



# ABELARD

IN

# FOUR DIMENSIONS

A TWELFTH-CENTURY PHILOSOPHER IN  
HIS CONTEXT AND OURS

JOHN MARENBON

# ABELARD IN FOUR DIMENSIONS



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*A Twelfth-Century Philosopher  
in His Context and Ours*

**JOHN MARENBON**

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## A C K N O W L E D G E M E N T S



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Cambridge, December 2012

## INTRODUCTION

For historians of philosophy, time should have four dimensions. Three of them relate just to the philosophers who are being studied. The first dimension is their present. Whether, as here, the subject is someone who lived nine hundred years ago, or whether it is a more recent thinker, this present is not our present, and understanding it requires special historical knowledge and skills. The second dimension is their past. Philosophers look back to teachers, predecessors and the sources from which they have learned to think. The third dimension is their future: the ways in which their ideas and words have been understood or misunderstood, neglected, studied, adapted and distorted, up to the present day. The fourth dimension lies in the relation between the past thinkers and philosophy today, between their times and our present.

In the three Conway Lectures in 2009, on which this book—though much altered and greatly expanded—is based, I devoted a lecture to each of the three dimensions: Abelard's present, his past and his future. The fourth dimension did not form the subject of a particular lecture, because it ran through all the lectures. Its presence, I argued, is the methodological feature which distinguishes historians of medieval philosophy from other medievalists, making them both philosophers and historians. But is it as straightforward to combine the first, second and third dimensions with the fourth as the plan of my lectures supposed? The lectures themselves, in their detail, suggested not; they showed, rather, that at every point there are tensions between more historical and more philosophical concerns. This book therefore adds

two new chapters, which look specifically at this fourth dimension in a manner appreciative and yet also critical. Chapter 5 examines the various comparisons which have been made between Abelard, on the one hand, and Frege and other more recent logicians and philosophers of language, such as Putnam and Kripke, on the other. Chapter 6 looks at Abelard's metaphysics in the light of contemporary trope theory and some other recent interpretations.

The earlier chapters begin by looking at Abelard's present and go on to consider his past and future. The first chapter looks at the difficulties, especially in the case of his logic, in reconstructing Abelard's views from the textual material that survives, and examines the extent to which the records that survive allow changes and developments to be traced in his thinking. The second chapter concentrates on a particular example of Abelard working in the context of his own present. It examines his argument that God can do only what he does, how his contemporaries reacted to it and how Abelard, perhaps in reaction to them, modified and extended it. The third chapter turns to Abelard's past by considering his relation to his most distinguished recent predecessor, Anselm of Canterbury. The fourth chapter, on Abelard's future, returns to his argument that God can do only what he does, showing how, from Peter the Lombard to the end of the Middle Ages and even up to Leibniz, this position was discussed, often dismissively, but sometimes with careful attention to its substance.

My approach, therefore, juxtaposes historical and philosophical considerations. It might be argued, however, that another type of consideration should also be taken into account. Many of the discussions examined, especially in chapters 2, 3 and 4, come in works about Christian doctrine, including the versions of what Abelard himself called '*theologia*'. Should they not be treated as theology, rather than philosophy? But it is not clear what such a treatment would involve. By '*theologia*'—a word considered at the time as a neologism—Abelard simply meant talking about God, and any discussion, however philosophical, of arguments about, for instance, God's will and its freedom cannot but acknowledge that their subject matter is God and that many of their conclusions would not at all apply to human will and freedom.

There does not, then, seem be room for complaint here. Perhaps, though, the demand for a theological perspective is a call for less scrutiny of the arguments and more attention to how biblical and patristic authorities are used. Such a shift of focus, however, would go against Abelard's own spirit and practice. He quoted the Bible and the church fathers frequently, but he was acutely aware that citations from both could be found apparently to support and to oppose almost any contentious view. He respected the inviolable authority of scripture—but only of scripture as subject to interpretation. And in his logical works he gave to Aristotle the same degree of respect, or perhaps more, since he usually strove to interpret Aristotle in accord with what seemed to be his real intentions. Moreover, although he had no wish to be the heretic some of his contemporaries thought him, Abelard was willing to follow a line of reasoning to its logical conclusion, even if that put him at odds with the whole tradition of Christian thought (nowhere is this better illustrated than in his argument about God's lack of freedom to do other than he does, examined in chapters 2 and 4). In the decades immediately after Abelard, writers on theology such as Gilbert of Poitiers followed the hints given by Boethius in his theological works and developed a conception of how, at a certain stage in thinking about God, the ordinary rules of human discourse break down, though they can be applied in a special, oblique way. Abelard made no such distinction, and his interpreters today are most able to grasp the train of his thinking by subjecting it, whether it is about logic or God and attributes, to the sort of rigorous philosophical analysis which he never hesitated to use on his own and other people's thinking in every domain.

