

Chapter Title: INTRODUCTION Monastic Wales

Book Title: Abbeys and Priors

Book Subtitle: Abbeys and Priors of Medieval Wales

Book Author(s): JANET BURTON and KAREN STÖBER

Published by: University of Wales Press. (2015)

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt9qhvn.7>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

University of Wales Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Abbeys and Priors*

INTRODUCTION MONASTIC WALES

*I faithfully admonish you to found a monastery ...
as a citadel of God against Satan, where the cowled champions may
engage in ceaseless combat against Behemoth for your soul
(OV iii: 144–7).*



IT WAS THUS that a medieval historian, Orderic Vitalis, characterised the importance of religious houses to medieval society: monasteries were like castles, though manned by spiritual not earthly soldiers, troops whose prayers were weapons against the devil (Behemoth). The context of his remark was an imaginary conversation between his father, a chaplain named Odelerius and here the speaker, and Earl Roger of Montgomery, a Norman incomer and one of the elite brought to England by Duke William, later King William I. Odelerius uses these words to persuade the earl to found a monastery, Shrewsbury Abbey, on the borders of England and Wales, for the benefit of his soul and – incidentally but no less importantly – to secure his political and social position in what was for him a new land. Orderic was born at Atcham (Shropshire) around 1075, and brought up for the first ten years of his life at Shrewsbury. When he left, sent by his father as a child oblate to be brought up to the monastic life at the Norman abbey of St Evroult, and never to see his native land again, a form of monasticism quite unlike the native *clas* church was beginning to percolate into Wales. In the century and a half that followed some sixty religious houses were established there, large and small, in town and countryside, following different rules but with the same basic goals: to allow men and women to devote themselves to a life of prayer and spiritual fulfilment. Although Orderic was himself a monk – and therefore likely to stress the importance of the way of life that had been chosen for him – we may be sure that society at large regarded those communities of men and women who committed themselves to a life of seclusion, prayer, and contemplation, as having a central role in medieval society. Monks, nuns, canons, and friars were the channels through which intercession was made for the well-being of humankind – collectively they were ‘citadels of God’. However, they came also to offer tangible benefits to society at large: as centres of education and hospitality, as landlords and agents of economic power, as builders and patrons of art and literature. Although some of sites occupied by Welsh religious houses may have been liminal, monasticism itself was far from marginal.

WHAT'S IN A NAME (AND A COLOUR)?

A glance at a conventional map of Monastic Wales will show monasteries with different names and labels. So, what do these signify and how were these groups distinctive? Before attempting to answer that question it is important to stress that there were as many similarities as there were differences. Monasteries were among the first communities to frame rules that governed how they were run: the daily routine followed within their walls; how men became monks and women became nuns; and the chain of command within each house. The rule that gained most currency in Western Europe was that compiled by St Benedict around the middle of the sixth century. Although there were many other rules – and sometimes monasteries in the centuries after Benedict followed not one rule but an amalgam of several – the Rule of St Benedict achieved a dominant position and was adopted by the majority of monastic houses both for men and for women. Hence, such houses are termed **Benedictine**. The Benedictines are also known as the Black Monks, from the colour of their habit. Benedictine houses were mostly independent, that is, they did not have any constitutional ties one with another. However, there were a number of important exceptions. First, from around the tenth century numerous monastic houses began to band together into informal networks, offering mutual prayers and commemoration for their deceased brothers. Secondly, we see the foundation of dependent monasteries, which became known as priories. A Benedictine abbey would send a group of monks to make a new foundation, but instead of that new house achieving independence, it would remain dependent on its mother house.

Both these features can be observed in the rise of new monastic congregations and orders that emerged from the tenth century onwards; their houses enjoyed a constitutional relationship that moved beyond the sharing of mutual prayers. In 909–10 a very significant foundation was made at Cluny in Burgundy. Cluny followed the Rule of St Benedict and therefore was, and remained, Benedictine. However, in time it grafted on to the Rule a host of new practices – mostly liturgical – and perceived of its place in the wider church in a different way to earlier movements. It attempted to free itself from the power of lay patrons (about whom more will be said below), and to compensate it developed a close relationship with the papacy, making itself directly dependent on Rome to the exclusion of lay rulers and local bishops. Cluny emerged and flourished at a time when parts of Europe were subject to hostile invasions, of Vikings from the north, Moslems from the south, and Magyars from the east. It must have seemed to offer a beacon of salvation, hope, and beauty (the phrase ‘the beauty of holiness’ has been used to capture the liturgical and architectural splendour associated with Cluny) in troubled and violent times. Such was its attraction that a number of existing houses decided voluntarily to adopt Cluny’s customs, while men and women who wished to establish a new monastic house brought monks either from Cluny or one of its daughter houses or associated

abbeys. Such houses became known as **Cluniac**. They remained Benedictine in that they followed the Rule of St Benedict, but they were also members of a congregation that followed the same customs, and owed allegiance to the abbot of Cluny as head of the congregation. Daily life in Cluniac houses was dominated by an elaborate liturgy, including offices for the dead, and a Cluniac monk would have spent most of his waking hours in church.

