Kriston R. Rennie

The Destruction and Recovery of Monte Cassino, 529-1964

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Italy in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages

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And there, uplifted, like a passing cloud
That pauses on a mountain summit high,
Monte Cassino's convent rears its proud
And venerable walls against the sky.
– Henry Wadsworth Longfellow[1]

1   Longfellow, 'Terra di Lavoro'.

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Abbreviations

Chron. Cas.	*Chronica monasterii Casinensis*
Gregory the Great,	
Dialogues	*Grégoire le Grand: Dialogues*, ed. Adalbert de Vogüé
JE	Jaffé-Ewald, *Regesta pontificum Romanorum* (590–882)
JL	Jaffé-Loewenfeld, *Regesta pontificum Romanorum* (882–1198)
MGH	*Monumenta Germaniae Historica*
Conc.	*Concilia*
DD O III.	*Ottonis III. Diplomata*
SS	*Scriptores* (in Folio)
SS rer. Lang.	*Scriptores rerum Longobardicarum et Italicarum*
SRM	*Scriptores rerum Merovingicarum*
PL	*Patrologiae cursus completus, series Latina*
Rule of Saint Benedict	*La règle de saint Benoit*, ed. Adalbert de Vogüé

Prologue: The Oak Tree

Abstract

This prologue introduces the book's main themes and arguments. It poses and contextualises the central questions underpinning this historical investigation into Monte Cassino's 'destruction tradition' over 1,400 years. To this end, it proposes a conceptual model through which to examine the abbey's long historical tradition and representation of death and resurrection, destruction and recovery.

Keywords: destruction; recovery; tradition; identity; representation; reconstruction

Some shepherds chanced upon him. They discovered his secret hiding place, concealed in a narrow cave (grotto) in the Apennine Mountains near Subiaco, in the lonely wilderness 35 miles from Rome. There, through the thickets, they caught sight of a strange man. At first glance, because he was 'clothed in rough skins, they mistook him for some wild animal'.[1] A closer inspection identified him more clearly as a servant of God. The passing shepherds didn't know his name, or that he'd been living in this remote location for three years. They didn't know that he was 'born in the district of Norcia of distinguished parents',[2] or that he'd willingly abandoned his home, his inheritance, and his Roman liberal studies to 'go into solitude'.[3] Yet their encounter occurred just as this man's reputation for holiness was becoming known in the surrounding region.

A great following soon developed around this mysterious hermit. News quickly spread of his influence, signs, and wonders: 'Like a shining lamp his example was to be set on a lamp stand to give light to everyone in God's house.[4] Great numbers visited his cave, trading food for spiritual

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1   Vogüé, *Grégoire le Grand: Dialogues*, II. 1, p. 136.
2   Ibid., II (Prologue), p. 126.
3   Ibid., II. 1, p. 128.
4   Ibid., p. 134.

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nourishment. Not everyone had the temperament, opportunity, or desire to follow his ascetic lifestyle, though many were inspired to live like him: in God's service. Some came to him seeking only advice, having heard of the miracles he performed. But increasingly, as 'the people of that whole region for miles around had grown fervent in their love of Christ', many 'forsook the world to place themselves under his guidance'.[5]

Wishing to please his visitors, this saintly figure agreed to many requests. Approached by an entire monastic community who had recently lost their abbot, he consented to become their superior. Showing great reluctance, he nevertheless agreed to instruct them in the practice of virtue, and to watch over their religious spirit. Before long, he had established twelve monasteries in the surrounding area, each populated with an abbot and twelve monks. He played a hand in their organisational structure, spiritual discipline, and overall direction. His wisdom and knowledge provided a constant source of encouragement. His personal role was key to their growth, prosperity, and success.

Yet this experience and fame came at a personal cost. As his popularity grew, he moved farther away from his initial goals. The life of austere spiritual solitude, which brought him to the mountains in the first place, was replaced by a duty-bound role of advisor and administrator. Although the progress of his work could not be stopped, the time for his departure from this region was imminent. His next move would prove decisive for the history of Western monasticism, a critical moment in the early institutional history of Western Christianity and the Roman Church.

