

## Patrons, privileges, property – Sorø Abbey's first half century

By Brian Patrick McGuire

The island of Zealand in the medieval period housed two Cistercian abbeys, Esrum and Sorø. Esrum was a royal and ecclesiastical abbey, in the sense that from the very first years many of the top figures in the Danish church and state participated in the endowment and affairs of the place [1]. Esrum was, thanks to Archbishop Eskil of Lund, a primary centre of religious life, a direct offshoot of Clairvaux. It thus became the head of its own family, which came to count many daughter abbeys. But this spiritual centre remained geographically isolated from centres of population and from all other religious houses, except for the Augustinian Æbelholt. Sorø, as daughter of Esrum, owed obedience to its mother house. Its relationship with the secular church was more on a local, as opposed to national level [2]. Most of all Sorø was the abbey founded by and for some of the most powerful land-owners of Western Zealand. Even in its brief Benedictine period Sorø owed everything to the group of people whom later historians came to call *Hviderne*, the Whites [3]. From the first decades the members of this family made clear to the monks that gifts of land meant burial in the church. Such a practice was with few exceptions forbidden by the decisions of the Cistercian General Chapter [4]. But the records we have from Sorø tell us nothing about any conflict between ideal and practice.

While Sorø, despite its legendary wealth and prestige, created by its

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[1] See my article, "Property and Politics at Esrum Abbey," *Medieval Scandinavia* 6, 1973. There were also two Cistercian convents on Zealand, one at Slangerup, the other at Roskilde.

[2] By the perhaps confusing expression, I mean the personnel and structure belonging to the parish, diocesan, or papal organs within the church, as opposed to the monastic orders and institutions.

[3] This name will be used for convenience's sake, even if it is a post-medieval invention. See Poul Nørlund's remarks in "Jorddrotter på Valdemarstiden", *Festskrift for Kristian Erslev* (Copenhagen, 1927), pp. 141–142. Prof., dr. phil. Niels Skyum-Nielsen suggests the name *Skjalm-slægten* (the Skjalm family).

[4] For the various decisions on the matter, see Edw. Ortvéd, *Cisterciordenen og dens Klostre i Norden*, Vol. I: *Cisterciordenen Overhovedet* (Cpn., 1927), p. 78.

relations with Absalon, Esbern Snare, Anders and Peder Sunesen, started out as a regional foundation, Esrum from the outset was an international community. This distinction becomes more blurred after the end of the thirteenth century. By then the cluster of families descending from the Whites no longer played such a dominant role in the abbey's life. But also in the later period at Sorø, there is an immediate nearness to and dependence on the rural, lay aristocratic core of Zealand society.

Besides being involved with big landowners, Sorø had to accept its geographical proximity to other central religious foundations of Zealand. Fifteen kilometers to the east was the flourishing Benedictine abbey of St. Bent at Ringsted. Thirty kilometers to the south another Benedictine house, that of St. Peder outside Næstved. To the west, at a distance of fifteen kilometers, was the Johannite abbey of Antvorskov outside Slagelse. Only to the north were there no religious houses, but not so far to the northeast was the giant of Roskilde, with its cathedral chapter and innumerable convents. The bishop and chapter of Roskilde were the greatest landowners in the country.

By the time Sorø was founded as a Cistercian house in 1161, Ringsted and Næstved were already well established. Both in terms of available land and in consideration of the Cistercian desire for semi-total isolation from populated centres, the island of Soer, surrounded by lakes and forests, was still uncomfortably close to the complications of medieval civilisation [5].

And yet Sorø made it. Despite the difference with mother Esrum, the daughter grew up quickly and found her place in Denmark. This is the great silent triumph of the place and a key to our understanding of the two abbeys. Both have a permanence and stamina about them—and at the same time show an uncanny flexibility. Grounded on land, careful, conservative, unimaginative in their economic administration, both enjoyed centuries of relative tranquillity. They survived not merely because they lasted out every crisis by pure stubbornness but also because they went through several renewals and changes of mind. In this study of Sorø we will limit ourselves to the very earliest times,

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[5] Tage Christiansen of Nationalmuseet in Copenhagen has pointed out to me that monasteries in the heartland of medieval Europe, as in northern France, were often much more crowded together than Sorø to its neighbours. But if we compare Sorø with Esrum, whose only near neighbour was Æbelholt, the former is much more exposed to the possibility of disputes about land ownership with other religious foundations.

from the coming of the Benedictines, probably in the 1190's, to about 1215, and try to see the abbey in its first and most violent period of growth.

### 1. *The Sources for Sorø*

The main source for this period is the first part of a very tricky and extremely troublesome manuscript contained in the Royal Library, Gl. kgl. Saml. 2485, 4°, and printed in *Scriptores Rerum Danicarum* IV, 463 ff. Danish historians call it the *Sorø Gavebog*, and we can translate this to the Sorø Donation Book. This should be distinguished from the Sorø (Book, (AM 290, fol., at the Armagnæanske Institut, Christiansbrygge 8, Copenhagen) which is an unprinted manuscript from 1490 containing the text of various privileges to Sorø, most of them later than the twelfth century and very many being the text of general papal privileges given to all Cistercian houses [6]. For our purposes, the Sorø Book is valuable only for the early charters, while the Sorø Donation Book is essential but contains a hornet's nest of problems. These will hopefully be clarified sometime in the future when the definitive edition of the Donation Book started by Poul Nørlund and now taken over by Tage Christiansen and Kai Hørby is completed. Until then we can get most help from Nørlund's article, "De ældste Vidnesbyrd om Skyldtaxationen" [7]. Nørlund thinks that the Donation Book, whose manuscript is from 1440 or immediately afterwards, combines at least two different elements—an earlier account of the first years of Sorø and the donations given by its founders up until about 1212, and a later letter registry over donations and land transactions, up until 1440. The situation is made more complicated by the fact that the earlier section contains many later interpolations [8]. The trouble with Nørlund's conclusions is that his caution as an historian precludes him from making anything more than a preliminary hypothesis. Thus he says that the section beginning with the words "Sequitur exacta relatio" about the good deeds of Absalon

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[6] A summary of these charters is given in SRD IV, 560–69.

[7] *Historisk Tidsskrift* 9 Række, VI Bind (1929), 54–95, esp. 54–68. This article was a gentlemanly but firm answer to the rather glib assertions of Erik Arup about the divisions of the Donation Book in his article, "Leding og Ledingsskat i det 13 Arhundrede", HT 8R, V Bind (1914–15), 141–237, esp. 202–214.

[8] Kai Hørby has pointed out to me that the wear on the last leaf of the first section of the manuscript indicates that it had a life of its own before it was finally joined to the second section.

and his relatives (SRD IV, 468–75) was originally written sometime between 1212 and 1215. But he does not make any definite conclusions about the dating of the most fascinating part of this first section, the Cistercian account of the Benedictines at Sorø, who were there prior to 1161 (463–67), as well as a following brief mention of donations by Absalon and Esbern Snare and their relatives (467–68), which precedes the so-called “*Exacta relatio*”. For the sake of clarity, but only until the new edition of the Sorø Donation Book comes, we can tentatively judge these fragments as originating from writings contemporary with the “*Exacta relatio*”, if not a few years earlier. The memory of the Benedictine foundation was quite fresh when our Cistercian chronicler wrote so arrogantly about it, and so it is hard to imagine this polemic as belonging to a later period. We thus in the first section of the Sorø Donation Book (463–475) have a fifteenth century collection of materials for Sorø’s history based on an early thirteenth century account or accounts for the early days of the abbey and its first donors. Together with these materials was added after 1440 a register of charter and transactions having to do with Sorø.

## 2. *The Benedictine Abbey: History and Myth*

Our review of the sources has shown that the only part of Sorø’s history covered by something resembling a chronicle is the period that precedes the arrival of Cistercians from Esrum. According to the author of the account, the Benedictine house founded at Sorø, probably in the 1140s was a den of sin. Through his description we get a marvellous, even if brief, introduction to the way a proponent of a new ideology tries to expose the faults and limitations of an older ideology’s practice. It may well be that the Sorø Benedictines were lax from the beginning, but the important side of the matter for us is that the Sorø Cistercians were so totally convinced of their moral superiority to their predecessors. Such an attitude is helpful for role defining in a group of people that feels it is living in some ideal manner. For a brief moment we get a glimpse of the pioneering spirit of the Danish Cistercians, and we can assert that it resembles in content the way the categorical Bernard look at his task in using his order to reform monasticism as a whole. It cannot be sufficiently emphasized, however, that the interpretative part of the Cistercian narration concerning the Benedictine foundation tells us much more about the Sorø Cistercians in about 1200 than about the Benedictines a half century earlier. The clear prejudice against the Benedictines makes all the information

suspect, except for the property donations, for which the Cistercians had good reason to be correct.

According to our writer, the founder Toke Skjalmsen promised many donations to the Benedictine house but did not have time to realize them before his death [9]. On his deathbed he called together his brothers and donated to the fledgling Benedictine monastery as much of his possessions as he legally was entitled to give away to non-relatives [10]. The lands included Sorø itself; Jørlunde south of Slangerup and thus at a great distance from Sorø; Fjenneslev Lille, much more strategically placed to the east of Sorø; part of Frømoste, north of Fjenneslev; some of the nearby forest of Haverup; a few fishing places, at least one being on Tuel Lake by Sorø; and also nearby, half of Heglinge. This was not enough on which to support a religious foundation, and perhaps in recognition of this lack, Toke also gave 16 marks of gold, which he entrusted to his brother Asser for the purpose of building a church. He was buried in the family church at Fjenneslev and only later was his body transferred by the Cistercians to their new church. Thomas, who had been prior of St. Canute at Odense, was made head of the new community, and under him the stone church was built [11]. Toke's brother Asser eventually retired to the monastery just before his death, at the same time donating the village of Sorø and neighbouring fields, some forest land north of Sorø, the village of Heglinge, a disappeared settlement probably just south of present day Pedersborg, and in the neighbouring Tuel Lake an inlet called Sundrewhigh, for fishing, plus another fishing spot called Vedlegerd. Finally the brothers got another share of Haverup Wood.