Cluny flourished in the eleventh century and into the twelfth under a succession of wise and capable abbots. However, by the late eleventh century society was changing and monasticism, which often mirrored social, economic, cultural, and intellectual developments, was changing too. The causes are complex, and beyond the scope of this Introduction. Suffice it to say that there came to be a reaction against the complexities of monastic practices current at the time. Some felt that the elaboration of the liturgy, the daily round of services in the monastic church, had led to a distortion of Benedict's carefully devised routine of communal prayer, manual labour, and private reading and devotion: the first activity had squeezed out the other two. Others saw monasteries being founded in and around towns, and were uncomfortable with the potentially close interaction between monks and townsfolk. Still more were concerned about the conspicuous wealth of many monastic houses, and the way in which this wealth was displayed through their buildings and treasures.

The reaction of a number of individual monks was to turn their back on organised monastic life within communities and opt instead for the solitary life of the hermit. Indeed this would have seemed a perfectly acceptable and logical step. The monastic life had originated in the deserts of Egypt and in Palestine, and the earliest monks were hermits, or solitaires. Benedict in his Rule himself commended the hermit life, though was careful to stipulate that a long period of probation or training in the community was a necessary pre-requisite to the 'solitary combat of the desert' (RSB 1). And so it was that men like Robert of Arbrissel and Bernard of Tiron in France, and Romuald of Ravenna and John Gualbert in Italy, left their monasteries to live the solitary life. Some lay people shunned society as well. Vitalis gave up his position as clerk to Count Robert of Mortain in northern France and like the monks mentioned above fled to the solitude of the forests. To many of these men it was not just a desire for solitude that motivated them. Some felt driven to preach. Nearly all embraced a life of poverty.

Such men are known to us because someone later decided to write about them. There must have been hundreds more men and women who dropped out of society – lay or monastic – who simply do not appear in the historical record. What set Robert, Bernard, and Vitalis, aside was that their careers did not end with their decision to become hermits, and what happened to them next tells us something very important about the appeal of the hermit life in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. They were not allowed to enjoy their solitary life, but were joined by others and – ironically perhaps – ended by founding abbeys to accommodate their followers.

Bernard founded a house at Tiron and Vitalis one at Savigny: but the story continued. The way of life they adopted, a return to the Rule of St Benedict in its simple form, appealed to would-be monks and to patrons, and similar houses were founded on both sides of the Channel. And two new monastic orders emerged, affiliated to their respective mother houses. The order of Tiron (**Tironensian**) and that of Savigny (**Savigniac**) both make an appearance in Wales.

However, the name that dominates the new or reformed orders – then as now – was that of Cîteaux, head of what became the **Cistercian Order**. The New Monastery, as Cîteaux was first known, originated in a mass walk out from a Benedictine monastery in Burgundy known as Molesme. Moreover, the secession was led by the abbot of Molesme, Robert. The story of the foundation of Cîteaux has been told many times, both by twelfth-century Cistercians and by modern historians. In fact, the Cistercians retold and refashioned their history so many times that it is difficult to know where what must have originated as oral tradition among the monks blended into later representation or a desire to create a self-identity. The story is a complex one, but we may be sure that what lay at the heart of the emergence of the Cistercian Order was a desire to return to the primitive observance of the Rule of St Benedict, to apostolic poverty (the lack of possessions associated with Christ's apostles and the earliest Christians), which itself led the Cistercians to a simplicity of building style and church ornament appropriate to that poverty, and to a sense of solitude and seclusion that evoked the deserts of the earliest hermit-monks (Cistercian literature abounds with the words 'desert' and 'wilderness' to describe Cistercian sites).