The hand of God guided him in his decision to leave.[6] Three ravens, whom he was accustomed to feed, showed him the way. Circling above him, they offered solace and guidance. Still, he hesitated at every crossway, unsure of his journey's path and purpose. At a critical moment of self-doubt, however, two angels suddenly appeared to ease the man's confusion. Taking the form of young men, they showed him 'which way he ought to take'.[7] And with their help, this ascetic figure of growing repute eventually arrived and settled 'in the stronghold of Cassinum'.[8]

There, perched on a mountain top overlooking the rich, fertile Liri Valley and the ancient town known today as Cassino,[9] he established a spiritual

5   Ibid., II. 2, p. 138.
6   A source written more than four centuries after Benedict's lifetime suggests that he withdrew from Subiaco 'by reason of the persecution of the presbyter Florentinus' (*Chron. Cas.*, I. 1, p. 17).
7   Paul the Deacon, *Historia Langobardorum*, I. 26, p. 68.
8   Ibid.
9   Formerly known as Eulogimenopolis, San Germano, and, from 1862, Cassino. See *Chron. s. Ben.*, c. 15 (p. 476) and c. 20 (p. 479).

community of 'many monks'.[10] He wrote some basic instructions for the religious life that inspired a Western religious tradition and monastic order. 'Gradually,' as the earliest account of his life relates, 'the people of the countryside were won over to the faith by his zealous preaching'.[11]

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So begins the life of Saint Benedict of Nursia (480–547), a figure 'renowned for his great life and his apostolic virtues'.[12] A man who, after arriving on the mountain of Cassino in the early sixth century, 'restrained himself in great abstinence'[13] and inspired a whole monastic tradition. An historic figure recognised today as the 'father', 'patron and protector of Europe', and 'gem of Italy'[14]: an architect of unity and a universal symbol of Christian perseverance, resilience, peace, faith, and goodwill.

And so begins also the history of Monte Cassino abbey – Benedict's 'house'[15] – jointly founded in 529 with his twin sister, Saint Scholastica. Sitting 519 m above sea level (1,702 feet), approximately 125 km south-east of Rome along the ancient Via Casilina, this Benedictine abbey grew into one of the most important religious, political, cultural, and intellectual centres in Western Europe. Heralded in the modern era as a 'lighthouse of Western civilisation', European heritage, learning, and culture, it continues to house the name, spirit, memory, and tradition of its original founder, with whom the abbey is synonymous. 'Few places in the West,' noted one of the abbey's most eminent modern historians, 'represent the continuity of tradition between the ancient and the modern world as well as does Monte Cassino, the foundation of St. Benedict.'[16]

What sits atop the mountain today, however, is a distant relative of its original foundation. The so-called 'Citadel of Campania'[17] stands there still, though much altered in appearance. Its imposing physical stature disguises fourteen centuries of adversity, material and cultural destruction, exile, loss, and death at the hands of Lombard, Saracen, Norman, Angevin, French, Spanish, Italian, German, and Allied advances and aggressions. As this

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10   Paul the Deacon, *Historia Langobardorum*, I. 26, p. 68.
11   Vogüé, *Grégoire le Grand: Dialogues*, II. 8, p. 168.
12   Ibid.
13   Ibid.
14   'Segni di nuova vita', p. 2. See also Rea, in *Pacis Nuntius*, p. 27.
15   'Casa di san Benedetto', in *Ildefonso Schuster – Ildefonso Rea*, no. 119, p. 183.
16   Bloch, *Monte Cassino*, I, p. 3.
17   Vogüé, *Grégoire le Grand: Dialogues*, II (in the full title).

book argues, the abbey's intimate experience with suffering epitomises a 'destruction tradition'[18] (*Zerstörungstradition*), whose individual episodes have been incorporated into a monastic (Benedictine) narrative of progress, sovereignty, and triumph. Their enduring role has shaped and defined the abbey's core identity, historical representation, sense of community, spirit, and self-consciousness over the course of more than fourteen centuries.

