sayings of the monks of old is wanting to our order and our way of life’. This is not so much a display of the arrogance their enemies accused them of, but rather proof of the perpetual proximity of the Desert ideal to the Cistercian imagination. In other words, it was not only possible but indeed necessary to live like the Desert Fathers. This actually shows the optimism of the first Cistercians: perfection seemed to be within their grasp. The seminal idea of the Cistercian order was the conviction that it was possible to lead even in those times a monastic life without concessions to the world. This is why Citeaux was called the ‘New Monastery’; it signalled a radical difference from the old ones. The ideal of the Desert was not considered to

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be part of the historical past, but a living reality which continued to animate the present.\textsuperscript{27} For them, the desert was not a ‘sandy place where hermits could bury their heads’; they went there, as had their Lord, to find themselves, to consider how to meet the new challenge, how to find a form of living that would be appropriate, as Cluniac monasticism no longer was, to their circumstances and aspirations.\textsuperscript{28} The Desert was thus a place of future renewal: ‘the desert shall rejoice and blossom as the rose. It shall blossom abundantly and rejoice even with joy and singing’ (Isaiah 35.1).

What is more, the Cistercians saw themselves as literal desert dwellers, and the \textit{topos} of the monastic community founded in the wilderness is evoked in nearly all the narratives describing the establishment of early Cistercian houses. Thus, time and again we are told that the founders settled in a ‘locus horridus et vastae solitudinis’, ‘a place of horror and vast solitude’ (Deuteronomy 32.10), such as in the account of the founding of Citeaux (\textit{Exordium Cisterci}), in the \textit{Vita prima} of St Bernard, to describe Clairvaux, in \textit{Exordium parvum}, where the monks from Molesme find a desert place (\textit{heremum}) which is ‘inaccessible, despicable and inapproachable’, and also in the Fountains Abbey \textit{Narratio de Fundatione}.\textsuperscript{29} This emphasis on the desolateness of the places they settled should not be taken too literally since, in most cases, they were at a convenient distance from the commercial thoroughfares of the time. However, the idea mattered very much to the Cistercians, who insisted that their foundations should be built as far as possible on the margins of society, in the waste-lands which, paradoxically, could be holy and a source of joy, and at the same time the home of devils and a source of terror.\textsuperscript{30} Obviously, the \textit{topos} is used to lend a heroic aura to the founders of the Order in conformity with the image of

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\item Leyser, \textit{Hermits}, p. 5.
\item Leyser, \textit{Hermits}, p. 39.
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the Desert Fathers. But it would be too simplistic to see here a discrepancy between ideals and reality.

The Cistercians indeed lived in the desert in a superior sense, that of an interior solitude shared by the members of a community. In addition to this, there may have been at work here an unconscious Neo-Platonist ideal of bringing order into chaos. As Anthony had made ‘the desert a city’, the first Cistercians cleared lands, built magnificent buildings and established a new monastic observance in what they saw as the heart of the wilderness. In the Cistercian imagination, this effectively meant taming the wild nature by establishing therein the Rule of the Order: ‘they remained living in their little huts built by their own hands, in the society of beasts, insisting on practicing daily manual labour, cutting down with their knives or axes, uprooting the land with their hoes, they transformed an uninhabited place into a habitable one’. Moreover, the use of the ‘locus horridus’ topos shows the evolution of the myth of the Desert from a literal flight into the wilderness to a mystical flight into the inmost recesses of one’s heart.

Although the eleventh-century eremitical reforms did much to revive the actual practice of a life lived in forest solitude, the stress on the necessity for inner solitude was a theme that became central to the Cistercian monastic theology later on. Indeed, this, too, was part of a general tendency in twelfth century spirituality to move away from external manifestations of ascetical privation to ‘internal attitudes known only to the individual monk or nun and to their closest colleagues and spiritual advisors’. A more properly mystical use of the desert topos in describing

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the soul’s immediate consciousness of God was accomplished by fusing the inner ‘desert’ of the purified monastic ascetic with a ‘Dionysian-inspired teaching about the divine desert’.³⁴

However, among the first generation of Cistercians the use of the desert theme was fairly traditional. Bernard of Clairvaux appealed to the Desert Fathers in his attack on Cluny (as Robert had done, less scathingly, with the monks of Molesme), and he applied the imagery of the Exodus to the Cistercian life, although he does at times mention the interior solitude the bridal soul should cultivate in order to enjoy the visits of the divine Bridegroom.³⁵ William of Saint-Thierry (c. 1085-1148) expresses his great devotion to inner solitude when he prays: ‘Give me, O Lord, the consolation of my wilderness, a solitary heart and frequent conversation with you’, but also his enthusiasm about the revival of the desert tradition among the Cistercians.³⁶

It was in the second generation of Cistercian authors, those active around 1160-90, that we find a new stage in the evolution of the desert motif.³⁷ The expanded account of the origins of the Order shows how important the use of the desert myth had become, rooting the Cistercian reform in a monastic tradition stretching back to John the Baptist and Jesus himself.³⁸ Within this Cistercian identity with the desert (as they understood it), a more mystical use of the desert motif also appeared.³⁹ Gueric d’Igny (c. 1090-1157) was the first to give the desert theme a central role in the identity of the Cistercian community.⁴⁰ In one of his sermons, he describes the way in which the paradox of desert solitude and community support forms the crucial preparation for the monk’s experience of the visitation of the Word: ‘it is surely the work of a

³⁷ Aubberger, L’unanimité, pp. 120-24.
³⁸ Exordium Magnum Cisterciense, 1, in Matarasso, The Cistercian World, p. 17.
³⁹ McGinn, Ocean and Desert, pp. 165-67.
marvelous grace that in our deserts we have the peace of solitude without any lack of the consolation of caring and holy companionship’.\footnote{Guerric d’Igny, ‘Sermon 4 (On Advent)’, \textit{Sermons pour l’Annee liturgique} (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 2011), p. 58.} Thus, for him, the desert serves as the arena for working out salvation, a traditional theme of monastic literature, which he gives a Cistercian twist, an emphasis on community in isolation.