So far, perhaps, there seems to be little to distinguish the Cistercians from the followers of Vitalis and Bernard, apart from their desire to record their own history. However, there were differences, and these may in part account for the success of the Cistercian Order, which by the time of the death in 1153 of the most famous of all Cistercians, Bernard of Clairvaux, numbered some 350 abbeys throughout Europe. The Cistercians not only developed distinctive ideas on how best to achieve their ideals about the practice of the monastic life, but they put in place two administrative structures to help realise their goals. These were the Annual General Chapter, and annual visitation. Each year, beginning on 14 September, all Cistercian abbots were required to attend a meeting held at Cîteaux. At first the intention seems to have been simply to uphold the bonds of love and charity that lay at the heart of the order (the Cistercian constitution was known as the *Carta caritatis* or 'Charter of Love'), to discipline abbots who needed it, and to help out abbeys in financial distress. However, it grew to be the legislative body of the order, passing regulations designed to underpin the distinctive Cistercian way of life. Although in time the abbots of distant houses received dispensation from personal appearance every year, the General Chapter remained symbolic of the different perceptions of authority within the order. Whereas the abbot of Cluny was the ultimate power within the congregation of Cluny, the abbot of Cîteaux was subject to the General

Chapter. The second administrative innovation reflected the family structure of the order, in which every new house remained the daughter of the abbey from which it was founded. And every year, an abbot was obliged to go on visitation of all his daughter houses. As with attendance at the General Chapter, visitation potentially placed a burden on abbots with many daughter houses, or ones at a considerable distance. Nevertheless, the twin-pronged approach to the maintenance of discipline and uniformity was impressive in its conception, so much so that in 1215 the pope attempted to impose regional general chapters on the independent Benedictine houses. Orderic Vitalis, writing in the mid-1130s, noted some of the characteristics that he thought distinguished the Cistercians from other monastic groups: the location of their monasteries (in 'lonely wooded places': OV iv: 327); their austerity; their strict observance of the Rule of St Benedict; their seclusion that led them to bar their doors to the outside world; and the sweet sound of the names they gave to their abbeys. He was perhaps the first to remark that the Cistercians wore undyed habits. Walter Daniel, who wrote the life of the celebrated English Cistercian Aelred of Rievaulx, told how they were called 'white monks' because 'as the angels might be, they were clothed in undyed wool spun and woven from the pure fleece of the sheep' (Powicke 1950:10). Thus the Cistercians are often called the **White Monks**. Women participated in the great Cistercian experiment as men did. They did not attend the General Chapter, nor was the system of affiliation (the relationship of mother to daughter house) as rigid as it was for male houses. They followed the Cistercian customs, but there is evidence that they may have grafted other practices on to these, making their way of life more eclectic than that of Cistercian men.

All the orders so far discussed followed the Rule of St Benedict for monks. Another important rule was that ascribed to St Augustine (d. 430), bishop of Hippo in North Africa, but it was in reality an amalgam of some of his writings put together in the eleventh century. The Rule of St Augustine attempted to devise a monastic lifestyle for communities of priests, modelled on the *vita apostolica*, the common life of the apostles as laid down in the Acts of the Apostles. In 1059 the Lateran Council held by Pope Nicholas II authorised groups of clergy to follow the common life, and the Rule gained currency as an appropriate form of life for such groups. Those who followed the Rule of St Augustine were known as regular canons (words deriving respectively from Latin and Greek meaning 'rule') and more specifically as **Augustinian Canons (Canonesses** in the case of women). From the colour of their habits they are sometimes called the **Black Canons**. At first the Rule seems to have been adopted by the staff of priests at great collegiate and cathedral churches, such as St Ruf at Avignon in France, but the adaptability of the Rule meant that it was appropriate for use in a great variety of establishments. Some were priories that grew from solitary hermitages. Others took over earlier churches – in England the Anglo-Saxon minster churches, for example. Augustinian canons also staffed hospitals, either independent or attached to a priory. Newly founded priories might have

appeared very similar to houses of Benedictine monks: both followed a monastic lifestyle; the brethren of both wore black. Augustinian houses might be endowed with a number of parish churches of which they took on the pastoral care. Indeed, some historians have suggested that what distinguished the regular canons from monks was their desire to be of service to the outside world, though with such a diversity of houses generalisations are difficult to sustain.

The explosion of new orders led to a degree of interchange and cross fertilisation. Thus, Norbert of Xanten, a renowned preacher, took the concept of the Augustinian canons, and grafted onto it the administrative framework of the Cistercians. His house at Prémontré in north-east France gave rise to the name of a new order, that of the **Premonstratensian Canons**. This was distinguished by an ascetic lifestyle reminiscent of the Cistercians, underpinned by a general chapter and a system of visitation, but with an emphasis, too, on preaching. The Premonstratensians were active in the conversion of the Slavs on the eastern borders of Europe, with Norbert becoming first archbishop of Magdeburg. Like the Cistercians the Premonstratensians wore undyed habits and are known as the **White Canons**.

