

CARMEL IN THE LATE MIDDLE AGES I

DEVELOPMENTS WITHIN THE ORDER

This chapter will cover positive developments within the Order in the years from 1291, when Mount Carmel was lost, until 1515, when St. Teresa was born. The following chapter will deal with certain negative aspects of the Order's history, marking its decline, within this same period. Obviously, it will not be possible to go into full detail, but a limited number of features taken together will give a reasonably complete picture of the Order over 224 years.

EARLY HISTORY OF CARMELITES

As has already been pointed out, documentation for the 13th century and the early decades of the 14th is sparse. Even the earliest historians of the Order lament that they can find no information concerning the Priors General who ruled during the Palestinian period (*Monumenta Historica* 236). Towards the end of the 14th century, Bernard Ollerious (d. 1380) states that no books or historical documents had come down from early times in the Order. He explains that hermits did not keep records or diaries: 'Good faith and an established right was enough for them' (*Speculum Carm.* 1167, A.D. 1680).. ,

Some of the other mendicant Orders are more fortunate in possessing records of their origins, records which give a close-up picture of the brethren of early days. The *Fioretti of St. Francis*, though not strictly historical, is a case in point. The Dominicans too, possess *The Lives of the Brethren* by Gerard de Fracheto O.P., who began writing in 1256. It so happens that this latter book preserves probably the only authentic episode of an early Carmelite that has come down to us. Gerard tells us that in 1237, the second Master General of the Dominicans, Bl. Jordan of Saxony, was drowned near Mount Carmel when returning to Europe, after a visitation of the Holy Land. When the

fate of the Master General became known, a certain brother of the Order of Carmel was tempted to lose trust in God and abandon his vocation. If God did not protect a good and holy man like Jordan, what chance did others have? Before he was able to carry out his resolve, however, Bl. Jordan himself appeared to him, and assured him that 'everyone will be saved who serves the Lord Jesus to the end.' 'This brother himself: Gerard concludes, 'and brother Simon, the Prior General of the Carmelites, a religious and truthful man, have related these facts to our (Dominican) friars.' (*Lives of the Brethren*, p.116, English trans. by Placid Conway 1924. See also Smet: *The Carmelites*, p.27) The Prior may well have been St. Simon Stock.

THE LOSS OF MOUNT CARMEL

We have already mentioned an English Carmelite, William of Sandwich (Gulielmus a Sanvico), a historical person whose name is mentioned as being present at the General Chapter of Montpellier in 1287. At the time, he was Provincial of the Holy Land. A Chronicle attributed to him and first published in 1370, is of doubtful authenticity but it does mention some facts that can be verified from other sources. One of these is the final destruction of the community on Mount Carmel (see *Acta Capit. General I*, p.10: *Anal. DC III*, pp.302-315: *Les Plus Vie~ Textes*, pp. 195 foIL).

The battle of Hattin in 1187, in which Saladin defeated the Crusaders, marked a turning-point for the Latin Kingdom in the middle East. Although the Crusaders managed to struggle on for another century and even to win back some of the coastal towns, it was clear that the end was in sight. The Saracen leader, Kalawun, decided in 1283 to put an end to the Crusaders' presence altogether. In 1291, their last fortress, Acre, was captured amid terrible slaughter. And with the fall of Acre, there came also the end of Mount Carmel. The Chronicle of William, if it can be relied on, says that the Turks massacred all the religious they found there.

But the Order never forgot its birthplace. In 1293, only two years later, a new set of Constitutions included a precept

that the Prior General should gather up the books and other articles belonging to the Carmelites of the Holy Land. They were to be kept safely and given back when the Holy Places were recovered by the Christians (*Anal.* OC 18, p.183). It has been pointed out too, that a large number of the Carmelite foundations in Europe were made in seaports, as if waiting for the dawn of a blessed day when the religious could sail back again to their beloved homeland (cf. Smet: *The Carmelites* p.31). Fr. Benedict Zimmerman has diligently collected whatever information he could find about Carmelite contacts with Mount Carmel in the 14th and 15th centuries. (They are to be found in extenso in *Anal.* OCDYI. 1931, pp.80-114.)