*Abelard in Four Dimensions* can be read from various different perspectives and addresses itself to at least three different sorts of readers. Although it is not a general book on Abelard and his thought (I have written one already), it is written so as to be comprehensible to readers who are approaching him for the first time. Chapter 1 begins with a brief account of his life and writings which, along with the detailed list of editions of Abelard's works in the bibliography, provides an introductory framework. The body of the book discusses some of

Abelard's most striking and characteristic ideas, through a wide range of his thought: his sophisticated semantics (chapter 5), his theories about the metaphysical structure of concrete things and about identity and difference (chapter 6), the place of intention in his moral psychology (chapter 3) and his conception of God and divine omnipotence (chapters 2 and 4).

For specialists in Abelard and his times, there is both new material and fresh interpretation. The examination in chapter 1 of the manuscript sources for Abelard's logic brings together for the first time work which I and others have been doing on the character and genres of twelfth-century logic and takes a fresh look at what can be known about the chronology and authenticity of the logical works usually attributed to him. Although Abelard's basic position on God's inability to do other than he does is well known, the details of the argument and how Abelard developed them have not before been studied closely, nor have the reactions to it by his contemporaries (chapter 2)—and even less the reception of the argument in later centuries (chapter 4). A number of scholars have looked recently at what Abelard's debts to Anselm may have been, but the account offered in chapter 3 is different in many ways from theirs, in particular by providing a detailed comparison of how each writer considers the necessity of God's actions, especially his incarnation. Chapters 6 and 7 take issue with some of the most active recent interpreters of Abelard, including Norman Kretzmann, Klaus Jacobi, Alain de Libera, Chris Martin, Peter King—and myself. I have taken the opportunity to correct misinterpretations I made in my book *The Philosophy of Peter Abelard*, now fifteen years old, and in subsequent articles, though also to re-assert, with more careful supporting arguments, readings and positions I believe to be justified.

Finally, as a methodological investigation, this book should have some lessons to teach and, more important, problems to raise and approaches to suggest for all who try to study the philosophy of the past, especially that of periods which, like Abelard's twelfth century, are distant from our own day both chronologically and in their conditions of life. It is with this wider audience in mind that I can answer a criticism which might be made about what I have chosen to discuss in the fol-

lowing pages. Each of the four dimensions might have been filled with a different choice of topics; that, however, is perhaps not a fault but a sign that the four dimensions, more than just a way of organizing one book about Abelard, could serve far more widely as a tool for thinking and writing about the history of philosophy.





*Part I*



ABELARD'S PRESENT

## INTRODUCTION TO PART I

To study a philosopher's present means doing many things. They include, for example, looking at the social and the intellectual assumptions of the time, the literary forms then current for philosophical writing; in the case of a twelfth-century thinker, such as Abelard, they would also involve exploring the links between his work and both the school curriculum and religious developments of his time. The following two chapters, however, concentrate, not on Abelard's context, but on his present in a more immediate and intimate sense: on Abelard as a philosopher living through time and, like any human being, developing and changing his ideas.

Chapter 1 sets out to establish a solid basis for looking at Abelard chronologically. To do so, it must treat the evidence for chronology in the opposite way to that usually favoured by exponents of a developmental reading. Typically, they arrive at an idea of the main lines of a thinker's development, and they use it, often along with subtle evidence based on minute comparisons of different passages, to arrive at a comprehensive, precise chronology of writings, on the basis of which the account of the thinker's changing thought can be further refined. Here, rather, the aim has been to use all reasonable scepticism so as to arrive at an imprecise and incomplete ordering of works, uninfluenced by any prior view about Abelard's direction of development. The chapter also explores a related question: the relationship between the manuscript material that survives and the philosopher's own teaching and writing, which is often much less direct than today's ideas of authorship assume.