This 'tradition' is historically and culturally constructed. It is not an antithetical concept but rather a 'central organizing principle'[19] conditioned by violent breaks with the past. This narrativised conception of reality reveals Monte Cassino's underlying structure: its relationship with the past and 'social form of knowledge'.[20] The abbey's experiences, therefore, ultimately define its meaning and value.[21] For this reason, the interplay between 'destruction' and 'recovery' is important to interpreting Monte Cassino's historical representation and consciousness; its perspective(s) and perceived coherence help explain what the community of monks sought to preserve, to rebuild, to remember, and to forget.

Monte Cassino's destruction was never so total as to render it obsolete. Its symbolism was ostensibly difficult to erase. After every episode of destruction, the abbey's authenticity was reconstituted, its meaning and value reanimated into a cohesive and arguably stronger whole. With every episode, it became what Gert Melville called a 'symbol of the destroyed symbol'.[22] As this book demonstrates, the physical acts of destruction unified rather than divided the religious community; historicizing this continuous existence across fourteen centuries reveals a conscious identity, whose narrative representation evolved with time and experience.

Destruction made visible the abbey's unifying power. Its character was 'transfigured by imagination'[23] with every subsequent recovery effort, its identity (re)conceptualised in relation to these significant historical moments and processes. Whereas the abbey's destruction is critical to its self-representation and story of perseverance, understanding the periods of its recovery is equally important to its characterisation as a prestigious religious house and symbol of universal human experience. For while the abbey suffered destruction at the hands of others, the process of rebuilding

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18   Melville, 'Montecassino', p. 322.
19   White, 'The Value of Narrativity', p. 19.
20   Samuel, *Theatres of Memory*, p. 30.
21   White, 'Fictions of Factual Representation', p. 122. See also Rosenzweig and Thelen, *The Presence of the Past*, pp. 37–38.
22   Melville, 'Montecassino', p. 324.
23   Durkheim, *Elementary Forms*, p. 283.

was more deliberate and controlled by the community of monks; recording and interpreting their experience played a prominent role in shaping the abbey's long-standing tradition. Significant choices were made in this creative process, generating in turn the abbey's discursive representation and shared reality.

Monte Cassino's history cannot be told apart from war and its aftermath, death and resurrection, destruction and recovery; these experiences are among the abbey's most visible, intimate, and essential features. They validate it as an important 'memorial site',[24] one whose 'continuous memory […] also generates its existence'[25] – a place whose 'inherent sanctity […] is made not only explicit but also timeless'.[26]

But how exactly did this past emerge and develop? The story traditionally begins in the early Middle Ages, shortly after foundation, when Monte Cassino succumbed to a Lombard attack; the abbey was sacked c. 577 and the community of monks was exiled at Rome for over a century. Against all odds, however, they eventually returned to the mountain under a Brescian figure named Petronax, re-establishing a monastic community which grew in number, reputation, territory, and wealth until a second attack on the abbey in 883. On this fateful occasion, Saracens from the mouth of the Garigliano River sacked the abbey, killing the abbot (Bertharius) at the altar of Saint Martin – violent actions that initiated a period of prolonged exile at Teano until 915, followed by a further 25 years at Capua, in southern Italy.

The abbey's first 500 years were disruptive but formative nonetheless. Recovering from these disastrous experiences, Monte Cassino underwent a so-called 'golden age' under Abbot Desiderius (1058–1087) in the second half of the eleventh century. The competing political powers of Capua and Benevento, and the advent of the Normans through southern Italy in the same century, did not weaken the abbey's spiritual resolve and material purchase in the region. But unfortunately, as many histories of the abbey remind us, the impressive building programme initiated by this abbot (and future pope) was completely destroyed by a powerful earthquake in 1349, leaving very few historical traces beyond the abbey's famed bronze doors and remnants of mosaic floors; fragments of the latter material populate the abbey's contemporary museum, serving to reintegrate them into the long historical narrative.