Asser is supposed to have died only thirteen days after the stone church was finished. He had left the monks with barely enough to start a permanent community. Poul Nørlund's comparison of the initial endowment of Sorø with that of the Næstved Benedictines shows how insignificant Sorø's lands were at this time [12]. The most

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[9] SRD IV, 465.

[10] This amount, called the *halve hovedlod*, was half of the maximum land value that could be left to a son and equivalent to what a daughter was legally entitled to inherit. See Nørlund, *Festskrift*, 163–5.

[11] SRD IV, 466.

[12] "Klostret og dets Gods", p. 56, contained in the collection of articles entitled *Sorø: Klostret, Skolen, Akademiet gennem Tiderne*, I (Cpn., 1924). The number of mentions of Nørlund's work already reveals my debt to him. I do not intend in this article to update or disagree with Nørlund on any important points but

valuable possession Asser left to Sorø was his body. He was buried in the church, and so began the essential tradition of the West Zealand landowners arranging burials at Sorø and thus transferring property to the monks in payment.

The most exotic part of Asser's story is his secret donation of sixteen marks of gold to the monastery. He actually gave it to his own brother Ebbe Skjalmsen, who was the father of Sune Ebbesen, and the grandfather of Anders and Peder Sunesen, whose roles would be so central at Sorø [12a]. Ebbe was caught up in politics and war and so quite naturally handed over the gold to Prior Thomas, who is castigated for his simulated piety. Under him, says our compiler, Sorø made no progress at all. But Ebbe could not know, and when he died he was buried to his own desire in the Benedictine church. So even though the bones of the first brother, Toke, lay at Fjenneslev, together with those of his father Skjalm, two of the sons had now given Sorø the sepulchral insurance it needed in order to survive.

Thomas's successor, Jordanus, who had been prior at Ringsted, made an equally bad job of heading Sorø, while the next prior, Robert, an abbot from Sweden, was more interested in his stomach than in the monastic life [13]. The picture is one of unmitigated decline from the very first. The contrast between the unselfish generosity of the Whites and the corruption of the Benedictine priors could hardly be stronger. The short narrative could not make the coming of the Cistercians more necessary and welcome:

Robert departed without honour, as the others who came before him, and the place became desolate, since by divine disposition it was to be handed over to other farmers, who would make it bear fruit [14].

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merely give a fuller treatment to the early days at Sorø than he had room for in his summary of the medieval development and in his treatment of particular problems in the Sorø Donation Book.

[12a] SRD IV, 466–67.

[13] SRD IV, 467.

[14] *Ibid.*, Recessit (Robertus) igitur sine honore, sicut et alii, qui fuerunt ante ipsum, et desolatus factus est locus, quoniam dispositione divine locandus erat aliis agricolis, qui facerent fructum.

*Locandus* here apparently has the classical sense of a piece of property being farmed out or given out on contract, God in this case being the owner who was dissatisfied with the former tenants. This subtle and compact turn of phrase points to a writer who had a good command of Latin and is at least an indicium for a

We do not know from any other source whether the monastery was totally abandoned before 1161, but our chronicle's passage brings to mind an image of weeds covering the fields and the church falling into disrepair before the Cistercians arrive. So we have a perfect setting for the Cistercian myth of reform and renewal [15]. The very language of the description, emphasizing the contrast between unproductive and productive land, is in the best tradition of Bernard.

### 3. *The Cistercians, 1161–1201, and Absalon*

Absalon and his brother Esbern Snare arrive on the scene as gigantic heroes, the stuff of folk legend: "strong men and renowned in all the land and beyond every Danish family. They with their brothers and relatives continued and completed the work in excellent fashion, as will be made known below" [15a]. These words serve as a preface to the narration that Nørlund dated as prior to 1212.

Concerned by the decline of Sorø, Absalon, now bishop of Roskilde, sent a group of Cistercians there from the Esrum community, which had been founded at the latest in 1151. The date given for the Sorø foundation is 13 June 1161. Our compiler tells us that the holdings of the Benedictine monastery were so limited that Absalon provided the Cistercians with a great many new possessions so that they could have what they needed. Here we may have an alternative explanation for the trouble in the previous foundation. There was just not a sufficient economic base.

We can see the way Absalon functioned in the story of the acquisition of the forest of Haverup, just north of Sorø [16]. We have already heard that Toke Skjalmsen and Asser had given parts of this forest, and now Absalon saw to it that the rest of the area came to the monks, first through the holdings of Magga, one of Skjalm Hvide's daughters, and secondly through his own holdings.

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high level of learning at Sorø at the opening of the thirteenth century. Also the language is in perfect harmony with the agricultural imagery so popular among Cistercian twelfth century writers.

[15] Cistercian hostility towards Benedictines was apparently reciprocated in full measure. I have not yet been able to find Danish examples, but see Franz Winter, *Die Cistercienser des Nordöstlichen Deutschlands* I, 46 (Gotha, 1868): "Sie sahen die Cistercienser nicht als jüngere Brüder, sondern als Gegner mit unerträglichem Hochmuth an und das nicht ganz mit Unrecht."

[15a] SRD IV, 467.

[16] SRD IV, 467–8.

But the villages, forests, and fishing areas that Sorø already had were ill-suited for the basic Cistercian method of cultivation: the grange farm. Under this system, the monks could remain attached to their cloister, while the lay brothers lived out on the granges, preferably not too far from the monastery, and either cultivated the lands themselves or else supervised hired labour [17]. In this way the monks avoided the responsibilities and complications of owing village whose peasants would be bound to the monastery. Even though the brothers from the first did have villages, they seem to have made an effort up until about 1200 to organize their agriculture around granges. The first such grange we hear of is that of Gudum [18], located northeast of Slagelse and mentioned in the first papal letter Sorø received, from Lucius 3 in 1181, but not called a grange until Urban 3's letter of 1186 [19]. We can be fairly certain that none of this land had previously belonged to Absalon, but the narration makes it clear that he helped the monks with the exchanges and occasional purchases from local owners necessary to put together a sufficiently large area for a grange farm.

Also mentioned in the earliest papal bull is Slagelsesbo, just to the east of Sorø and today known as Store Ladegård [20]. Here there were some extra complications. Valdemar 1 owned this land, but Absalon, aware of its central location and potential convenience for the brothers, convinced the king to exchange his holding for the village of Skelverhøj. The latter belonged neither to Sorø nor to Absalon but to the bishopric of Roskilde. This fact did not trouble Absalon. He compensated Roskilde by giving it Jørlunde, the distant property that his uncle Toke had given Sorø and which could hardly have been of any worth to the monks. To make sure Roskilde got a fair deal, Absalon also handed over what Sorø had in Hesselrød and in Lerholte, also in Northern Zealand. These Sorø had previously acquired from Toke Ebbesen, the son of Ebbe Skjalmsen.

Already we see a pattern of property acquisition that we will find repeatedly in Sorø's history, and in that of all Danish Cistercian houses. The monks are almost always glad to get land willed to them, no matter how distant from their monastery, so long as there is no

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[17] See *Ortved*, op. cit., pp. 109–110.

[18] SRD IV, 468.

[19] *Diplomatarium Arna-Magnæanum* (DAM), ed. G. Thorkelin I, (Cpn., 1786), pp. 266, 275.

[20] SRD IV, 469.



price tag attached. Distant holdings are simply considered capital expendable in exchanges which enable the monks to acquire choice lands closer to the monastery. Absalon, with his fine sense for balancing different interests, must have been an excellent teacher for the monks in the art of exchanging lands and ending up with good farming areas in the immediate vicinity of the monastery.

Still, Sorø owned only half of Slagelsesbo. The other half was in the possession of small landowners. Sorø could not establish a grange there, as we can see from Lucius's 1181 letter listing Slagelsesbo as a village, not a grange. But in the 1186 papal bull Slagelsesbo is called a grange. It looks as though Absalon in the meantime was at work, sometimes convincing the landholders to donate their lands, sometimes having to resort to exchanges [21].

In the neighbouring Slaglille, we can see the individuals involved in Sorø's acquisition. A certain Trued Lille, who built the church at Slaglille, gave  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a bol of land to Sorø. His sister, Tolla, gave the remaining fourth [22]. Ulf Ebbesen gave land worth half a mark. His son-in-law Kød gave two øre. The list of names is long, and it must have been painstaking and frustrating work to fill in all the missing parts of the puzzle. After Absalon's death, the Bishop of Roskilde added to his farm at Bjernede, slightly to the north of the Slaglille area, a number of properties on the border of what must have been the Slagelsesbo grange [23]. This was a major defeat for the monks, who would have preferred to buy the Roskilde bishop out of Bjernede and so have a clear swath of properties to the east of Sorø. But not until 1414 did Roskilde completely give up all its lands around Alsted herred, so the Sorø monks apparently in the meantime had to learn to live with their powerful neighbours.