Chapter 2 illustrates the study of Abelard as a developing writer by looking at his argument that God cannot do otherwise than he does in his earlier and later formulations of it, and in relation to other twelfth-century thinkers' responses to it. Developmental study is sometimes seen as an alternative, or even an antithesis, to properly philosophical analysis. This chapter aims to show how the two methods can complement each other, presenting the argument from the beginning step by step, and ending with a critical examination of Abelard's reasoning, which leads to a perhaps unexpected conclusion about his general views on God's providence and human freedom. This first dimension, which looks at a philosopher's own time, should not, then, be seen as opposed to the fourth, which links the philosopher in question to today's philosophical concerns. Rather, it is, as it were, at right angles to it. The best work in the history of philosophy plots a graph using these two axes.



## CHAPTER ONE



### ABELARD'S DEVELOPING THOUGHT

A philosopher's own present is always a *period* of time—a philosophical career which may span many decades. Few thinkers, even the steadiest and most consistent ones, retain entirely the same ideas and interests throughout their lives, and many change their views radically. Is it, then, one of the tasks of historians of philosophy to trace how their chosen thinkers developed philosophically from their earliest to their latest works? Recent work on Abelard implies both positive and negative answers to this question. From 1980 onwards, Constant Mews has tried to establish a detailed chronology of Abelard's works and to show how Abelard's thinking changed over the years;<sup>1</sup> my own book *The Philosophy of Peter Abelard* (1997) relies at various points on positing a development in Abelard's views and takes a view about the general way in which his interests developed. By contrast, the leading specialists whose background is a purely philosophical one have had little to say about Abelardian chronology or the development of his ideas.<sup>2</sup> A student approaching this author through either of two gateways much used in the anglophone philosophical community—the *Cambridge*

*Companion* and the article in the *Stanford Encyclopedia* dedicated to him—would receive, for the most part, the impression of a single, unchanging body of thought.<sup>3</sup>

Although the ‘development sceptics’—those who avoid any attempt to trace a chronological development in Abelard’s thinking—do not usually put their case explicitly, two sorts of reasons seem to lie behind their attitude. It is no coincidence that their background is usually strongly philosophical. There is a general tendency for such scholars, especially the anglophone ones, to concentrate on the relevance of their chosen author’s ideas to contemporary debates and to consider, at least implicitly, that looking at an author’s development is a sidetrack, a task for the biographer or intellectual historian but not for them. To this doubt about the desirability of developmental study, they add one about whether it is even possible in Abelard’s case. In order to trace a development, a firm chronology is needed, but for ancient and medieval authors there are often no clear indications of the date or even the order of the texts. Interpretations of Aristotle illustrate the problem clearly. Since Jaeger in the 1920s, scholars have produced hypotheses about the chronology of Aristotle’s works and, very often, discussed his thought in terms of its development. Many still do, but others find the whole enterprise dubious. They point out that, for the most part, the ordering of the works is based on assumptions about which positions are the more mature, or on an overall view about the direction of his thinking (that, for example, he moved from an early dependence on Plato to a more empirical approach), which are not based on any solid evidence. Moreover, the very nature of the Aristotelian works that have survived, it can be argued, makes it impossible to put them into a chronological order: they are working drafts, subject to various authorial revisions perhaps over the course of many years.<sup>4</sup> It may well seem that an author like Abelard raises the same sort of problems. Indeed, the leading development sceptic among Abelard specialists, Peter King, claims that he does: ‘The dates of composition and even the number of Abelard’s writings remain largely obscure and a matter of controversy among scholars. One reason for this is that Abelard constantly revised and rewrote, so that several distinct

versions of a given work might be in circulation; another reason is that several of his writings might represent "teaching notes" constantly evolving in courses and seminars. Hence it is not clear that "date of composition" is a well-defined notion when applied to the body of Abelard's work that we now possess.<sup>5</sup>

My previous book on Abelard, as already mentioned, is developmentalist in its method. Given the development sceptics' arguments, is it not time to give up such an approach? The present chapter is an attempt to provide a reasoned answer to this question. Investigators of the truth must steer a course between the two extremes of complete credulity, which allows them to form an abundance of beliefs, many of which will, however, be false, and excessive doubt, which ensures the truth of their beliefs only by greatly limiting their number. How to steer this course depends on the particular area of investigation. The development sceptics, it will be urged, doubt too much and so must go without a number of important, well-grounded beliefs, but they are right to urge caution. A moderate, tentative developmentalism can be used for studying Abelard, but there are more areas of uncertainty than most scholars (myself included) have recognized.

