



Aelred of Rievaulx: Biography and Bibliography

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Introduction

- Aelred was an English monk in the 12th century who was eventually elected abbot of Rievaulx, a prominent English house in the newly-formed Cistercian Order.
- Aelred wrote extensively on numerous subjects, including history, the human soul, friendship, and theology.
- Aelred became controversial following his death for several reasons, not the least of which was some of his body-centric writing.
- Critics also called into question Aelred's management style as abbot and his sexual history as a young man.

Amidst this controversy, the value of Aelred's writings are frequently lost, and we seek here to reevaluate the literature on Aelred and put him in the proper context. To that end, Professor Bruce Venarde is translating four of Aelred's most important works: *The Nun of Watton*, *On the Institution of Recluses*, *Pastoral Prayer*, and *Spiritual Friendship*. I have been examining and summarizing secondary literature on Aelred to aid Professor Venarde in contextualizing the Abbot.

Aelred as Abbot

- Aelred was elected abbot of Rievaulx in 1147 and remained in that position until his death in 1167.
- Aelred's management style at the Abbey was famous and controversial.
- He was relatively permissive. At times he was even accused of bending the Rule of St. Benedict, a code that was followed strictly by the Cistercians.
- At the peak of Aelred's abbacy, there were over 140 monks and 500 lay brothers in residence at Rievaulx.
- Major structural enhancements became necessary for all buildings at the monastery.
- Many of the funds for renovation came, at least in part, from local nobles who donated their possessions to the monastery in exchange for prayers during the tumultuous Anarchy in England from 1135-1154.



The only extant illustration of Aelred, from a manuscript of *Mirror of Charity*.



The presbytery, or rectory, at Rievaulx, probably begun around 1140.

Important Dates

- 1110: Aelred born at Hexham (Northern England)
- 1134: Aelred joins Rievaulx
- 1135-1153: The Anarchy
- 1142: Aelred becomes novicemaster at Rievaulx
- 1143-1147: Aelred abbot of Revesby
- 1147-1167: Aelred abbot of Rievaulx
- 1160s: Aelred completes a large number of his famous writings, including *On the Soul* and *Spiritual Friendship*
- 1167: Aelred dies



An outside view of the ruins of the Rievaulx church, a revolutionary piece of monastic architecture, probably begun in the late 1140s.

Aelred Today

- In the past ten years alone, 79 scholarly works have been produced which either focus entirely on Aelred or examine him and his writings in a thematic study.
- His works have been translated into Dutch, English, French, German, Italian, Polish, and Spanish.
- Scholarly interest focuses on a variety of topics, although some common themes include Aelred's sexual orientation and history, his thoughts on the soul, his spirituality, historiography, and theology.
- Aelred's most controversial writings focus on the body and its relationship with the spirit.
- Many of his works concentrate on relationships among Christians or those that Jesus may have had.
- Aelred's sexuality has been particularly controversial.
- Some scholars believe his early years involved several affairs with men at the Royal Court of Scotland.
- Some even believe he remained sexually active as abbot of Rievaulx.
- Much scholarship, though, has been dedicated to proving that Aelred's relationships remained platonic after he took his vows.

Regardless of his sexual orientation, Aelred's writings on Christian friendships are still widely read and used instructionally by monks who follow the Rule of Benedict. Aelred's legacy is controversial because he was unconventional, and this is precisely what makes him so fascinating.

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Image References

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