Compared to Slagelsesbo, Lynge grange came easily to the monastery [24]. Just to the south of Sorø Lake and located between two long corridors of forest area, Lynge is already named as a grange in 1181. The Sorø Book of Donations only says that Absalon acquired the land for the monastery "partly by purchase and partly by just exchange". One wonders how many tactical moves and hard-driven bargains lie

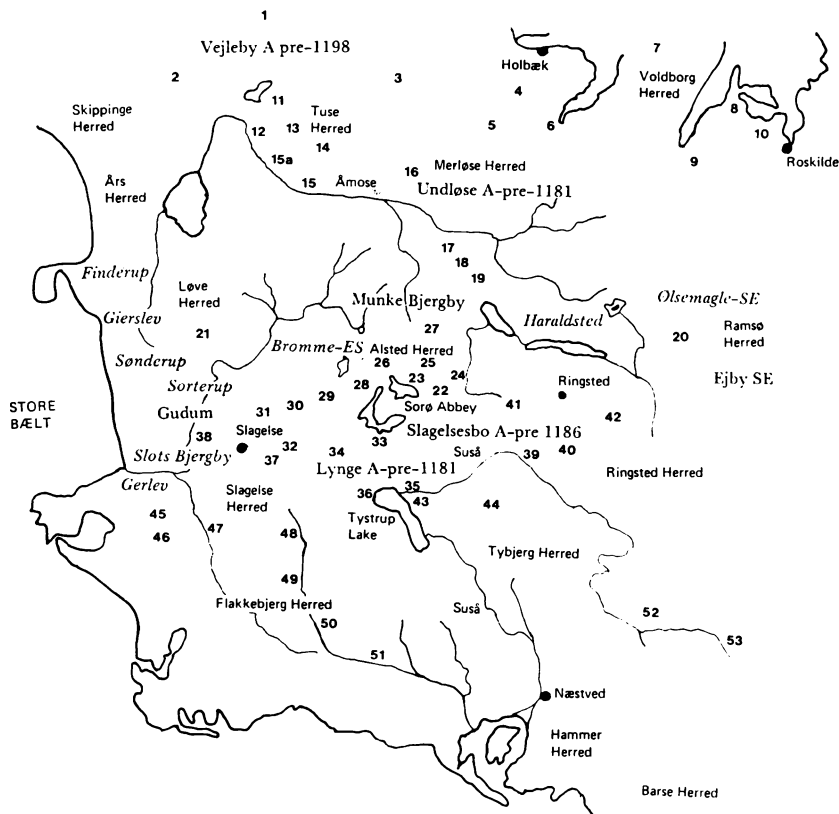
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[21] SRD IV, 472.

[22] Poul Nørlund, *Festskrift*, p. 147. This article contains a very helpful section, "Hviderne og Sorøegnen", which goes through the family properties, mainly using the information of the Sorø Donation Book.

[23] SRD IV, 469.

[24] SRD IV, 469.



### SORØ LANDS 1161-1214

All the granges are included, except for Asserbo in Northern Zealand and Tvåaker in Halland, viz. Vejleby, Undløse, Munkø Bjergby, Ejby, Gudum, Slagelsesbo, Lyngø.

Note that the immediate area around the abbey is also considered a grange.

All parishes for which Sorø came to receive the proceeds of the bishop's part of the tenth are italicized, as: *Finderup*.

Most outlying possessions are included, but in the area immediately around Sorø, space has not allowed for a few.

A – indicates that Absalon gave the land or arranged the transaction.

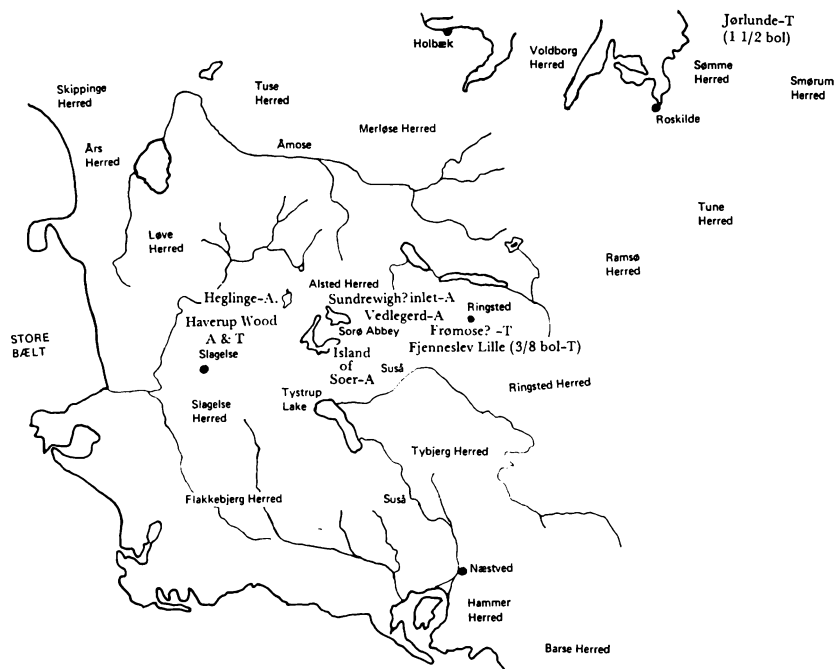
ES – Esbern Snare responsible for the donation. PS – Peder Sunesen.

SE – Sune Ebbesen (died 1186).

The village names included here by no means indicate that Sorø came into possession of the entire village. But often a considerable portion of the places named did come wholly or nearly so into Sorø's possession. Geographically the map follows modern courses of streams, but the east end of Sorø Lake has been expanded to give some idea of its approximate size in the Middle Ages.

A + indicates that the given holding was alienated from Sorø in the year noted.

Note that except for Undløse and Vejleby, holdings involved in the 1205 Pedersborg deal are not included here. See the special map.

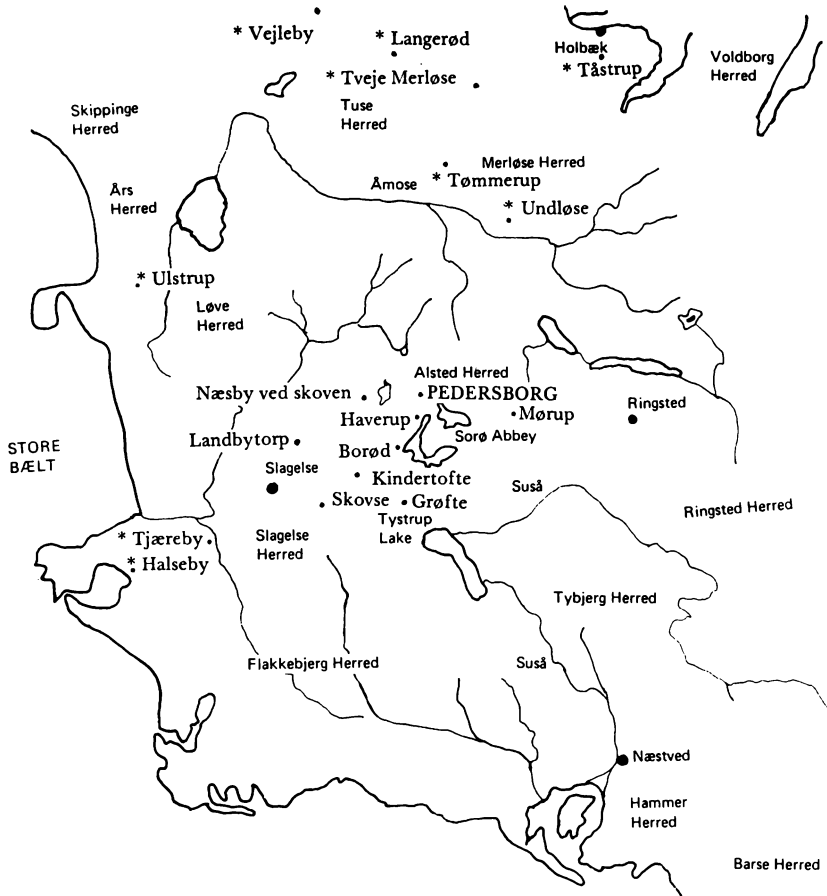


# BENEDICTINE SORØ-PRE-1161

Donations of Toke Skjalmsen (T) and Asser Rig (A)

The numbers on page 14 stand for the following locations:

- |   |                           |  |
|---|---------------------------|--|
| 1: Vejleby + 1205                               | 17: Assertorp             | 36: Suserup + 1215                       |
| 2: Snertinge                                    | 18: Stenmagle-ES disputed | 37: Oldebjerg 1206                       |
| 3: Ellinge A + 1181-6                           | 19: Nyrup 1213            | 38: Rosted + pre 1186                    |
| 4: Tveje Merløse A 1199                         | 20: St. Salby-SE          | 39: Vrangstrup                           |
| 5: Sasserup                                     | 21: Krænkerup A-1199      | 40: Skellerød                            |
| 6: Eriksholm A 1199                             | 22: Slaglille             | 41: Sigersted (Gitte SE sister pre 1186) |
| 7: Jorlunde + pre-1186                          | 23: Sasserbro Mill        | 42: Bjæverskov A part SE                 |
| 8: Hesselrød + pre-1186                         | 24: Mørup, PS-1205        | 43: Broby PS 1214                        |
| 9: Vindinge + post 1198                         | 25: Bjernede + post-1201  | 44: Åse Anders Sunesen post 1198         |
| 10: Ovre ES's wife but to A Glostrup A-pre-1198 | 26: Heglinge + pre-1186   | 45: Vemmelev A pre 1181                  |
| 11: Tornved-A-1199                              | 27: Ørslev Vestre 1205    | 46: Fårdrup + post 1188                  |
| 12: Læsøholm A-1199                             | 28: Pedersborg 1205       | 47: Gimlinge                             |
| 13: Akseholm A                                  | 29: Haverup Wood          | 48: Skørpinge + post 1198                |
| 14: Skamstrup                                   | 30: Kindertofte PS        | 49: Gimlingetorp 1207-15                 |
| 15: Dønnerup                                    | 31: Dævidsrød A 1199      | 50: Ormager 1207-15                      |
| 15a: Sørninge                                   | 32: Skovse PS 1205        | 51: Førslev                              |
| 16: Merløse, regained later + sold again 1205   | 33: Knudstrup A pre-1198  | 52: Ornum + pre 1186                     |
|   | 34: Stenstrup             | 53: Atterup SE                           |
|   | 35: Alsted 1199           |  |



### THE PEDERSBORG DEAL—1205

Names give villages where Sorø got lands from Jens, grandson of Peder Torstensen. Names with a star indicate lands which Jens got from the monks in return.

behind that phrase. The monks at least seem proud of this holding: "It is a grange that is notable and very ancient [25]."

In the course of the 1160's and 1170's, Sorø thanks to Absalon was slowly building up an agricultural base which it would hold onto for centuries. But this was not enough. The Cistercian rules required fish as one of the main sources of nourishment [26], and so Absalon saw to it that Sorø acquired the village of Vejleby, which in medieval times was on an arm of Lammefjord [27]. The Donation Book says that the brothers were in great need of fishing facilities, and this statement hints at least at what a significant and substantial enterprise the abbey already must have become. After all, Sorø itself was surrounded by fresh water lakes, but these were not enough. Now the brothers apparently needed salt water fish. The property is not listed in any papal bull until that of Innocent 3 in 1198 [28].