In the course of these centuries, two attempts were made to regain possession of the site once occupied by the Order, but 'nothing came of them. Finally, in 1627, the Italian Congregation of the Teresian Carmelites committed the task to Fr. Prosper of the Holy Spirit. He had been a missionary in Persia since 1620 and on his journey thither, had seen Mount Carmel in the distance and was inspired with a holy eagerness to reestablish the Order there. Fr. Prosper was a remarkable man. Born in the town of Naldo, Calahorra in 1583, he joined the reformed Carmelites in Rome, in October 1607. He was favoured with contemplative graces and missionary zeal. In the face of considerable difficulties, he eventually made a small foundation in Aleppo in 1627 and in due course established contact with the Sheikh in whose territory Mount Carmel was situated. After long-drawn-out negotiations and the payment of a large sum of money, Fr. Prosper was ~allowed to open a small convent on Mount Carmel. When Bernard Surius, a Franciscan, visited the Holy Land in April 1645, he found Fr. Prosper living in this tiny monastery with two other Carmelites. He gave a glowing account of their manner of life in that place; 'well adapted to serve God and to taste the delight and reap the sweet fruit of solitude, to the great admiration of Turks and Moors alike' (see *Anal OCD VI*, 1931, pp.92 foII. An account written by Fr. Prosper himself is in the same publication, Vol. V, pp.210-248. Also *Acta Ordinis* 10, 1958, p.281).

EXPANSION OF THE ORDER IN EUROPE.

Once the Rule had been adapted and approved by Innocent IV, the Carmelite Order grew with great rapidity in Europe. True, it never attained the numerical strength or the prestige of the Franciscans or Dominicans, but by the end of the 13th century, that is within 60 years of its arrival in Europe, the Order had something like 150 houses (see Bede, *The Rule* p.28, note 88). As compared with four small provinces at the time of the Chapter of Aylesford, (1247) there were now 12 provinces in the Order by 1300. England is third in order of antiquity; Ireland is the twelfth, having been founded in 1271.

The province of the Holy Land included five foundations in Cyprus, some of which may have been made as early as 1237. After 1291, many Carmelites seem to have emigrated to Cyprus which formed part of the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem. The Carmelite province continued there, until Cyprus itself was over run by the Turks in 1570. St. Peter Thomas is buried in the Carmelite Monastery of Famagusta, the ruins of which still exist. Nicholas Audet (1481-1562), the great reforming General of the Order was a native of Cyprus. It is a plausible suggestion that the 'Mount Enatrof' to which Nicholas of Narbonne retired in 1271 after issuing his *Flaming Arrow*, is the hermitage of Fortaine or Frontaine, mentioned by William of Sandwich, the name being written backwards (see *Anal. DC* 31, p.307: *ibid.* 18, pp.183-184; Smet, *The Carmelites*, p.51; also Smet's *Life of St. Peter Thomas*, 1954, p.82).

By the end of the 14th century, the number of houses in the Order had increased to 300. New provinces were added in the 15th century in Germany, Bohemia, Denmark and Aragon. Some of these, however, were short-lived and were swept away by the Lutheran reformation in the following century (Smet, *The Carmelites*, pp.50, 58 and 136-139).

HOLY MEN AND WOMEN

Since the main purpose of every religious Rule is to form those who follow it into worthy disciples of Christ, one may reasonably ask what fruits of sanctity the Carmelite -Rule had

produced by the late Middle Ages. In brief, the answer is that the Carmelite Order was graced with many saintly men and women during the two centuries which we are surveying. Some of these have been canonized or beatified. Many others have now been forgotten. A few instances of those whose life-story has been reliably recorded are worthy of mention.

One of the best documented of the medieval Carmelite saints is unquestionably, St. Peter Thomas. We are fortunate to possess a *Life* of him by one of his closest friends and admirers, Philip Mezieres, a colourful and chivalrous person, deeply involved in French affairs, both at home in France and in the island of Cyprus. Mezieres' great ambition was to recover the Holy Land for France. It was while in pursuit of this goal that he met Peter Thomas and the association with him brought about a spiritual renewal in Philip. He reformed his life and resolved to dedicate himself to the service of God and man in an honourable way. For the rest of his days he was the inseparable companion of the saint and had boundless admiration for his holiness, prudence and prayer. In the Lent of 1366, Philip began to write the life of his friend. In spite of its enthusiastic praise, it is a trustworthy document. 'We have here not merely an historical chronicle but a little work of art, one of the gems of medieval literature' (Smet, p.32 of his edition 'of Mezieres' *Life*). The book is a record of St. Peter Thomas' life as Carmelite friar, bishop, crusader, diplomat and saint. It is interesting to note that the great Franciscan scholar, Luke Wadding, also wrote a life of Peter Thomas in 1637, being under the impression that he was a Franciscan. And indeed, by a curious coincidence, the saint's predecessor in the See of Patti and Lipari was another Peter Thomas who was indeed a Franciscan (see Smet, *op. cit.* p.33).