As we have seen, a number of these new movements, especially the canons, associated themselves with preaching in one way or another. From the late twelfth century the question of who should and who should not be allowed to preach became an important issue for the Church. One concern was the increase in the number of unlicensed preachers: enthusiastic lay people who tried to engage in preaching were perceived, by the church hierarchy, as a potential danger because of the possibility that they might lead people into error. Yet the Church faced new challenges, among them the problem of growing heresy, and preachers were needed. In this context a radical new movement appeared: that of the friars, who brought significant changes to the monastic landscape of western Christendom. The mendicant orders of friars appeared on the European scene in the first decades of the thirteenth century and enjoyed immense popularity across Europe. They represented a whole new form of communal religious life in that they did not spend their lives enclosed in monasteries like monks and canons, but practised a more active mission of preaching among the lay community. The friars soon became a familiar sight on the streets of an increasingly urban Europe from the mid-thirteenth century onwards, practising the poverty they preached – or at least that was the original idea. The friars have often been cited as representing the response, *par excellence*, to a changing society with changing religious needs. Engaged in their outgoing preaching activities, they brought the word of God to the people, and they soon became heavily involved in the newly emerging educational institutions that sprang up across Europe (but not yet in Wales): the universities.

There were four main groups of friars, popularly identified by the different colours of their garments: grey, black, white, or brown. The first of these were the followers of St Francis of Assisi (d. 1226), a young Italian who had rejected his family's wealth

and taken to the streets to preach and live a life in poverty. Initially regarded with suspicion by the ecclesiastical authorities, but attracting a great following among like-minded men and women, Francis's movement was recognised as a religious order in 1210 by Pope Innocent III. Francis's friars were known as the **Franciscans** or **Friars Minor (Grey Friars)**. The **Dominican Friars** were also named after their founder, the Castilian priest and Augustinian canon St Dominic de Guzmán (d. 1221). Dominic was prompted to bring together his friars as preachers to combat what the Church saw as the insidious heresy of the Cathars. Dominic's followers were also known as **Friars Preachers**, or as **Black Friars** (on account of the black habit they wore). The new movement, like that of St Francis, was at first received with apprehension by the authorities in Rome, but was granted papal approval from Honorius III in 1216. The two remaining orders were the **Carmelites (White Friars)**, who had originated on Mount Carmel in the Holy Land, and the **Austin Friars**, who wore brown. Each of these orders had their distinctive characteristics but there were also common features. As a result of their commitment to preaching the friars abandoned the Benedictine requirement of stability within the monastery: they were itinerant, wandering preachers. They were more likely to be found in or near to towns, where they could find a ready audience, rather than in the countryside. They were committed to absolute poverty – corporate as well as personal. This meant that in the early years of their expansion they did not own property but lived in houses donated by well-meaning friends. They lived by begging – collectively they are known as the mendicant orders – and this was another reason for basing themselves in towns. Their readiness to involve themselves in the cure of souls often led to conflict with the establishment, with monasteries or with parish churches. However, the friars gained the patronage of lay people from the highest to the lowest, and their sustained popularity is suggested by late medieval wills, which often name friars as beneficiaries. From their very beginning the Dominicans reinforced their preaching with academic study in the emerging universities of Paris, Bologna, and Oxford, but before long the Franciscans, too, became leading theologians and university teachers.

All these groups were represented in Wales, and it is now time to look a little more closely at how and when they arrived.

CONQUEST AND CONSOLIDATION: CASTLES, PRIORIES, AND PARISHES

This book begins with the coming of the Normans, but this does not mean that monasticism did not exist in Wales before the late eleventh century. On the contrary, there was a long tradition of an ascetic form of monasticism that had much in common with its Irish counterpart. The culdees can best be characterised as hermits,