The theoretical argument against developmentalism mentioned above—that it is an unphilosophical approach—applies to scholars who are so keen to see how writers change their ideas that they do not take sufficient care to understand any of them properly in the first place. It has no weight against those who see tracing a development as one aspect of one dimension—their author's present—among the four they are studying. And the practical problems of establishing a chronology for Abelard's works are less universally intractable than King, for instance, suggests. The main events of Abelard's life and some of their dates can be known with near certainty, and there is evidence which allows a number of his texts to be placed within this chronological framework. King argues that, because of his tendency to revise, Abelard's works may not in principle be datable. Here, however, it is important to distinguish between his non-logical and his logical writings. Among his non-logical writings, only two were substantially revised: the *Theologia*



and *Sic et non*. But the *Theologia* exists in three clearly ordered versions, which in fact provide some excellent material that illustrates well his developing ideas.<sup>6</sup> The exact history of how *Sic et non* was expanded is less clear; it is not, however, a work by Abelard at all, but rather an ordered dossier of authoritative texts for him to use.<sup>7</sup> True, Abelard introduced revisions into almost all his other texts (and within the three recensions of the *Theologia*), but these are almost all small verbal changes or minor additions.<sup>8</sup> By contrast, twelfth-century logical texts, in general, present all the difficulties King mentions and more—in many cases they seem to be the products, not only of several substantive revisions, but of a number of writers. For this reason, Abelard's logical texts certainly need to be treated with great caution when it comes to both attribution and dating. Admittedly, there are reasons to think that, to an extent, Abelard's work is an exception to the rule about how the logic of his period has been preserved and that, especially given its links with his theological writings, a chronological ordering may be possible. There are also, unfortunately, a number of factors which, at least in the present state of research, make such an arrangement rough, incomplete and, in some respects, less than fully reliable.

The chapter begins therefore with a chronology of events in Abelard's life for which there is strong evidence. The chronology provides a framework for ordering and, in some cases, dating Abelard's non-logical works. The larger part of it, however, is about the logical works, which present much more difficult problems of both dating and authenticity. The manuscript material will be surveyed and considered against the norms for twelfth-century logical texts, before the chapter examines the relationship of the texts transmitted under Abelard's name to Abelard himself and, finally, what can be established about their chronology.

#### PETER ABELARD: A LIFE IN BRIEF

For all but the last ten years of his life, the major source for the events of Abelard's life is a letter he wrote early in the 1130s, the *His-*

*toria calamitatum*.<sup>9</sup> Supposedly addressed to an unnamed friend, whom Abelard sets out to console by showing that, however bad his misfortunes, his own have been worse, it seems clearly intended by Abelard, who was a well-known, indeed somewhat notorious figure, to present to his contemporaries the events of his life and his present attitude to them. Since Abelard wants to appear in the best light, at once a properly repentant sinner and a man much wronged, it is only to be expected that he will often distort the account of his own views and intentions and perhaps also omit facts he finds unimportant or awkward. Yet there would be no point in his telling lies about external events themselves, such as when and where he taught, since these facts would have been widely known. But what if the *Historia calamitatum* was not written by Abelard himself at all?

The *Historia* apparently sparked off one of the most famous epistolary exchanges of all time—the letters between Abelard and his former lover and wife, Heloise, now an abbess, who had seen a copy of it. Doubts about the authenticity of this correspondence go back more than two centuries. But, first, most specialists on Abelard today consider that these doubts have been adequately answered.<sup>10</sup> Second, it was only the more extreme proponents of inauthenticity who questioned the attribution of the *Historia*. The more moderate and less implausible position held the whole correspondence, including the *Historia*, to have been composed by Abelard, denying Heloise any role in the composition. In any case, even those who saw the *Historia* as a forgery accepted that it was based on authentic biographical material. There seems, then, no good reason to distrust the broad account of events—as opposed to their interpretation—given in the *Historia*, especially since many of the main incidents are confirmed by other testimony.