St. Peter Thomas is a noble and saintly figure though of humble birth: his father was a serf. He entered the Carmelite Order in 1327 and became procurator of the Order in Avignon, spending the remainder of his life in the service of the Holy See. He died in Famagusta, in the island of Cyprus, on January 28th 1365. (For a more complete account of St. Peter Thomas, see *Santi del Carmelo*, pp.301-309)

More in keeping with the traditional Carmelite patterns is the life-style of Blessed Jacobinus of Crevacuore who died in 1508 at the age of 70. He was porter of his convent in Vercelli and also quested alms for his community. Known locally as Fra Giacomino or 'Brother Jim', he was noted for his spirit of prayer and humble work. He often shared his meals with the poor who came to the door. An early biographical sketch says of him that 'he shone with a wonderful holiness, quite unnoticed by most men.' This holiness caused him to be remembered and revered, even in that age of religious decadence. (See *Santi del Carmela*, p.217)

There is need for a thorough study of Carmelite spirituality in late medieval times and nothing in this respect has as yet been attempted. It is indeed, a somewhat elusive subject for study but with the gradual publication of contemporary documents, a study of this kind is clearly necessary, if only to discover

St. Teresa's indebtedness to it. In the course of the 15th century, the vitality of the Carmelite spiritual tradition tended to dry up but it did not wholly die. St. Teresa was aware of its existence and value and when the call came to her to reform the Order, she did not think of creating a new way or founding a new Order. Her motto was, 'Let us go back to our beginnings.' She knew that in spite of all, there was enough riches and inspiration in the original way of life to provide a solid foundation for her reform.

Our principal authority in the general field of medieval spirituality is Jean Leclercq, O.S.B. See his studies: *Aux Sources de la Spiritualite Occidentale*, 1964: and his contribution to the *History of Christian Spirituality*, Vol. II.

NUNS AND TERTIARIES

Almost from the very beginning, the Dominican and Franciscan friars had nuns following the same rule of life. This was not possible in the case of the Carmelites, owing to the circumstances of their origin. But even after they came to Europe and took their place among the mendicants, there was no immediate move to establish Carmelite nuns. Indeed, in

1261 the Order was granted exemption from the duty of supervising any nuns.

However, from quite an early date, groups of devout women came to be associated with the Order, in different countries of Europe. The earliest record of such associations is in Lucca, Italy, in the year 1284. From then on, these associations became more numerous, though the degree of affiliation varied considerably. In general, it was a question of pious women looking for direction and some kind of rule of life. Such women were often called 'mantellate' from the fact that they wore a white mantle over their ordinary dress. In Spain, the popular name given to them was 'beatas.'

By the middle of the 15th century, the number of these groups had grown and Blessed John Soreth took the initiative in having some of them incorporated into the Order. He sought and obtained from Pope Nicholas V, a Papal Bull, *cum nulla* of October 7th, 1452. According to the terms of this Bull, the Prior General and the Provincials of the Carmelite Order had the same faculties and privileges as the Dominicans, with regard to the reception, way of life and protection of religious women who, singly or in groups, would present themselves for admission to the Carmelite Order. The first to avail of this permission were the beguines of Ten Elsem in the Netherlands. Others quickly followed in Italy and Brittany. The most outstanding volunteer was Frances d'Amboise (1427-1485), the widowed Duchess of Brittany, who entered the Order on 1 March 25th, 1468 and died 17 years later with a reputation for sanctity. (See *Santi del Carmela*, pp.211-212)

Side by side with the cloistered type of Carmelite nuns, a more flexible regime was followed by others who lived in beguine ages or 'beaterios.' One of these was founded in Avila in 1479. A new and more spacious convent was built in 1513. This was the Incarnation Convent which, in 1535, received its most famous postulant, Dona Teresa de Ahumada, now known as St. Teresa of Avila (for more details on the history of Carmelite nuns previous to the time of St. Teresa, see Smet: *The Carmelites* pp.103-118).