During these years Absalon succeeded in getting a group of Carthusians to come to Denmark and gave them some land in Asserbo in Northern Zealand [29]. The experiment failed. The brothers returned home to France, and Absalon was left with Asserbo. In the transactions that ensued we can see the man as more a worldly businessman than a pious benefactor of religious foundations. Absalon had previously given Sorø some land in Undløse for 52 marks silver, and in return for their giving him all of Undløse, he gave the monks Asserbo. It is difficult to understand why the monks said yes to such a deal. Asserbo was distant and unsuited for grange farming, while Undløse was much closer and offered excellent pasturage. It may well be that the monks consented because it would have been too embarrassing to say no to their great patron.

At any rate, by 1181 Asserbo had been incorporated as one of the monastery's first granges and is named again as such in the 1198 bull from Innocent 3. Absalon soon saw to it that the brothers got Undløse back [30]. Perhaps he had intended to do so all along, but in any case he gave the brothers this valuable pasture land in return for Ellinge

[25] *Ibid.*, ". . . est grangia notabilis et multum antiqua".

[26] The prohibition against eating meat was one of the strongest rules of the Order. See Canivez, *Statuta Capitulorum Generalium Ordinis Cisterciensis* (Bibliothèque de la Revue d'Histoire Ecclésiastique: Louvain, 1933), for the year 1157, nr. 14.

[27] SRD IV, 469.

[28] *Bullarium Danicum*, 1198–1316, ed. Alfred Krarup (Cpn., 1931), p. 11.

[29] SRD IV, 469–70.

[30] SRD IV, 470.

near Holbæk. The brothers had acquired Ellinge on an exchange arranged also by Absalon before 1181, in which the second wife of Esbern Snare, Ingeborg, had left Ovre (Hvidovre and Rødovre today) to Sorø, which Absalon then acquired (probably because of his interest in his new fortress town of Copenhagen) and gave up his own Ellinge in return [31]. In this transaction our compiler speaks of the value of Ellinge as pasture land, and now in giving up Ellinge for Undløse the brothers were giving up a more distant pasture area for a closer one.

To follow this succession of exchange, donations, and purchases is a dizzying, time-consuming process, but it is for this period the best and often the only way to penetrate the relationship between Absalon and Sorø. Absalon continued to be involved with the monastery after he became archbishop of Lund in 1177. His intimate, down-in-the-dirt manipulation with the lands of Sorø contrasts with his more distant relationship with Esum. Always willing to help the Esum monks, Absalon did not show the same enthusiasm for their interests. As a result Esum seems to have been relatively independent from the secular church and any network of families, while Sorø remains the beneficiary of Absalon and his relatives. It could be objected that this impression is exactly the one that the Sorø monks want to give us and that they exaggerate the influence of the Whites in order to secure the continuing support of family members. But the bare record of who gave what is enough to convince us that especially Absalon and Esbern Snare were intimately caught up in the growth of Sorø up to 1200.

Absalon's favouritism for Sorø must have brought some unfavourable response, especially from those close to the interests of the Roskilde bishopric. Our compiler summarizes Absalon's gifts and arrangements for Sorø by asserting that he only in a few cases gave directly to the monastery lands that belonged to the church of Roskilde. Almost always the lands he donated to Sorø came from his own patrimony [32]. There is an atmosphere of unease and defensiveness in those lines, as if the monks fear a challenge to their holdings from Roskilde. Such a challenge did not come until later in the thirteenth century, and it is actually surprising that until then the tension was kept beneath the surface.

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[31] SRD IV, 468.

[32] SRD IV, 470.

Just as Roskilde bishops held land very close to Sorø, so Sorø had interests right in Roskilde. Absalon gave Sorø a direct share in the wealth of Roskilde's religious foundations: the convent of Our Lady, which was probably reformed and made Cistercian in these years, seems to have had some kind of shrine to St. Margaret which attracted pilgrims and donations [33]. Two of Absalon's charters to Sorø that we have and a number of papal bulls confirm this gift.

Even more challenging to the church at Roskilde, Sorø was entitled through Absalon to the entire episcopal share ( $\frac{1}{3}$ ) of the tenth paid in Ringsted herred [34]. This must have been a large amount, but later Absalon had to modify the arrangement. "In order that he avoid prejudicing his successors," our compiler tells us, he instead gave to Sorø the episcopal share of the tenth in a number of parishes [335]. These parishes were not all in the immediate vicinity of the abbey; it must have been a chore for the monks to see that they got all the funds to which they were entitled. The parishes were: Finderup (Løve herred, Holbæk amt); Gierslev (same); Sorterup, Sønderup, and Slots Bjergby (all Slagelse h., Sorø amt); Haraldsted (Ringsted h., Sorø amt); Ølsemagle (Ramsø h., København amt) [36]. We have copies of both of the original privileges, the first giving the Ringsted tenth, the second providing the substitute. They are both composed in a warm, almost emotional language, which tells of the role of the Cistercians.

These letters may have been conceived by Abbot Simon of Sorø himself [37]. The first has been dated between 1161 and 1171; the second after 1171. Absalon's most complete explanation for the change, however, is not given until he confirmed Sorø's properties after 1197 [38]. He says he could no longer give the whole herred's tenth to Sorø when the medium of payment changed from money to grain. Absalon's decree refers to the decision made by the drafters of the Church Law of Skåne and Zealand that in the future the episcopal part of the tenth would be collected not in money but in grain [39].

[33] First mentioned in Lucius 3 privilege – DAM I, 266. Also included in Absalon's post 1197 letter – DAM I, 276.

[34] DD I, 2, nr. 147 – dated 1161–71. The whole story is told in the Donation Book, SRD IV, 470.

[35] DAM I, 250 (after 1171).

[36] Under Gierslev is named (SRD IV, 470) the adjacent chapel of Løve, and under Slots Bjergby the chapel of Gerlev (today a parish of its own).

[37] Arthur Köcher, "Absalons Brev til Roskilde Mariekloster," *Scandia* 2 (1929), 65–79, esp. 76.

[38] DAM I, 276.

Thus the episcopal share would vary in accordance with the size of the harvest and increase if new land came under cultivation, while under the old system, the payment had remained the same under all circumstances.

It is probable that the monks got an equivalent income after the new system was introduced—if not an even better one. Absalon wisely wanted to be certain that his successors would not be able to claim that the monks, in following the old system, no longer could demand anything of the revised tenth. Once again Absalon shows his unique ability to think and act in the monks' long term interest and here to anticipate future problems for them. In such helpful acts by Absalon and the monks' apparent acceptance of them, it is essential to realize how far we are from the initial impulse of Cistercian idealism, as expressed in the *Exordium Parvum*. Here it was made clear that the monks were to have nothing to do with receiving the income from tenths paid to the church by men living on lands that the monks did not own. The earliest infractions of this rule pointed out by J. B. Mahn come from the beginning of the thirteenth century [40], and so Sorø seems to have been among the very first of the Cistercian abbeys that disregarded the initial decision. One wonders whether Absalon or the monks were aware of the gap between ideal and practice, and the silence of our sources on such points is frustrating.

The possibility that Absalon's departure might generate a wave of resentment, claims, and disputes against the Sorø monks was never realized. The new bishop of Roskilde, Peder Sunesen, gave the abbey sometime between 1201 and 1212 not only the tenths of these seven parishes but also added three others, apparently on a temporary basis: Munke Bjerghby, Bromme, and Undløse, all north of Sorø [41]. The monastery's security lay not only in Absalon's care not to step on people's toes and the monks' clear and careful concern for registering all their property transactions, but also in the important fact that until 1277, all the bishops of Roskilde in one way or another were descendants of the original Whites: Peder Jacobsen, bishop from 1215–1225, was Peder Sunesen's nephew. Niels Stigsen, 1225/6–49 was a grandson of Toke Ebbesen, a brother of Sune Ebbesen, and did a great deal for Sorø. Because of politics (he served as royal chancellor

[39] Niels Skyum-Nielsen, *Kvinde og Slave* (Cpn., 1971), pp. 190–191.

[40] *L'Ordre Cistercien et son Gouvernement* (1098–1265). *Bibliothèque des Ecoles françaises d'Athènes et de Rome* (Paris, 1945), 116–118.

[41] *Diplomatarium Danicum* (DD) II, 4, nr. 41.



and had to flee the country), he sought and found refuge at Clairvaux, where he placed an interdict on his diocese and died in 1249[42]. Not since the days of Eskil had a Danish churchman gone to Clairvaux to die. This act is a tribute to the continuing pull of Cistercian spirituality on the members of the White family and thus on the core of the Danish establishment.

Jacob Erlandsen, bishop of Roskilde from 1249 to 1252, soon went on to greater—and more complicated—tasks. He was a great grandson of Anders Sunesen's sister, while his successor, Peder Skjalmsen Bang, 1254–74, was Jacob's nephew [43]. We are far from the original lines of the White family, but we can still trace these people back to Skjalm Hvide, the almost legendary first member of the family. Perhaps the duty of family loyalty is our best explanation for the lack of friction between Roskilde and Sorø during all these years. Also the lack of family connections between the two may be our best explanation for the friction that showed itself later on in the century. Likewise at Øm in the 1260's, the abbey was nearly ruined because of opposition with the Århus bishop. Once family bonds and sympathy were gone, there was often nothing left but a reservoir of resentment and jealousy. Sorø was thus singularly lucky that the Whites held on so long to the Roskilde bishopric. It would be no exaggeration to claim that despite all the formal legal exemptions a Cistercian abbey was granted from the power of the local bishop, its prosperity and sometimes even its survival, at least in Denmark, depended for a large part on the disposition and good will of this same bishop [44].