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24 Melville, 'Montecassino', p. 331.
25 Ibid., p. 322.
26 Remensnyder, *Remembering*, p. 44.

Another cycle of recovery, rebuilding, and resettlement in the late Middle Ages followed this natural disaster. Pope Urban V (1362–1370) initiated and oversaw a programme that took many decades to complete. By the fifteenth century, Monte Cassino had regained some of its former glory. But the political climate in Europe saw French and Spanish troops vying for the Kingdom of Naples, with the abbey of Monte Cassino occupying a strategic location at the crossroads of southern Italy. This historical and geopolitical landscape meant that the abbey suffered various depredations at the hands of opportunistic rulers, soldiers, and even local peasants. It was this setting which barely escaped the advancing French Revolutionary army in 1799, whose escapades in the nearby town of Cassino are well-documented but little known. Yet the abbey survived unscathed in a physical sense, only to experience the effects of feudal restructuring under royal orders in 1807 that threatened the administrative, organisational, fiscal, and jurisdictional independence it has enjoyed since the early centuries of its existence.

The impact of Italian unification in the second half of the nineteenth century weighed heavily on Monte Cassino. Yet the suppression of monasteries and religious institutions during this transformative political era did not extinguish the famed abbey; in fact, the emergent nationalism and internationalism of this time thrust it into the spotlight as a symbol of Western unity, faith, civilisation, learning, and culture. The articulation and expression of this historical significance and religious value has prevailed until today, a spirit that survived the abbey's most devastating experience with modern warfare and all its fury: the dreadful Allied bombardment of Monte Cassino on 15 February 1944, which reduced the abbey to a pile of rubble.

This précis of the abbey's 'destruction tradition' represents a familiar historical narrative. 'If there is a place where the great events of our history seem to crowd together,' wrote one of the abbey's former archivists, 'that place is Monte Cassino.'[27] It is the dichotomous representation of this past that informs this book's main argument: the relationship between harmony and discord, mourning and resurrection, 'tribulations and joys'.[28]

On several occasions between the sixth and twentieth centuries, peace was extinguished at Monte Cassino. Each attack on the abbey represented a sharp break in the continuum of time, threatening the community's identity and relationship to its original foundation under Saint Benedict – a rupture of the past. For the survivors, their spatial and temporal grounding was thrown askew, leading to periods of emigration – temporary but often long-term. Plans

27   Leccisotti, *Monte Cassino*, p. 312.
28   Ibid., p. 311.

1. The ruined monastery at Cassino, Italy, 19 May 1944.

and building programmes for reconstruction may have taken different forms over the centuries, but every time the historical memory of Monte Cassino triumphed over the tragedy of loss, displacement, and death. The abbey was always rebuilt and repopulated, the connection to its foundation re-established, and its fabric, identity, and history resuscitated: 'after whirlwinds of war had blown out the holy and benevolent flame',[29] peace was returned to the abbey. Yet what remains in the collective historical memory is a pastiche or bricolage – the appropriation of specific events into a cultural design and framework of knowledge, which conveys an unbroken or deliberate chain of progress.

To make sense of this historical and synthetic phenomenon is this book's main objective. It pursues the *idea* of Monte Cassino over time, asking how – from the Middle Ages to the present day – the abbey viewed itself and was viewed by others. The construction and politicisation of Monte Cassino's past presents the significant historical problem. Exactly how it is remembered in relation to destruction is distinctive and diagnostic. As an early monastic foundation in Western (Latin) Christendom, Monte Cassino generates many assumptions on monastic ideals, identity, sovereignty, socio-political and religious order in a longer European heritage. Remembering this history is a conscious and paradigmatic activity. Its cultural legacy has been crafted over many subsequent centuries, making it of great interest and relevance

29   Pope Paul VI, 'Discorso', in *Pacis Nuntius*, p. 9.

2. 'Succisa virescit'. Drawing by the painter, Pietro Annigoni.

to historians of all specialisms and time periods. As we'll see in the first two chapters, Monte Cassino quickly came to enjoy enormous prestige as Saint Benedict's monastery and the home of his monastic *Rule*; outside valuations of this esteem, and internal self-perceptions of its importance, created a spiritual community whose history was produced and fostered through its written records.