From boyhood until the dramatic events that can be dated to 1117, Abelard, the *Historia* tells us, led a life centred on logic (*dialectica*), first as an eager and brilliant student, then as a teacher, of it.<sup>11</sup> Abelard was born in around 1079 at Le Pallet in Brittany and was given an initial education by his father, Berengar, a knight (HC 18–19).<sup>12</sup> His ability made him shun a career as a knight and give up the inheritance he was due as the oldest son so as to pursue logic

(HC 19–28). Abelard says that he travelled in the area to wherever the subject flourished and engaged in disputations (HC 28–30). He does not mention that, as a beginner ('the least of his pupils'), he was taught at Loches and at Tours by Roscelin, a logician and a controversial theologian, with whom his relations later became very hostile.<sup>13</sup> Abelard then recounts a series of events, based on his rapid rise to celebrity as a logician and the enmity he inspired. He was drawn to Paris by the fame of William of Champeaux as a teacher of logic, and at first he was a favoured student but then aroused his hostility and that of his leading pupils because, Abelard says, he argued against him and sometimes proved his superior in disputation (HC 31–41). Abelard therefore decided to set up his own school, first at Melun (about forty miles from Paris) and then at Corbeil (twenty miles nearer) (HC 45–65). By his own account, Abelard was already by this time a famous teacher, whose reputation eclipsed that of William's other pupils and even William's own. Shortly after he set up the school in Corbeil (*non multo . . . interiecto tempore*), Abelard became ill through overwork and returned home to Brittany for a few years—where, he says, eager students of logic still came to him (HC 65–69).

When he returned to Paris, William of Champeaux had 'converted himself to the order of Canons Regular'—that is to say, he was following a semi-monastic life, based on the Rule of St Augustine—but was still teaching publicly in a convent in Paris. Abelard attended his lectures on rhetoric, where he attacked and forced William to abandon his theory of universals (HC 70–100). Abelard gained many students as a result of this success and William's successor at Notre Dame handed over his position to him. But William swiftly acted to remove Abelard, by making accusations against the master who had made way for him and replacing him with another. Abelard set up his school at Melun again, but 'not long afterwards' William, sensitive to accusations that his conversion was incomplete, moved for a time far away from Paris, and Abelard began to teach on the Montagne Sainte-Geneviève, at that time just outside the boundary of Paris (HC 101–32). William then returned to Paris and started teaching there again in the same monastery as before,

robbing the master he had installed at Notre Dame of his remaining pupils (*HC* 132–54). After another trip back to Brittany, by which time William had already become bishop of Châlons, Abelard went to Laon to study Christian doctrine with Anselm, the famous teacher there. But he was not impressed by Anselm's lectures on the Bible and began to give his own, on the notoriously difficult book of Ezekiel, until Anselm forbade them (*HC* 158–240). Abelard then returned, where finally 'for some years' (*annis aliquibus*) he was master at Notre Dame. It was during this time that he became the lover of Heloise, secretly married her and was castrated on the orders of her uncle and guardian, Fulbert, who thought Abelard was going to renege on his marriage by making Heloise become a nun.

According to most specialists, Abelard's arrival in Paris can be dated to around the turn of the century, his first schools at Melun and Corbeil to 1102–4 and his return to Paris and attack on William's theory of universals to 1108. His studies at Laon are placed in 1113 and the castration in 1117.<sup>14</sup> For these last two dates there is indeed solid evidence. William was consecrated as bishop of Châlons in 1113, and the context of the comment in the *Historia* suggests that it was shortly afterwards that Abelard went to Laon. And, with regard to the castration, it is known that those who carried it out were punished by blinding and castration; it seems very likely that Fulbert too would have been punished, and his name is indeed absent from those of the canons of Notre Dame in a charter of 1117 (it would reappear by 1119).<sup>15</sup> Links between Abelard's career and William of Champeaux's conversion promise to provide more chronological precision, but there is some uncertainty over these dates. William had definitely given up his position as archdeacon of Paris by the summer of 1112.<sup>16</sup> A very detailed examination of the various sources has led Charles de Miramon to suggest that William's process of conversion extended over a number of years, beginning in about 1109, and that it would have been in this year or thereabouts that Abelard's successful challenge to his position on universals took place.<sup>17</sup> Constant Mews sees the process of conversion as much more rapid and argues that Abelard's return to Paris to challenge William should be dated to after Easter 1111.<sup>18</sup> On this basis, Mews