During the last period of his life, Absalon blessed Sorø with yet more possessions [45]. It is as if this complicated and obscure man never could be satisfied with what Sorø held in terms of lands and

[42] The notice in the Clairvaux burial list makes clear Niels Stigsen's cause and his family relationship to Eskil: "Ante medium altaris S. Martini ep. jacet bono memorie D. Nicolaus Roskildensis episcopus consanguineus D. Eskili Lundensis metropolis in regno Dacie archiepiscopi, exul pro libertate sue ecclesie, qui obiit anno domini MCCXLIX, viii kal. octobris" – p. 197 in *Le Trésor de Clairvaux*, Charles Lalore (Troyes, 1875).

[43] The best source for the confusing relationships among the Whites' offspring is still the tables given in SRD IV, 545, but they must be consulted with care, for there are mistakes. I have tried to trace family relationships as well as possible, but I prefer not to present a number of charts because this article deals primarily with Sorø and not with the White family.

[44] This is one of the subjects on which Nørlund does not touch.

[45] SRD IV, 470–71.

jumped on any chance to enrich the monks. This time it was Bjæverskov, which is not listed as a Sorø grange until a Gregory 9 bull of 1228. This would indicate that the property came into the monks' possession after 1198, when Innocent 3's bull was issued [46]. The village itself and much of the surrounding area west of Køge were given by a canon of the church of Lund, Asser. This is one of the few times in Sorø history that we see anyone from Lund taking an interest in the Sorø Cistercians. Asser also gave land in the district to the Lund canons. But Absalon saw to it that Sorø was able to get hold of this area through an exchange. Now that the brothers had a substantial piece of land (2½ bol), they themselves seem to have gone ahead to round off their possession. They gained a further bol of land where there was a mill, a meadow called Dragholm, and half of Jellinge forest [47].

By now the monks no longer needed Absalon, for they had learned to build up and complete land holdings. It may seem odd that the brothers were occupying themselves with lands so far to the east of Sorø, but if we look at our map of lands gained before 1215, we can see that the brothers had already gotten holdings in Ejby, Køge, and Ølsemagle from Sune Ebbesen, who had died in 1186 [48]. Ejby is listed in 1198 as one of the brothers' granges, and so it was quite natural that Absalon tried to help the brothers to enlarge their sphere of influence here. The expansion of Sorø west of Køge indicates how active, almost aggressive, the brothers were at this time in building up a solid system of granges and other holdings. Because of the presence of St. Bent's at Ringsted, the brothers had little chance of getting anything in Ringsted herred, and so they jumped over these lands and put down roots further to the east.

The ambition, adventure, and boldness that characterize the cooperation between Absalon and Sorø in these years climaxed in 1197 with the addition of Sorø's most distant grange, Tvåaker in Halland [49]. Already two decades earlier Esrum had gained Morup, also in Halland, as a place from which the monks could get lumber [50]. Now

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[46] *Bullarium Danicum*, p. 214.

[47] A *bol* or *mansus* is traditionally a term used to measure land. See the article "Bol" in *Kulturhistorisk Leksikon for Nordisk Middelalder* II, 55–62.

[48] SRD IV, 468.

[49] SRD IV, 471.

[50] *Cod. Esromensis*, ed. O. Nielsen (Cpn., 1880–81, photographic reprint, 1973), pp. 54–55 (from 1178).

Sorø followed suit in an area slightly to the north of Morup. Our compiler says that Absalon “took pity on the poverty of the community”. He was especially concerned with “their lack of lumber, which they needed for the construction of buildings [51].” At this stage it seems almost absurd to speak of poverty, for Sorø must have by now been one of the richest foundations in Denmark, but this is part of the Cistercian legend for Sorø. At Tvåaker the brothers could make salt, extract iron from the soil, and get timber – almost the same activities as those spoken of in an Esrum charter for Halland [52]. And just as with Esrum, the local inhabitants did not exactly welcome the monastic intruders. Absalon bought not only the village of Tvåaker but also a part of the surrounding forest.

Halland's social structure seems to have been less hierarchic than Western Zealand's, for the compiler tells us that Absalon bought this forest directly from the inhabitants of the place and not from any local landowner. The boundaries are very carefully described, but even so the inhabitants of the village of Tvåaker disputed them after Absalon's death. Under Anders Sunesen, the boundaries of the area belonging to Sorø were redefined, so that the lands belonging to the peasants of Tvåaker were clearly distinguished from those belonging to Sorø [53]. The description of the new boundaries speaks of a mill where iron produced by the monks and also of a southern ironworks. Anders Sunesen also strengthened the hold of Sorø over the area by giving the monks the episcopal share of the parish tenth of Tvåaker. Just as with the holdings of Sorø on Zealand and their confirmation by Absalon's successor Peder Sunesen, we can say that in Halland, Absalon's successor as archbishop of Lund strengthened and even extended the privileges already given.

But even here we have not yet completed our review of Absalon's generosity to Sorø. In his will, he left the monastery a great number of miscellaneous holdings from his patrimony. Many of these lands are in the Holbæk area, where Absalon's manor farm seems to have been,

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[51] SRD IV, 471: “. . . compassus indigentie dictae domus, specialiter de lignorum inopia, quibus necessario opus habebat pro consummandis aedificiis.” The assertion is hard to accept in consideration of Sorø's rich forest areas on Zealand.

[52] *Cod. Esrum.*, p. 230. Valdemar's letter is addressed to the inhabitants of Faurå hurred in Halland and orders them to let the brothers cut down living trees, to collect the wood of dead ones, to make salt, and to feed their pigs on the roots of the forest.

[53] SRD IV, 471. DD I, 4, 66 (1202–23).

with Holbæk itself and four villages, including Tveje-Merløse, with its beautiful twin-towered church, and Tåstrup, between Holbæk and Tveje Merløse [54]. Another substantial farm given Sorø was that of Læsøholm near Holmstrup, just south of Skarre Lake. This manor included the villages of Akselholm and Dønnerup. The fertile land around Åmosen forms the southwestern boundary of these new holdings, which opened up yet another substantial area for the cultivation of the monks. Yet another manor farm, Erikslev, south of Holbæk and on the inlet Bramsnæs vig, also went to Sorø, together with a myriad of smaller holdings. Only in the area immediately around Sorø itself could Absalon add little of importance. In Sorterup parish, the village of Tyvelse went to the monks. Also in Slagelse herred, Dævidsrød and Krenkerup came into their possession.

The actual text of Absalon's testament does not name these possessions individually but only says that he left Sorø with all his patrimony, except for the most sacred family property of all, Fjenneslev, which went to his brother Esbern Snare. Sorø thus missed the very property which would have done it the most immediate good, but even an Absalon could not alienate Fjenneslev to the monks. According to Arnold of Lübeck, he died at Sorø [55]. Unlike his ancestors, he does not seem to have become a monk of the foundation at the end of his days. At least we have no mention of deathbed vows. But it was hardly necessary. Absalon would remain through the centuries the primary benefactor of Sorø, the man who gave the place an economic basis on which it always could count.

In the midst of Absalon's decades of wheeling and dealing for Sorø, one wonders where Valdemar 1 and Knud 6 have been. With Esrum they were extremely generous with charters and exemptions, while with Sorø there are no surviving copies of privileges from them. We do know through an 1197 papal bull that each of the kings had exempted the labourers of the monastery from all royal service [56]. This sparse mention is of great value. First it tells us that Sorø did have lay labourers at this time and thus points to a shortage of lay brothers in cultivating the house's lands. Secondly the passage points

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[54] Absalon's will is in DD I, 4, 31. Names of the properties given to Sorø are in SRD IV, 473.

[55] See DD I, 4, 31.

[56] "... ut ab omni regio servicio (coloni monasterii) sint liberi et immunes". Th. Bartholin, *Collectanea C*, p. 582, Royal Library MS E don. var. 1, fol.. Also notation in SRD IV, 564.

to the pattern of royal good will that we know from Esrum and would expect for Sorø. Because of the lack of consistency in the types of privileges that have survived to us, Nørlund quite logically assumed that Sorø was just as richly endowed with royal charters as Esrum was [57]. But this assertion is undermined by the fact that the Sorø Book of 1490 has a great number of Absalon's charters from this period, as well as papal letters. Why would the ecclesiastical documents from this period be preserved in such numbers, while the royal ones were lost? There are many possibilities, among them that the royal charters were few and far between during this time, or that the monks did not value them as much as the ecclesiastical ones. In either case we come to the same conclusion: the relative unimportance of royal favouritism in this era for Sorø because of the total dominance of Absalon and his family. But it is perhaps superfluous to distinguish Absalon's policy from that of the king's, for Absalon's good will for Sorø automatically meant royal good will.

#### 4. *Absalon as a Person*

It might be in order to close this description of Sorø's benefits from Absalon with an attempt to see this legend as a person. In one way the Sorø account of his deeds only contributes and expands the myth of Absalon the great man that Saxo tried to build up. As far as the monks are concerned, Absalon can do anything if he sets his mind to it. He is energy and will incarnate. This view of Absalon is at the heart of the beautifully written and traditional work by Hans Olrik, *Konge og Præstestand* (especially volume two) [58]. Here we see Absalon bending the desires of King Valdemar to his own. As Olrik says, "Superior personalities' enthusiasm will always be irresistible [59]". Absalon here is a kind of *Übermensch*, perhaps partly fashioned by nineteenth century dreams, but already implicit in Saxo and in the Sorø source. The great question for us is whether we can go further and penetrate the impression our sources give us and reach the man himself. And here I think our monks have done us a great favour. In their concern with being factual, they give us the nasty details of land transactions that would not have interested a man like Saxo. And in these we find something about Absalon that we might have suspected from his great political success: his thoroughness. Like a medieval Kis-

[57] "De ældste Vidnesbyrd", *op. cit.*, p. 69, n. 1.

[58] *Valdemartidens Kirkemagt og Kongedømme* (Cpn., 1895).

[59] *Ibid.*, p. 215.

singer who does not mind immersing himself in trivia and even becomes a kind of messenger boy, Absalon was willing to negotiate with both peasants and magnates and to gather together, piece by piece, Sorø's central holdings. Absalon certainly had better things to do, but his passion for arranging the affairs of Sorø not only indicates a devotion to his monastery as his family's spiritual home, but also a deep personal need for order and completeness [60]. This is the picture the monks want to give us, but the myriad transactions speak for themselves of a patient but imaginative man slowly and coolly assembling the jigsaw puzzle of Central Zealand for Sorø's benefit.