THE CARMELITE THIRD ORDER

The story of the Carmelite Third Order is almost identical with that of the nuns. At the beginning of the Order no Tertiaries existed. But after the Order was established in Europe, it was not uncommon for lay people, not bound by religious vows, to attach themselves to it. As we have just said, Blessed John Soreth obtained permission from the Holy See on October 7th, 1452, to organize some of the women into proper communities following a modified form of the men's Constitutions. The same Papal Bull of 1452 also authorized him to ~associate men and women with the Order, without the obligation of their having to live in a fully constituted religious community. From this move, Carmelite Tertiaries originated. Blessed John Soreth seems to have regarded it as an asset to his reform. The example of laymen and women earnestly striving to serve God according to the Carmelite Rule could not but be a challenge and example to the friars and make them more earnest in keeping their obligations (see old *Gath. Encycl.*, a.v. Third Orders, p.637).

PREACHERS AND THEOLOGIANS

Preaching was one of the chief occupations of the friars and was extensively practiced. Naturally, there is no record of the greater part of the sermons preached but according to Fr. Benedict Zimmerman, there are large collections of medieval sermons in most of the principal libraries of Europe. It is agreed on all sides that the friars brought new life into medieval preaching. This calls for a proper study. The Carmelites, like the other Mendicant Orders, preached both in their own churches and in parish churches as well. They preached not only on Sundays but on feast days and even weekdays. It is also known that there were open-air sermons, such as at Paul's Cross in London, where the friars took turns to preach. And there were wandering preachers who went from town to town, speaking from platforms set up in the market places. Some of these had recourse to extravagant ways of drawing attention to themselves, methods which were censured by synods and Chapters.

. The General Chapter of Trier in 1362, has some interesting

ordinations for Carmelite preachers. They should know Latin and study in the 'Book of Sermons' and preach before the community before being sent out to preach in public. They should not preach prophecies or predict future events nor preach novel ideas that do not serve for the reformation of morals. They should not engage in disputes with the preachers of other Orders; they should not cultivate long beards or display banners to catch the attention of the crowds (*Acta Capit. General I*, p.50). It would be interesting to follow up the history of these prescriptions.

Studies developed rather slowly among Carmelites. At first, learning was not part of their tradition and even after becoming Mendicants, they did not take to it readily. In 1375, one of their apologists could write: 'The men who dwelt on Mount Carmel were simple hermits. They were poor and unlearned and possessed no books. Neither were they writers and were accustomed to pray rather than write' (*Speculum Carmelitanum I*, p.146).

However, as time went on, the Order did produce a number of prominent theologians such as Gerard of Bologna, Guido Terreni and John of Baconthorpe. The latter is perhaps the most considerable theologian the Order has produced and is often likened to Scotus for his subtlety and critical acumen. His writings were very numerous, said to comprise more than 120 volumes in all but many of them are lost. His commentary on *The Sentences* was printed in Milan in 1510 and was regarded as the official Carmelite textbook of theology for some decades. It is likely that St. John of the Cross studied it. In philosophy, Baconthorpe showed a certain preference for the opinions of the Arabian Averroes. It is generally agreed that he is a very difficult theologian to follow and probably for that reason, has never exercised a widespread influence. Fr. Eliseus O.C.D. writes of him; 'His prodigious knowledge astounded those who were his contemporaries. No one could work like him. He was perfectly at home with the thought of Aristotle and his Arabian commentators, of St. Augustine, of Aquinas and Scotus. Endowed with a prodigious memory and a penetrating mind, he was quite familiar with all the current trends. . . He possessed in an out

standing measure the scholastic penchant for distinction and subdistinctions. His mind was constantly in pursuit of new solutions. His is probably the most powerful brain that the Carmelite Order possessed.' (For more information about Baconthorpe. see Xiberta, *De Scriptoribus Scholasticis Ord. Carmelit.*, pp.213-227; *Anal. OC* ill, p.168-173; *La Vie Carmelitaine [Etudes Carm.]*, 1935, pp.106 foll: *old Cath. Encycl.* n, a.v. Bacon)

Efforts to set up a Carmelite school of scholasticism have been made from time to time but came to nothing. None of the authors which the Order produced have the stature of Aquinas or Scotus (Smet: *The Carmelites* p.168).