The resulting portrait is a truly global cultural site, born from the ashes of a small medieval religious community. The abbey's modern coat of arms embraces this generated identity. Its motto, *Succisa virescit* – which loosely means, 'the cut-off shoot grows verdant again' – invokes the 'age-old oak planted by St Benedict',[30] whose robust trunk took root 'at the dawn of the formation of the new Europe'.[31] '"Stripped of its leaves"' by the violence of the war,' as this book explores, the tree springs up 'even more vigorously than before'.[32] This powerful symbol of peace, regrowth, heritage, and continuity acknowledges the abbey's turbulent past. It embraces these defining

30　Pope Benedict XVI, 'Celebration of Vespers'.
31　Rea, 'Pro Montecassino', p. 2.
32　Pope Benedict XVI, 'Celebration of Vespers'.

historical experiences from which it recovered and flourished, time and again, from the sixth to the twentieth centuries. It also captures an internal (Benedictine) belief that 'the life of the abbey was not in the buildings and the possessions, but in the spirit that animated the community'.[33] As one of Monte Cassino's former archivists wrote, the monks of this mountain summit have, over the centuries, witnessed the rise and fall of dynasties, empires, and kingdoms. 'Sometimes they were caught in the storm and swept away,' he continued, 'but the [oak] tree planted here by St. Benedict always gave forth new shoots.'[34]

These 'shoots' are historical fragments of the abbey's past. Their number is many. They represent an idea 'kept alive through the vicissitudes'[35] of time, enduring more than fourteen centuries. Their reconstruction and configuration – that is to say, their description, representation, and narrative – presents Monte Cassino's 'semantic horizon'.[36] Nietzsche might have called it the 'fabric of existence'[37]: how segments of the past are ordered, for some purpose or implicit intention. Their inner coherence, articulation, acceptance, and relation over a long (diachronic) continuum of time generates our historical perspective; it also provides our principal source of coherence for understanding its meaning, value, and significance. The end result is an understanding of history that traverses multiple historical periods, national and international interests, and political boundaries. It is this vision of the past that effectively binds the abbey together into a cohesive and synthetic whole.

Interpreting this historical reconstruction is anything but straightforward. In many respects, its true characterisation is complicated by the countless scholarship on Monte Cassino. The abbey is both a subject and object of historical veneration most familiar to historians and general readers of twentieth-century warfare, nationalism, sovereignty, and politics on the one hand, and historians of early medieval religious life, orders, and institutions on the other. But as I argue, the key to realising the abbey's historical identity lies with harmonising these eras and synthesising them into a large-scale 'destruction tradition'.

Applying this 'conceptual apparatus'[38] considers the totality of Monte Cassino's experience: the material nature of its existence, its violent

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33 Leccisotti, *Monte Cassino*, p. 100.

34 Ibid., p. 312.

35 Ibid., p. 311.

36 Koselleck, *The Practice of Conceptual History*, p. 124.

37 Nietzsche, *Use and Abuse of History*, p. 54.

38 White, 'Fictions of Factual Representation', p. 126.

breaks with the past, the imaginative reconstructions of its legacy, and the conceptualisation(s) and reconceptualisation(s) of its meaning, value, and coherence. These 'sub-plots' comprise the abbey's essential components, whose organisation into chronological sequence defines its narrative structure.[39]

By focusing on the singular abbey of Monte Cassino over 1,400 years, this book raises important questions that originate in the medieval world, but which culminate in the emergent nationalism and internationalism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Interrogating the politics and culture of identity from medieval to modern times reveals the processes of historical writing and representation that have consistently shaped the abbey over centuries.