#### 5. *Esbern Snare and the Sunesens: 1201–1214*

If there had been no Absalon, and if the party of brothers who emigrated from Esrum to Sorø in 1161 had had to count on more occasional donations from members of the White family, Sorø's history would have been completely different. One wonders whether the monks, less able to count on unlimited wealth and holdings, would have been able to realize the call of the original Cistercian spirituality. We cannot know, and it is probably useless to speculate on history's might-have-beens. We can at least assert that the very administration of this huge amount of land certainly must have taken a great deal of time, at least for the abbot, the cellarer, and the sub-cellarer. And we know that this land created many problems and conflicts for the monastery. As soon as Absalon leaves the scene, his relatives start getting stingy and holding back lands that already have been testamentated to Sorø. It may have been their jealousy of this rich foundation that motivated them, and it must have been galling to part with a parcel of land to a monastery for whom such a holding was nothing but one more drop in a very large and overflowing bucket.

Once again, however, Sorø was extremely lucky, for Absalon's brother Esbern Snare not only was generous in his donations to the monks but also gave his moral support to Absalon's will and tried to see to it that all the possessions came to the monks. And so Esbern gets

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[60] To speak in terms of "deep personal need" is to popularize the terms of psychology. But I think historians, even when confronted with the meagre Danish medieval sources, must try to see the figures of history as human beings with personalities. Otherwise history too easily either becomes a positivistic listing of proven facts or else a hunting ground for rigid theorists. For an evaluation of psychology in history, see the article by Jean Leclercq, "Modern Psychology and the Interpretation of Medieval Texts", *Speculum* XLVIII, 3, July, 1973, 476–490.

the highest compliment as a man “equally praiseworthy with his brother Absalon”. He was “always approving and confirming all things, both after Absalon’s death as before, even though he legally could have acted otherwise, if he had wished [61].” Already on the deaths of each of his wives, Esbern had given lands to Sorø [62], but he still willed the maximum amount possible of his possessions to the monastery. Not for many years did these lands come to the monks, for as our compiler says, Esbern’s sons hardly matched their father’s devotion. But, he goes on, God will still reward Esbern for he sees our hearts and knows that Esbern had intended the monastery’s best:

And although his sons did not act well together with him in that matter, but kept all things for themselves, it is still to be believed that he with God, who sees hearts, therefore was not deprived of the fruit of his reward and his good recompense [63].

For at brief instant, the history of Sorø is illuminated by a flicker of the twelfth century Renaissance and the intentionalism of Abelard’s *Ethics* [64]. Perhaps Abelard’s assertion – that what really matters is not the human act itself or its outcome but the intention behind it – is based on such a natural observation that we should not note its expression here by our Cistercian writer. But it is still possible that we are witnessing the reception in Denmark of a thought, an attitude that belongs to the greatest achievements of twelfth century humanism: the emphasis on inner motives and thus, human feeling, instead of outer results. It is not surprising that the place where such an attitude is found is a Cistercian monastery and an offshoot of Clairvaux. Despite the opposition between Abelard and Bernard, they were united in

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[61] SRD IV, 473: “Vir aequae cum fratre suo Absalon Archiepiscopo laudabilis et strenuus... semper approbans et confirmans omnia, tam post mortem ipsius quam ante, licet aliter de jure fecisse poterat, si voluisset.”

[62] Esbern Snare also distinguished himself by paying for the building of a stone house for the monastery’s bakery, probably the same one destroyed in the 1247 fire that almost totally ruined the monastery complex. SRD IV, 535.

[63] SRD IV, 473–4: Et quamvis filii non bene egerunt cum eo in parte illa, retinentes omnia sibi, credendum est tamen, ipsum apud Deum, qui videt corda, propterea fructu mercedis et merito bono non privatum.

[64] See the edition by D. E. Luscombe in the Oxford Medieval Texts (1971), esp. the section p. 53 entitled: “Quod intentione bona sit opus bonum”: “Bonam quippe intentionem, hoc est, rectam in se dicimus, operationem vero non quod boni aliquid in se suscipiat, sed quod ex bona intentione procedat.”

their concern with the inner life of the individual and his personal relationship with God.

Among the other descendants of the Whites given special mention by our writer or compiler is Anders Sunesen. Even though he was not nearly as generous as Absalon and Esbern, he gets very good treatment, perhaps because he still was alive when the section was written. He waited until after he had become archbishop of Lund before handing over to Sorø his share of lands that his father Sune Ebbesen already in 1186 or before had willed to Sorø [66]. The compiler does not criticize him for this delay but instead goes on to speak of the episcopal share of the Tvåaker tenth and his bestowal of episcopal insignia on the monastery.

Finally it was Anders who inspired his brothers to dig a canal. This still exists in segments today, running between Sorø Lake's southeast end and Tuel Lake [66]. The canal, called *Møllediget*, remains in our time as a monument to one of thirteenth century Denmark's greatest engineering achievements [67]. If we remember that Sorø, being founded on an island, lacked running water and thus the power necessary for driving mills, we can understand why the monks were so grateful to Anders Sunesen. Architectural excavations have not yet unearthed the course of *Møllediget* in its last section, but it is likely that it stretched right into the abbey complex and provided power and perhaps also drainage [68]. The ruins of Tintern Abbey in Monmouthshire provide a schoolbook example of the skill the Cistercians had in diverting watercourses, in this case actually leading the water beneath a number of the monastery's rooms to provide a complete plumbing system [69]. We also know from the biography of Bernard that Esum and Sorø's mother abbey Clairvaux was fitted out with a similar elaborate pipe and canal system beneath the various buildings [70].

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[65] SRD IV, 474 – DD I, 4, 68 – cannot be dated more closely than 1202–23.

[66] The original outlet from Sorø Lake is no longer visible, but a few dozen yards along a path known as *Filosofgangen*, the canal can be seen.

[67] Despite the uniqueness of *Møllediget* and its historical worth, there is a possibility that it will have to give way to an expansion of Sorø town's built-up area.

[68] Here I am greatly indebted to Kai Hørby, who provided an excursion to Sorø to examine the area of *Møllediget*. Also I must thank Tage Christiansen, who made me aware of *Møllediget*'s importance for Sorø's survival.

[69] See the guidebook to Tintern Abbey published by the Ministry of Public Building and Works (London, 1956), by O. E. Craster.

[70] C. P. O. Christiansen, *Bernard af Clairvaux*: Hans Liv, fortalt af Samtidige,



The letters of Abbot Wilhelm of Æbelholt, with his request to hold on to an Esrum monk for a few more days in order to finish a water conduit, provide a Danish example of the monks' abilities [71]. Water was life for the Cistercians, and so they had every reason to rank Anders Sunesen high on their list of benefactors.

Peder Sunesen resembled his brother Anders in taking a long time before handing over to Sorø his share of his father's land that had already been testamentated to the monks. But once again they received compensation in another area. Peder was invaluable to them in making sure that the terms of Absalon's will were respected. The compiler gives him special praise for providing a solution to a problem that apparently had plagued the monks for many years: Pedersborg [72]. The former owner of Pedersborg, Peder Thorstenseen, had been married to Skjalm Hvide's daughter Cecilia and apparently had built a formidable fortification there before his death in about 1175. The property had then gone to his grandson, Jens. He and the Sorø monks do not seem to have gotten on well. The compiler tells us that the monks were "daily suffering tribulations" from Pedersborg [73]. The problems are not explained in detail, but we can imagine that the owner could have demanded tolls from the monks for passing on their way to their northern holdings, or he could have sent his men to harass them directly [74]. In any case, the fortress of Pedersborg was too close for comfort, and so the monks rejoiced when Bishop Peder Sunesen arranged in 1205 that Pedersborg and its nearby villages, together with a number of outlying possessions in Slagelse herred's

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og et Udvalg af hans Breve. Selskabet for historiske kildeskrifters oversættelse (Cpn., 1926).

[71] SRD VI, 53–54. Another example can be found in the *Exordium Monasterii Carae Insulae*, contained in *Scriptores Minores Historiae Danicae*, M. Cl. Gertz (photographic reprint, Cpn., 1970) II, 176, concerning the skilled ("artificioso") monk Martin and his measurements of water levels. See also Winter, *op. cit.*, I, 169, "... so musste sich zunächst eine Kunst des Wasserbaues im Orden herausbilden und in der That sehen wir diese Kunst überall hervortreten, wo Cistercienser cultiviren."

[72] SRD IV, 474.

[73] SRD IV, 474: "Hic etiam (Petrus episcopus) sua promotione abstulit a fratribus et monasterio tribulationes quas cotidie patiebantur a fortalio de Borgh, quod nunc est curia seu villa quae Pæthersborgh dicitur..."

[74] Tage Christiansen has suggested that the tongue of land between Pedersborg and the island of Soer provided the only dry land access to the outside world for the monks. By closing this off, the lord of Pedersborg could easily have made life miserable for the monks.

west end be exchanged with Sorø's holdings in Undløse, Tømmerup, Tveje Merløse, Langerød, and Tåstrup, all in Merløse herred, plus the fishing village of Vejleby on Lammefjord, Tjæreby and Halseby in the far eastern part of Slagelse herred near Store Bælt. The monks followed their principle of giving up distant possessions for the sake of acquiring nearby ones, as we can clearly see from the map illustrating the Pedersborg deal.

The loss of Undløse with its pasture and Vejleby with its fishing was a blow for the monks. But psychologically and economically the Pedersborg exchange must have been a great relief for the monks. This is the first significant instance in which the monks, instead of trying to coexist with a powerful lay neighbour, simply buy him out of the district. This pattern will be repeated often in Sorø's history, even when it means financial loss or inconvenience for the monks. Always they were willing to pay a high price for peace.