A very interesting Carmelite scholar of the 15th century is Arnold Bostius (1445-1499). One of the best-known humanists of his day, he was also something of a theologian and spiritual writer. He was the first to present a synthesis of Marian theology and devotion and his work, *De Patronatu* (1479), is deserving of more attention than it has received (see *Carmelus* IX, pp.197-236). Bostius gives a sound interpretation of the Marian way of life which Christians and especially Carmelites should follow. He was also a fervent champion of the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, against the Dominicans. He also initiated a campaign to have the feasts of SS. Joachim and Anne promoted to a liturgical status (see *Anal. OCD* 1936, pp.104-151). For a full account of Bostius whose real name was Vaernewyck, see Zimmerman's articles in *Etudes Carmelitai* 20, ~935, pp.19-93 on *Carmelite Humanists*: see also Smet, *The Carmelites*, pp.162-166.

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HUMANISTS

Fr. Benedict Zimmerman's article in *Etudes Carmelitaines* (1935) already referred to, provides most of the material for this section on Carmelite humanists.

In the latter half of the 15th century, the Carmelite Order like the Church as a whole, began to feel the impact of the 'new learning'. It was a time both of re-awakening and of heartsearching for many. Was this new classical lore compatible with their status as mendicants, dedicated to 'the one thing necessary?' At its best, did it really have anything to offer to those whose

life was based on the spirit of the Gospels? At its worst, it was tainted by Averroistic, secular, worldly and even immoral influences. Why waste time on it? Once again, the Church and the Order were confronted with a serious and almost insoluble dilemma: how to reconcile secular learning with the love of God. Nevertheless, in the 15th century, the new learning infiltrated the Order. The Frenchman, Ponce Rainaud (or Pontius Reynold), who was Prior General of the Order from 1482 to 1502, was a typical example of a renaissance scholar. In theology he was something of a skeptic, accepting no doctrine that had not a clear basis in Scripture. He was so well versed in his classical authors that 'one would think he had been born with them' (*MHC*, pp.242, 260).

It is not possible to do justice to this question of humanistic learning versus religion in a few pages. It must suffice to say that the Carmelite Order produced a number of outstanding humanists who succeeded in reconciling in their own lives, sincere dedication to God and a love for classical culture. We shall limit our attention to two. One of these was Arnold Bostius, already mentioned: the other was Blessed Baptist Spagnoli of Mantua, who was one of the great humanists of all times and who died as General of the Carmelite Order.

In the opinion of Fr. Zimmerman, Bostius was the pivot of the humanist movement in the Order and dominated it for many decades. His busy pen kept in touch with the leading classical scholars of the day, including the famous Augustinian Erasmus, who esteemed him greatly. In the manner of the humanists, Bostius wrote elegant letters in polished Latin, encouraging young men of the Order to take up classical studies. At the same time, he showed genuine concern for the spiritual betterment of the Order and one of his early writings, *De flustribus viris* (1475), was composed expressly to encourage the brethren 'to imitate the good deeds of their fathers' (see Smet: *The Carmelites* p.163). We have already met Bostius in his capacity as Mariologist. (For an outline of Erasmus' relations with contemporary Carmelites, see Smet, pp.170-172)

Blessed Baptist Spagnoli was born in Mantua in 1447. His grandfather, Antonio Modover was Spanish, hence the surname Spagnoli so often given to the poet. He became a Carmelite in 1463, was ordained priest in 1470, and graduated as a Master in Theology at the University of Bologna in the same year. He was a local Superior for a number of years. In 1483, he was elected vicar of the Mantuan Congregation, a post which he held six times. Eventually, he was made Prior-General of the entire Order but died within three years. He was a zealous promoter of reform but was too old, when elected General, to extend it to the whole Order.

Even before entering the Carmelite Order, he had been interested in classical poetry and wrote the *Eclogues*. Though he composed a good deal of verse- throughout his life, some 55,000 hexameters in all, the *Eclogues* are his best. They are reflections, in Virgilian style, on love, womenfolk, poetry, country life etc. He published them, with some improvements, when he was about fifty. They were read all over Europe: Milton, Shakespeare and Spenser refer to them.