revises the usual datings for Abelard's early career, suggesting that he studied under William from about 1100 to 1104, before setting up his own schools at Melun and Corbeil, and then spending roughly the years 1108 to 1111 in Brittany.<sup>19</sup> This chronology has the advantage of allowing Abelard to have spent a few years as William's pupil, as his attitude to William in the *Dialectica* suggest he may well have done;<sup>20</sup> but Miramon's reconstruction of William's conversion is more convincing.<sup>21</sup> An alternative possibility would be to date Abelard's arrival in Paris a little earlier, around 1098, his teaching at Melun and Corbeil beginning four or five years later and going on to 1106 at the latest, with the return to Paris and the defeat of William over universals taking place in 1109 (Miramon's suggestion) or (better) 1110.

Following his castration, Abelard became a monk of Saint Denis (HC 628). Living in a house owned by the monastery, he continued to teach logic but also began to lecture on the Bible (HC 668–79). He then (HC 690–701) wrote a treatise (known now as the *Theologia Summi Boni*) in which he presented testimony to the Trinity not just from the Old Testament but also from pagan philosophers, before engaging in an analytical discussion of difference and sameness, designed to make sense of the doctrine that there are three persons of the Trinity which are one and the same God. Abelard's rivals—he names Alberic (of Rheims) and Lotulf (of Novara), pupils of Anselm of Laon and William of Champeaux—accused it of being heretical and persuaded the papal legate to have him summoned to defend it at a council held in Soissons in March 1121. There, after what Abelard depicts as the travesty of a fair trial, the treatise was condemned (HC 714–906). After a very brief period of quasi-imprisonment in the monastery of St Medard, Abelard returned to St Denis (HC 934–36), where he quickly became involved in a quarrel about the identity of the Dionysius who had founded the monastery (HC 941–61). He fled from the monastery and went to live in a monastic dependency at St Ayoul of Provins, where a friend was prior (HC 991–95). These events took place before the death of Abbot Adam of St Denis in 1122, who had refused to grant Abelard's request to lead a monastic life 'wherever he could find a suitable place' (HC

999–1016). His successor, Suger, also refused at first, but then, it seems not long afterwards, gave his permission, though requiring that Abelard should not put himself under obedience to any another abbot (HC 1020–37).

The remaining twenty years of Abelard's life, though no less dramatic and complex from a biographer's perspective, are much simpler to block out roughly, since they divide into four fairly clear periods. First, Abelard set up an oratory in Quincey in Champagne, dedicated originally to the Trinity and then to the Paraclete (HC 1037–42, 1116–24). Students came to him there and, mainly because he needed to earn some money, he returned to teaching (HC 1109–13). Then, second, he accepted the abbacy of the monastery of St Gildas de Rhuys, in a remote part of his native Brittany. After his unsuccessful attempts to reform the monastery led to attempts to murder him (HC 1497–1511), which drove him to live outside the monastery (HC 1525–26), he succeeded in having the most rebellious monks expelled, only to find that those who remained were no better and that his life was still in danger (HC 1534–59). The third stage of Abelard's later career was a return to teaching at Paris, on the Montagne Sainte-Geneviève. This period came to an end, if not before, then with Abelard's appearance and condemnation at the Council of Sens, after which Peter the Venerable persuaded him to live at his monastery of Cluny and, then, during his final months, in a dependency at Chalon-sur-Saône.

Some of the dates for these stages are fairly clear. The period at Quincey must have begun not long after Suger's abbacy (so in 1122 or 1123). By 15 March 1128, Abelard was certainly abbot of St Gildas, since he signs a charter using this title.<sup>22</sup> At the end of the *Historia calamitatum*, Abelard places himself still as abbot of St Gildas, living once again in the monastery and fearing for his life. A little earlier in the text (HC 1317–20) he mentions the papal confirmation of his gift of the Paraclete to Heloise and her followers, who had been expelled from Argenteuil. This papal privilege is dated to 28 November 1131,<sup>23</sup> and so the *Historia* cannot have been finished before then. It is therefore very probable either that Abelard was still at St Gildas at the end of 1131 or that he had only just abandoned it.