In the west end of Slagelse herred where the Pedersborg deal brought land to Sorø in 1205 was a forest area, near the village of Landbytorp in Kindertofte parish. The holdings of the monks here brought a dispute with an owner of part of the forest, Knud Knudsen, and so once again Peder Sunesen acted as mediator and saw that Knud gave up his share in the forest in return for some land in Skørpinge, Vester Flakkebjerg herred [75]. Again the monastery bought out a troublesome neighbour and gave a more distant holding in order to get a closer one. Peder seems to have learned from Absalon what the monks needed for security and acted again in their favour when he convinced his many brothers to give up their claims an Have-rup Wood, which rightfully belonged to Sorø. In 1214, at the high altar in Sorø church, Peder Sunesen performed his last known official act for Sorø by donating a farm in Broby willed by his father Sune Ebbesen [76]. After Peder's death, Sorø was subjected to the first of many miserable controversies in Broby when a local knight, Karl, took over the monks' mill there. Finally, sometime before 1250, an exchange of land pacified him [77].

During this first great period from 1161 to c. 1215, first under Absalon and then under Esbern Snare, Anders and Peder Sunesen, Sorø led a charmed existence. Although there were problems, as at Pedersborg, the monks could feel that their role in society was gene-

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[75] SRD IV, 475.

[76] DD I, 5, 43.

[77] DD I, 5, 52.

rally accepted and appreciated. In order that the monks could pray for their benefactors and spread the Cistercian way of life in Denmark, some of the most powerful men in the kingdom were doing everything possible to guarantee them a material basis for their activities. Not only agricultural lands, but also forests, mines, fishing areas, and buildings, together with miscellaneous income sources, such as the share in the tenth – all were handed over to the monks in rapid succession. Just as in Esrum during the half century after foundation, the monks were looked after with a generosity all the more incredible when we compare it with later periods.

### 6. *The Record of Growth*

The prestige and power Sorø must have gained because of this wealth and backing are reflected in a decision by the Cistercian General Chapter from 1191 [78]. The Abbot of Løgum had encouraged the brothers of Herrisvad in Skåne to revolt against their abbot. The chanter of Herrisvad had plotted along with him. Now the conspiracy's two authors were charged to come to Cîteaux at Pentecost so that the abbot there could judge them (Cîteaux being the mother house for both Herrisvad and Løgum). If the two refuse to do so, then the abbot of Løgum is to be deposed by the abbots of Esrum and Sorø. The abbot of Sorø is to make known to the Herrisvad chanter that he is summarily thrown out of the Cistercian Order. As for the others, Germanus, the Herrisvad monk who is said to have started the revolt, and the lay brother who is the chanter's brother, both are to be transferred, one to Esrum and the other to Sorø. There they are to be given proper punishment for their crime.

These detailed and harsh instructions not only tell us a great deal about the General Chapter's attempt to maintain discipline in the distant frontier regions of Scandinavia. The decision also shows us that the abbots had respect for the Sorø and Esrum abbots to rectify the situation. The calling on Esrum is no special action, for Esrum was the mother abbey in the Danish Clairvaux line and so had the status necessary to discipline monks in the mother abbey of the Cîteaux line. But Sorø was nothing more than Esrum's daughter. Such an elevation of Sorø to a position of equal responsibility at least provides an indication that by the 1190's, Sorø was becoming the equal of Esrum in influence and importance.

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[78] *Statuta*, Canivez, 1191, nr. 41.

Such recognition of Sorø comes again in 1250, when the General Chapter asked the abbots of Doberan, Sorø, and Herrerisvad to intervene in a quarrel between the abbots of Eldena and Dargun [79]. Sorø's position must have been badly damaged by the deposition by the General Chapter of the Sorø abbot a few years later in 1254, and after this time we hear no more of requests from the Chapter to Sorø's abbot to intervene in disputes. But this blow was still far in the future at the beginning of the century, when Sorø rested on the crest of its first great wave of donations and privileges.

The best way to summarize the growth of Sorø during its first half century is to look at the information given in papal bulls, not only in terms of the properties they name for Sorø, but also with an eye to the privileges they enumerate. The 1181 bull of Lucius 3 names two granges, Lynge and Asserbo, and four other possessions, Ellinge, Gudum, Vemmelev, and Slagelsesbo [80]. It is noteworthy that the first papal bull for Sorø comes twenty years after its foundation. Absalon was so much personally involved in looking after the abbey's interests that he apparently felt no need to seek papal protection. Esrum had gotten its first bull almost at the very beginning of its existence, 1151, but Esrum was always more on its own than Sorø and thus immediately in need of papal good will [81]. The privileges listed in 1181 are the same as those given Esrum in the bull of Alexander 3 of 1178: full exemption from payment of the tenth to parish churches on all lands the abbey owned; permission to receive both priests and laymen as brothers; prohibition against brothers' leaving the abbey without the abbot's permission. No abbey was to keep a brother who had left his own house without his chapter's permission. These privileges were customary for Cistercian abbeys by the mid-twelfth century, and there is nothing unusual in their concession to Sorø – except for the fact that the monks received them so late [82].

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[82] Professor dr. theol. Jakob Balling, Århus, has suggested to me that this delay in papal privileges for Sorø may have been due to the situation of the international church, with schism and confusion dominating these years. This certainly can apply to 1159–1177, when Frederick Barbarossa and Alexander 3 were locked in mortal conflict, but it is interesting that Sorø did not send a delegation or a request to Rome immediately afterwards, as Esrum must have done in order to get a 1178 confirmation of privileges – *Codex Esrum.*, pp. 5–7.

[79] Canivez, 1250, nr. 50.

[80] DAM (Thorkelin) I, 266.

[81] These assertions need to be qualified by the caution that Sorø may well have received papal bulls whose record is lost.

running of a monastery. It is clear from J. B. Mahn's *L'Ordre Cistercien* that by 1150 in Central Europe many of the original intentions of the *Exordium Parvum* had been neglected [85].

Once again we have here general privileges granted to any Cistercian monastery that requested them and thus telling us nothing specific about the situation at Sorø. Nevertheless these privileges are of interest, for Sorø was the first Cistercian monastery in Denmark to acquire them. Esrum did not obtain these immunities until 1189 under Clement 3 [86]. This may only be a coincidence, but once again Sorø shows itself to be a leader among Danish Cistercian houses in taking advantage of a new situation. From being twenty years behind in obtaining papal confirmation. Sorø is now three years ahead in guaranteeing its independence via the papacy. One wonders why, and the only possible explanation I can give is that Absalon, by now caught up in the affairs of the archbishopric of Lund and getting on in years, realized that his personal benevolence towards Sorø would someday end. It is only natural in consideration of his attitude until now to think of him as wanting the monks to be buttressed by all the advantages that the usual papal privileges to Cistercian houses could provide.

In Absalon's own charter confirming lands to Sorø, from 1197 or shortly after, the growth of the abbey's holdings is again apparent [87]. From five granges in 1186, the number has jumped to 9 – Slagelsesbo, Lyng, Gudum, Munke Bjergby (last time listed as a village), Undløse, Vejleby, Asserbo, Ejby, and Tvåaker in Halland. Absalon also lists what he calls *exteriores mansiones*, which must mean village holdings that are not organized as granges but where peasants cultivate the land for the monastery. Here we have nine names, and so for the first time a Sorø charter gives us a good idea of its non-grange holdings. The names are all new and are scattered all over Zealand, from Snertinge in Skippinge herred, Holbæk amt, to Udby in Bårse herred, Præstø amt.

At about the same time as this charter of Absalon's came the 1198 bull from Innocent 3, with the same number of granges listed (9) and most of the same village holdings [88]. We can thus say that the most rapid period of growth for Sorø came between 1181 and 1198. The

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[85] Mahn, pp. 116–118.

[86] *Cod. Esrom.*, p. 10.

[87] DAM I, 276.

[88] *Bull. 'Dan.*, p. 11.

The 1186 bull of Urban 3 to Sorø witnesses substantial growth during the preceding five years [83]. Lynge and Slagelsesbo have been elevated to the status of granges. Ellinge is gone. A completely new grange is Undløse, and new villages are Munke Bjergby and Otterup. Sorø has gone from 2 to 5 granges. Just as significant is the addition of a number of privileges limiting the power of the local bishop to interfere in the monastery's affairs. A whole series of immunities is listed: the bishop cannot use the precincts of the monastery for his business. After an abbot is elected, if the bishop is asked in a spirit of humility three times to bless the abbot but still refuses, then the new abbot can go ahead anyway and perform his regular functions, until the bishop recognizes his hardness and gives his blessing. The bishop is not to exact anything more than the *obedientiam debitam* from the abbot, and in effect this obedience had little content. No bishop can impede or in any way involve himself in the regular election of an abbot. If a bishop does refuse to cooperate with the monks, they are free to find another bishop to take care of the ordination of new priests among the monks, to consecrate their altars, etc. The peasants and hired workers on the monks' lands cannot be excommunicated for working on days when the monastery's customs prescribe them to work, even if the day is a holiday in the area for other peasants. If any of the house's workers have not paid their tenths or have done anything else bringing excommunication upon them, then the abbot of the monastery is free to absolve them from their sins if they are in danger of death. If their priests, once humbly asked, refuse or delay in conferring the last sacraments upon them, then the monks are free to do so.

These privileges break down totally the barrier between parish church and Cistercians that the *Exordium Parvum* intended to set up [84]. They allow the monks in certain situations to participate in pastoral care, at least for their own workers. Just as important, these privileges make it theoretically impossible for a bishop to supervise the

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[83] DAM I, 273.

[84] Contained in *Nomasticon Cisterciense*, R. P. D. Julian (Solesmes, 1892), p. 62: "Et quia nec in Regula, nec in Vita Sancti Benedicti eundem doctorem legebant possedisse ecclesias, vel altaria, seu oblationes aut sepulturas, vel decimas aliorum hominum, seu furnos, seu molendina aut villas vel rusticos . . . ideo haec omnia abdicaverunt, dicentes: ubi beatus Pater Benedictus docet ut monachus a secularibus actibus se faciat alienum, ibi liquido testatur, haec non debere versari in actibus . . . monachorum.

papal bulls confirm what we already know from the Donation Book: once Absalon started on his donations, there was no looking back.