Mantuan enjoyed a considerable reputation during his life and after his death. He was often compared to the other great Mantovano, the-Roman Virgil. To the present day, a commemorative monument in Mantua represents the Muse of Poetry hesitating as to which of the two deserved her crown of laurels. Posterity has not endorsed the high opinions which earlier generations held concerning Baptist Spagnoli. Much of what he wrote is of inferior quality. His impact was quick but not deep. Nonetheless, it is interesting to note that as late as 1911, an edition of the *Eclogues* was printed in Baltimore at the John Hopkins Press. It is an excellent edition, with a scholarly introduction of 60 pages by Wilfred P. Mustard, Professor of Latin in the John Hopkins University.

CARMELITE

PAINTERS

One of the features of the 15th century Church was the development of religious art, particularly in painting. Perhaps the most outstanding figure in this department is the Dominican

Blessed Giovanni da Fiesole, better known as Fra Angelico (1387-1455). The purity, simplicity and sweet nobility of his art have made him universally beloved in all ages.

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This new spirit invaded the Carmelite Order too, particularly through the Carmine in Florence. The Church attached to this house was solemnly consecrated in 1422, and Masaccio, 'the very creator of painting' as he is called, recorded the event in a fresco in the cloisters. A young friar of the community, Filippo Lippi by name (1406-1469), saw the great master at work and became his apprentice. In due course, he himself grew to be a leading figure in renaissance painting.

Concerning the personal character of Fra Filippo, there is room unfortunately, for only one opinion!.: 'A great artist, he lived in the continual embarrassments caused by his deplorable morals. Never was anyone less fitted for religious life'(Louis Gillet). Although he never actually left the Order, he seems to have lived outside of it for many years: In his favour, it must be said that he was in part the victim of a decadent system, and despite all his faults, he was buried in the habit which he had not worn too worthily.

Of Fra Angelico, it must be said that 'he was convinced that to picture Christ fittingly, one must needs be Christ like and he prepared for all his paintings by prayer' (Vasari). With delicate taste and good judgment, he insinuated features from his Dominican spiritual tradition into ~most all his painting. In Lippi's case, the Carmelite rule provided no such inspiration. In fact, he seems to have held it up to ridicule. One of his works, 'The Reform of the Carmelite Rule' is a realistic but very unspiritual presentation of Filippo Lippi's views and probably reflects the attitude of some of his contemporaries. However, it would be unfair to generalize. A contemporary of Lippi in the community at Florence was the saintly friar, Blessed Angelus Mazzinghi (1386-1438), who inaugurated the reform of Mantua. The signatures of the two men are to be seen side by side in some community documents.

None of this means that Filippo Lippi is not an outstanding artist. 'In the evolution of renaissance painting, he played a part

of the utmost importance. He is the incarnation of the invincible naturalness of the age. His power springs exactly from this attitude of instinct and spontaneity: it is not at all the product of a system or theory. It is a great plebeian force, tumultuous and unconscious, let loose through art and life. Nothing equals the ingenuousness and even the innocence of his love of nature. This friar, without rule or cloister, has the intuition of a primitive. He adores everything, the commonest herb and the meanest flower. He embraced life in all its forms with the candor of a child and the enthusiasm of a great creative artist. . . . No one has ever done more to bring art closer to life and to make it the complete mirror of nature' (Louis Gillet).

'Fra Filippo's -contemporaries on the whole judged him indulgently; indeed some of them only laughed at the 'friars' folly'. Others, like the saintly Dominican who was Archbishop at the time, St. Antoninus, had to reprimand him and deprive him of faculties to administer the sacraments. His Carmelite brethren in Florence, when writing his death notice, discreetly omitted any reference to his life as a religious. But they added a tribute with which we can all agree, 'Such was his gift as a painter that scarcely anyone equaled him in our time.' (See Smet, *The Carmelites*, pp.147 foll: also articles in the *Cath. Encycl.* or in any good encyclopedia of artists. Browning's poem 'Fra Lippo Lippi' does not really

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present the whole picture. See also a long article in *Carmelus V*)