What emerges from this critical interpretation is an encomiastic narrative. Our sources are overwhelmingly Benedictine and almost exclusively Cassinese. This emic construction evokes a partisan view of the abbey and its legacy, one written primarily by monks inside the cloister walls. As we'll examine, this teleological version of the past seemingly ignores or overlooks the abbey's fragmentation, cultivating in its place a social memory of historical events far more cohesive than might first appear to the outside observer.[40]

Such a triumphalist narrative is problematic for the modern historian, who – advocating caution in this representation of progress – must operate above it. Interrogating this process of historical construction poses the ultimate interpretive challenge. Taking care not to rehearse or affirm the abbey's representation in any celebratory or deterministic fashion, this book ultimately asks how Monte Cassino saw itself, how the abbey interpreted and understood its own trajectory, experiences, and place in the historical record.

The making and contours of this tradition will become clearer with each subsequent chapter. But it bears mention at the outset just how the balanced concepts of 'destruction' and 'recovery' informed the abbey's own history from the Middle Ages onwards. Erchempert's *History of the Lombards of Benevento* (written c. 889)[41] and Leo Marsicanus's *Chronica monasterii Casinensis* (early twelfth century)[42] are essential starting points for evaluating this internal perspective. Both texts are significant 'histories'

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39   Stone, 'Revival of Narrative', p. 3.
40   Pohl, 'History in Fragments', p. 362.
41   See Pohl, *Werkstätte der Erinnerung*, pp. 33–55.
42   Ibid., pp. 77–85.

of the abbey, whose authors provide 'information about the way in which the past had shaped the present'.[43] Both offer 'an inside history of the monastery's political culture and its perceptions of power'.[44] The former work, as Walter Pohl argued, was created as a strategy for dealing with the 'difficult time'[45] of the abbey's destruction in the late ninth century. But it is the latter work and its continuation by Peter the Deacon in the twelfth century that structures the abbey's narrative into defined temporal categories of 'pre-' and 'post-' destruction, introducing an early interpretative framework for Monte Cassino's identity.[46] This medieval textual community – what Pohl called a 'workshop of memory' – was central to the abbey's *Geschichtsbild*: the self-portrayal of its 'monastic, social, ethnic, and political identities',[47] which first came to light in the ninth and tenth centuries.

A 'golden chain'[48] of historiography connects the past and present through a linear process of identity construction.[49] And it reveals in its wake a long and uniform history, whose coherence and meaning were established by, and in relation to – *not in spite of* – its intimate experience with destruction and the much longer process of recovery. This link between the religious community and its lived experience was paramount to situating and explaining rather difficult historical conditions and circumstances in a much longer story of survival and perseverance. It is a modality of communication, an explanatory framework, a 'plot-structure of a historical narrative (*how* things turned out as they did) and the formal argument or explanation of '*why* things happened or turned out as they did'.[50]

Telling this story requires the evidence to speak for itself. This empiricist claim means interpreting how authors of that evidence fashioned 'fragments of the past into a whole whose integrity is – in its *re*presentation – a purely discursive one'.[51] There is a poetic and authoritative expression to this construction process, which is by no means unproblematic or uncritical. We might rightly ask whether the resulting portrait of Monte Cassino as symbolic of a universal human experience is consistent, accurate, or misleading. Are there contradictions or ambiguities in the way the abbey's past is

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43   Pohl, 'History in Fragments', p. 361.

44   Ibid., p. 362.

45   Pohl, *Werkstätte der Erinnerung*, p. 36.

46   *Chron. Cas.*, p. 5 ('Epistola Leonis').