The optimism of this period is reflected in a gift of land provided by yet another member of the White clan for Sorø, sometime between 1207 and 1215 [88]. Bishop Skjalm Vognsen of Århus, grandson of the very Peder Thorstensen whose Pedersborg fortress had plagued the monks, provided the villages of Gimlinge and Gimlingetorp in Vester Flakkebjerg herred for the monks. Far from having any connection with the immediate needs of the monastery, Skjalm's gift was to be used only to provide an income so that the monks could have pittances, special meals. Twice a year, for three days at a time, the monks were to remember Skjalm in sumptuous feasts [90]. Unlike similar deeds in the 1300's, Skjalm Vognsen's does not specify what the monks are to eat and how many courses they are to have. Skjalm's main concern seems to be with what the monks will do if they cannot spend all the income in purchasing food. If there is still money left after the celebrations, then the monks can use it for the fabric of the church. The very thought of surplus income is a sign of this period's sense of wealth and well-being at Sorø. It is seldom in the history of institutions that they find any need to anticipate what to do with left-over funds.

### 7. *The First Abbots*

But what about the inner life of Sorø – the abbots and their ways of ruling the monastery, not to mention the monks themselves. About the latter we know nothing, and for the former we have a list of abbots and nothing more. The *Series Abbatum* was probably drawn up sometime after about 1524, when a list of Sorø benefactors was made, but it could not have been completed before 1556, when Abbot Olav Lawrence died [91]. The abbot list is full of errors, as we can easily determine by comparing the information of the Donation Book with the number of years given for the abbots [92]. We must use the list with great care and only accept information in the few cases when it can be verified from other sources. It is possible that the Series was drawn up as part of a propaganda initiative to make the history of

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[89] DD I, 4, 130.

[90] A similar privilege in which Jakob Sunesen gives Sorø property in Tveje Merløse also provides for pittances – DD I, 4, 154, between 1208–1246.

[91] The *Series* is in SRD IV, 534–39. The list of benefactors starts in SRD IV on p. 545. Abbot Olav's date of death, p. 539.

[92] See Niels Skyum-Nielsen's helpful analysis in DD I, 5, 51.

the monastery look glorious and free of scandal, perhaps as a response to Reformation attacks on monasteries. The list of benefactors from the same time would thus also have been part of the monks' attempt to point out the centrality of the monastery in Danish history.

The *Series* opens with praise for the abbots, who all have ruled "with outstanding piety and foremost industry." God enlarged the monastery because of the abbot's energies and "in the future he will certainly give (further increases) if the successors cultivate solid faith and sincere piety [93]." The list of abbots is thus meant not as a careful historical review of the abbots but as an assertion of a continuous tradition of religious dedication at Sorø. We notice that while the thirteenth century Øm list of abbots criticized a number of them [94], this sixteenth century Sorø list either says nothing about the abbots or else speaks positively about their qualities, as when the last Catholic abbot, Henrik Tornekran, is said to have done the same amount of good for Sorø as he had done for Vitskøl and for Esrum, where he had first been abbot [95]. The compiler of the Sorø list was thus much more caught up in establishing continuity, piety, and stability, and thus securing the immediate future, than in maintaining historical accuracy or thoroughness. In the sixteenth century at Sorø, just as in the thirteenth century part of the Donation Book, the monastic contribution to history is born not out of leisure or of curiosity but out of the practical necessity of justifying the existence and privileges of the monastery.

If we try to mesh the Sorø list with our findings from other sources, we can get the following dim picture of the abbots. The first three were all foreigners: Egbert, a German, who soon returned home; Simon and Godfred, who were both English [96]. Simon is buried in the chapter house, Godfred in the cemetery. The next name is Atte, who was a native of Zealand, as almost all his followers were. Because we know that Godfred was abbot sometime between 1202 and

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[93] SRD IV, 534: "Catalogus venerandorum patrum, abbatum, qui ab annis domini mille centrum sexaginta duobus sacrum Sorens Monasterium ad presens usque tempus plantarunt insigni pietate, preclaraque industria rigarunt. Quorum officiosis conatibus pientissimus Deus semper incrementum dedit, posthac nimirum dabit, si successores solidam fidem et sinceram pietatem coluerint." Niels Skyum-Nielsen has already pointed out that the 1162 foundation date is at variance with the 1161 date given in many annals: DD I, 5, 51.

[94] *Scriptores Minores* (SM) II, 193, 194, 202.

[95] SRD IV, 538–9.

[96] SRD IV, 534.



1214 [97], it would be tempting to conclude that Sorø in the twelfth century was ruled exclusively by foreign abbots. But because our list is so faulty and our documents so few, there may have been other abbots during this period whose record is lost. Still, we can at least point to an important element of foreign leadership at Sorø in the twelfth century. A general impression of Denmark as culturally (in terms of West European Christian culture) a frontier country in the twelfth century, eager to receive and absorb religious impulses from the outside, is suggested here. Abbot Simon from England is actually much more of a person to us than many of his thirteenth century followers. He is signatory to a letter of Absalon to the convent of Our Lady at Roskilde, which was dated between 1164 and 1178 [98]. This convent is supposed to have been reformed at about this time and made Cistercian, directly under the supervision of the Sorø abbot. In a letter from Absalon to Esrum from this same period, Simon is once again among the signers [99]. About 1180 Abbot Simon of Sorø witnessed a letter of the now Archbishop Absalon to Roskilde, and in 1183 he witnessed a letter of Knud to Odense [100]. In the first papal privilege sent to Sorø, that of Lucius 3 in 1181, Simon is mentioned by name [101]. These mentions point to him as an active, travelled man, perhaps a confidant of Absalon. One historian has even ventured the hypothesis that Simon is the composer or dictator of a number of Absalon's letters from the 1160's and 1170's while he still was bishop of Roskilde, such as the letter to the Roskilde Convent of Our Lady [102]. Simon would be responsible for an Absalon letter giving the episcopal tenth of Ringsted herred to Sorø (1161–1171), in which the writer shows a warm attachment to the idea that Absalon, being rich in material goods, has a duty to share his wealth with his poor children at Sorø. There is an intimacy here and a personal quality that very well could point to an alliance for furthering Cistercian

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[97] DD I, 4, 32; I, 5, 43.

[98] DD I, 2, 163.

[99] DD I, 2, 162.

[100] DAM I, 269.

[101] DAM I, 266.

[102] Arthur Köcher, "Absalons Brev til Roskilde Mariekloster", *Scandia* 2 (1929), 65–79, esp. p. 76. The problem of the authenticity of this letter was taken up by Niels Skyum-Nielsen in *Scandia* 20 (1951), where he shows that the privilege as we have it today is a *vidisse* or *skinoriginal*. Skyum-Nielsen is sceptical about Köcher's theory that Abbot Simon dictated these letters. The question deserves further investigation.

idealism between the English Sorø abbot and the Danish warrior bishop.

Godfred is mentioned as abbot of Sorø in an undated letter of Absalon to Sorø in which he as archbishop lists and confirms the abbey's possessions [103]. This letter mentions Tvåaker and so was composed in or after 1197, when this possession came to Sorø through Absalon's donation [104]. Godfred is definitely abbot of Sorø in 1198, for he is named in Innocent 3's privilege of that year [105]. In 1201 he is still abbot, when Absalon made out his will [106]. We find him again in 1213 travelling to Lübeck to reconcile Jens, the son of Esbern Snare, with God, and to receive the property of Stenmagle that Jens had refused to deliver to Sorø after his father had willed it to the monks [107]. In 1214 when Peder Sunesen at the high altar donated a farm in Broby, Godfred was still abbot. He died later in the year [108].

The next abbot, Atte, was simultaneously the first Zealander (of whom we know) and the first descendant of the Skjalm family to assume the leadership at Sorø [109]. A son of Sune Ebbesen, he decided to leave the world and gave the abbey his possessions in Vemmeløse in Vester Flakkebjerg herred [110]. This was during the period when Peder Saxesen was archbishop of Lund and so would have been between 1223 and 1228. At some time after his entrance, Atte was made abbot. We can now compare the information given in the Sorø list with the mentions we have from documents:

<i>Abbot</i>	<i>Sorø list</i>	<i>Dates in documents</i>
Egbert	(German – 1161–63)	none – no mention at all
Simon	(English – 1163–86)	1164–78, c. 1180, 1181, 1183
Godfred	(English – 1186–1211)	1202–14, 1214
Atte	(Zealand, 1211–1218)	1223–28

This comparison shows decisively how hopelessly incompetent the

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[103] DAM I, 276.

[104] SRD IV, 471 – DAM I, 73.

[105] *Bullarium Danicum*, p. 11.

[106] DD I, 4, nr. 32.

[107] DD I, 5, nr. 39.

[108] DD I, 5, nr. 43. *Scriptores Minores* II, p. 58.

[109] SRD IV, 535.

[110] SRD IV, 500.

Sorø List really is [111], and even with help from the documents, we are almost at a total loss in establishing, for example, when Atte took over at Sorø, and if there was another abbot between Godfred's death and Atte's takeover.

By the time Abbot Godfred died in 1214, his monks could look at their achievements with pride and perhaps even amazement. In a little more than fifty years Sorø had grown from a frontier monastery with only the barest necessities of life into a great institution, with lands scattered across the face of Zealand and abroad, owning whole villages, having many hired labourers, and apparently also a good number of lay brothers to run its far-flung granges. The monks could look at their nearly finished church and feel that Sorø had come a long way indeed. It is probably no accident that after Godfred, we have no record of abbots who came to Sorø from abroad. Sorø was no longer on the fringe of the Cistercian world. It had become a centre of European monastic life.

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[111] As I already pointed out in my article on Esrum, *op. cit.*, the list of Sorø abbots given in C. A. J. France "A List of Danish Cistercian Abbots", *Analecta Sacri Ordinis Cisterciensis* 20 (1964), 185–98 is based almost entirely on the Sorø list and so is full of errors.