Gilbert of Hoyland, an English Cistercian who died in 1172, was the continuator of Bernard's sermons on the \textit{Song of Songs}. Commenting on Song of Songs 3.6 (‘Quae est ista quae ascendit per desertum sicut virgula fumi?’ [Who is she that goeth up by the desert, as a pillar of smoke]), he interprets the Bride's ascension through the desert as a turning away from the emptiness of this world. He applies the symbol of the desert both to the body and the heart: ‘your heart will surely be a good desert, if it has not been furrowed by the enemy's plow’.\footnote{Gilbert of Hoyland, \textit{Sermo super Cantica}, 15.3-4, in \textit{Sermons on the Song of Songs}, trans. by L. Braceland, 3 vols. (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian Publications, 1978), Vol. 1, p. 197.} Among the canons regular, Richard of Saint Victor (d. 1173) also identified the desert of the Song of Songs (this time Song of Songs 8.5: ‘quae est ista quae ascendit de deserto’ [Who is this that cometh up from the desert]) with the human heart, which gives rise to ecstasy when filled with spiritual joys.\footnote{McGinn, \textit{The Presence of God}, p. 293.}

Another contemporary English Cistercian, Isaac of Stella (c. 1100-c.1180), went even further: in his sermons for the first Sunday of Lent, he invites his monastic audience to follow Christ out into the desert, citing Hosea 2.14, one of the key texts of the biblical desert tradition: ‘they seek the desert and the secret places where they can be open to God, where he himself will answer and speak to their heart, as the prophet says: “I will lead you into solitude and there I will speak to your heart”’.\footnote{Isaac of Stella, \textit{Sermo} 30.4, in \textit{Sermons on the Christian Year}, trans. by H. McCafferty (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian Publications, 1979) , Vol. 2, p. 47.} This desert is an interior one, which he describes as ‘the desert not only of place, but of the spirit, or even sometimes of God’, where ‘we go into ecstasy by continually
meditating on his law'. In fact, according to McGinn, since Isaac of Stella is here identifying God with the desert, this is the earliest Latin text that explicitly links the divine desert with ecstatic experiences. This spectacular evolution of the idea of Desert from a physical abode to a mystical experience is characteristic of the development of the Cistercian imagination. It signals an internalization of the myth of the desert, a shift from a kind of *en chiridion* of monastic conduct to a symbolic metaphor for the heart’s solitude.

Reviewing all the different layers belonging to the Cistercian ‘myth of the Desert’, from the more realistic and pragmatic to the more philosophic and mystical, one realizes how important this concept was to the Cistercians. Indeed, it was part and parcel of their identity and imagination. There would have been no Cistercians (as they came to be known) without the idea of the Desert. Grounded in the ecological reality of the forested and isolated sites of the first Cistercian houses, the myth emerged in the writings of the later authors who told the stories of the founding figures of the Order. Thus, it had a theological function; it was a spiritual landscape that transcended the everyday realities of desert life, an embodiment of the Christian theme of alienation from the world. The myth of the Desert ‘hung like a painting in the Christian consciousness, naturalizing Christian ideals in a world where ideals remained elusive’. The Desert was equivalent to absolute freedom from ‘this world’. Adhering to the desert myth involved writing about themselves as desert dwellers and was in fact a reenactment of an age-old Biblical and Patristic scenario. Through the myth, Cistercian authors and readers transcended their own temporal limitations – they became contemporary to the first Desert Fathers (with all the pious and pragmatic implications thereof) and they participated in the world to come. Mystically, it was a symbol of the interior solitude that was so dear to Cistercian theologians.

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Of course, the myth of the desert also had important ideological functions; it served to legitimize the foundation of the new Order and it gave the Cistercians a moral ascendant over both Cluniacs and Benedictines. In this regard, it was a very effective political weapon; when compared to the ideal of the Desert Fathers only Cistercians claimed to be perpetuating, all of their contemporaries would have been morally dwarfed. Pragmatically, this also increased their attractiveness in the eyes of potential novices and benefactors. The Cistercians’ search for remoteness met happily with the wishes of benevolent donors, because the founding of Cistercian houses was easier and less of a financial drain than the traditional Benedictine ones. Cistercians often sought waste lands, which were of no value at all at the time of donation. Also, the spiritual gain the benefactor could hope for seemed better guaranteed. Cistercians were living a more severe life, an ‘arctior vita’, than traditional Benedictines, and thus were considered to be more pleasing to God. Hence, a donation to them was considered to be an ‘excellent spiritual investment’, and ‘a double advantage, spiritual and material, for both partners’.49

But beyond any economic or political motivations, the myth of the Desert was so important in Cistercian spirituality because it satisfied both the aspiration for an essentially new way of life and the need for continuity with the foundations of monasticism. This is precisely what an early Cistercian saw in the hut in which Bernard was staying when ill: ‘wherever I turned my eyes I was amazed to see as it were a new heaven and a new earth, and the well-worn path trodden by the monks of old, our fathers out of Egypt, bearing the footprints left by men of our own time’ – a telling sample of how Cistercian identity is inseparable from the myth of the Desert.50

49 Milis, *Angelic Monks*, pp. 31-38 (p. 32).
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