47   Pohl, *Werkstätte der Erinnerung*, p. 166.

48   The termed is used by Leccisotti, *Monte Cassino*, p. 196.

49   See Chapter 6.

50   White, 'Fictions of Factual Representation', p. 128.

51   Ibid., p. 125.

represented, organised, and rearranged across more than fourteen centuries of its existence?[52] How does its expression change over time, keeping in mind the role of communities and human agency in the process of identity creation and preservation. These questions are all the more poignant when considering – as this book does – the process by which Monte Cassino not only became legitimated as Saint Benedict's monastery, but how it 'saw itself in that light'.[53]

This *longue durée* or 'deep' historical approach offers a powerful lens through which to view Monte Cassino: how it developed its reputation as a centre of Western Christendom – a 'place of remembrance' (*Erinnerungsort*) or 'negative memory'[54] with a seemingly continuous past; how religious identity, cultivated and projected over so many centuries, is tied to the abbey's experience with war, destruction, and its aftermath; how the very idea of Monte Cassino is tied to a particular *locus* or *habitus*, environment, landscape, cultural heritage, and tradition; how the *animus* of Saint Benedict, and the venerable mountain on which he founded his abbey, have been harnessed into a universal symbol of hope, freedom, prosperity, Western culture and civilisation – historical agents of European identity, heritage, secularism, sovereignty, and unity in the modern world.

'Destruction' and 'recovery' present the main interpretive framework for pursuing such questions. These analytic categories provide a master key for understanding the abbey's true sense of its past. They offer a prism through which the categories of tradition, identity, and value can be interrogated. They also inform this book's main structure and argument. After establishing Monte Cassino's spiritual and historical esteem in Chapters 1–2, both as a product of human agency (the saint) and landscape-topography (the mountain), Chapters 3–4 look at each episode of destruction in detail, followed by the abbey's incredible (and successful) recovery efforts over the respective centuries. Before turning to this more detail-oriented, empirical side of the story in Part II: Rise and Fall, however, it is necessary to consider in Part I: *Animus* and Anchor: why Monte Cassino was a target of repeated aggression between the sixth and twentieth centuries; and why, in every case, it was deemed worth saving. Laying the foundation for this interrogation requires a look at the legend or 'invention' of Saint Benedict, whose persona plays a central role in attributions of holiness and historical significance for the venerable mountain on which he founded his abbey in the early sixth century.

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52 For some discussion on these questions, see Pohl, 'History in Fragments', pp. 343–354.
53 Pohl, 'History in Fragments', p. 357.
54 Melville, 'Montecassino', p. 323.

This background is important. Indeed, without Benedict, Monte Cassino wouldn't exist. More precisely, the abbey's origins and prestige owe directly to the saint's role in foundation, and the memory generated from this pivotal event; the possibility of his corporeal absence from the abbey following the eighth century does little to diminish these identity claims (see Chapter 2), which suggests that the monks 'took the extraordinary prestige of being Saint Benedict's monastery for granted'.[55] This argument will be advanced on more than one occasion as a means to illustrate an important dual purpose, one whose meaning relies on reassessing the saint's integral role in defining the abbey's representation and reputation. Their interconnection over fourteen centuries evolves and produces a powerful religious, national, and eventually international symbol. Chapters 5 and 6 (Part III: Preservation and Valorisation) examine the origins and evolution of this vision, asking how it was interpreted in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries into the realm of preservation and heritage. This process of validation, what I refer to as the abbey's patrimonial expression, developed in a transformative world of nascent nation states, international law, and world war.

Such a deep historical analysis yields one preliminary conclusion: the Benedictine abbey of Monte Cassino is a cultural product; its historical meaning and value, and sense of its own unbroken and continuous past, have been constituted by centuries of antagonism and warfare. The historical representation of its long and turbulent past has been reinforced by the abbey's experiences with destruction and recovery, death and resurrection. The interpretation and use of these defining historical moments in both written sources and contemporary imaginings have strengthened the abbey's assigned (symbolic) value, historical agency, and overall significance. While its material existence and contiguous religious observance in the twenty-first century suggests a constant across the medieval, early modern, and modern eras, any semblance of continuity is man-made: the product of a constructed historical tradition and legacy. The meaning of its construction was informed by common experiences, which together forge the abbey's existence and core identity.

This book traces that story from foundation to the present day. It argues for the centrality of historical representation in building contemporary understandings of – and appreciations for – the medieval past and its religious heritage.

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55   Pohl, 'History in Fragments', p. 364.