Map 1: *The Benedictines and Cluniacs in Wales*

while the *clas* church was a community frequently of secular canons (*claswyr*), ruled by an abbot. However, such arrangements were unfamiliar to the Normans who by the mid-1090s had forged westwards into Wales in the south (from as early as 1067), in the north, and through central Wales down into Pembrokeshire. As they progressed they established castles to symbolise their arrival and their dominance – and they built monasteries, specifically Benedictine monasteries. This Introduction opened with Orderic Vitalis's description of the foundation of Shrewsbury Abbey. It is worth quoting another sentence from that same chapter. Orderic remarked, of Earl Roger of Montgomery, that he was a benefactor of many monasteries, giving to them lands he had acquired rather than inherited (OV iii: 144). In other words, it was not unusual for a man to share with a religious house lands that he had gained through conquest. This is just what Roger did, founding an abbey on the very borders of England and Wales. Others did the same, and the names of those who planted military superiority over south Wales were also those of the founders of monasteries. Castle and priory went hand in hand at Usk (Wales's only medieval Benedictine nunnery), Monmouth, Abergavenny, Brecon, Llandovery, St Clears, and Pembroke (along the modern A40 and an important medieval communication), and along the southern coast and coastal hinterland from Chepstow, through Goldcliff and Ewenny, and Kidwelly. Indeed for a few years another Benedictine priory also lay not many miles from Kidwelly, in Carmarthen, until it was converted into an Augustinian house. The dates of foundation of these houses are not always easy to establish, but some we know to have been founded early – Chepstow, for example – and they are clear symbols of the arrival of a new power. Significantly, none of these houses became (as Shrewsbury did) an independent house. They remained dependent priories of their continental or English mother houses (such as Bec, Saumur, Lyre, Battle, and Gloucester), and this continued connection, manifest in so many ways, must have reinforced that these were institutions in the patronage of a foreign ruling elite.

The connection between castle and priory would have been clear from their footprints in the landscape. Less obvious, perhaps, and often overlooked, was the connection that bishops (who may well have guided the lay founders of monasteries and suggested suitable endowments) created between priories and parishes. The eleventh and twelfth centuries were periods in which the parish was still in process of creation and stabilisation. There is much that we would seek to know about the nature of the Welsh parish before the coming of the Normans. However, that Maurice de Londres, second founder of Ewenny, granted his monks all the churches of his lordship, that Bishop Robert of Hereford put in the hands of the monks of Monmouth the advowson of many churches in the diocese of Hereford, and that Bishop Bernard of St Davids confirmed churches – including that at the iconic site of Llangors – to Brecon Priory, all suggests that the new Norman monasteries, as well as being symbols of conquest for their lay lords, were to be instruments of diocesan reform in the hands of the Norman bishops.

Wales stands out in comparison with England, and indeed most of the rest of Europe, for the apparent poverty of its provision for religious women. The possible reasons for this – legal, social, economic, and cultural – are beyond the scope of this Introduction. However, as it was the sole female Benedictine house in Wales a few words should be devoted to the priory of Usk, if only to draw attention to the fact that it was an elite foundation, established by the de Clare family, lords of Chepstow. The date of foundation, and indeed the identity of the founder, cannot be ascertained for sure; it may have been established some time before 1135 by Richard fitz Gilbert de Clare, who was also the founder of Cistercian Tintern Abbey in 1131, or by his grandson later in the century. The least we can say is that one member of this important family thought it as important to make provision for religious women as for religious men, and that, with some interruption, the patronage of Usk remained in the possession of the Clare family throughout its history. The nunnery became closely associated with both Usk Castle and the town that grew up there.

TRANSFORMING WALES: WHITE MONKS, WHITE NUNS, AND WHITE CANONS

The Normans accordingly brought Benedictine monasticism to Wales, and it is to them that we owe that group of priories in the south, stretching from Pembroke to Chepstow. A glance at the Monastic Wales map, however, reveals the geographical limits of the Benedictine presence: there was no house of Black Monks north of Llanbadarn, and that venerable institution enjoyed only a short existence as a Benedictine house. Effectively Cardigan was the only house of Black Monks outside south Wales. This is a clear demonstration of how these monasteries were associated with the Norman incomers, and their distribution coincides with the limits of Norman political power. One question might be: would this situation, in which monastic patronage in Wales was controlled by incomers, persist with the coming of the new orders of the twelfth century? For a while it might have seemed that the answer might have been yes.

It was at the very end of the third decade of the twelfth century that two of the Norman military elite introduced abbeys deriving from the reformed Norman monastery of Savigny. These were Basingwerk in the north, established by Ranulf, earl of Chester, and Neath in the south, founded by Richard de Granville. Savigniac houses in Britain and in France were often planted in places that were politically marginal. Thus Basingwerk lay in contested space between Welsh and Norman spheres of authority, while Neath marked what was then the western limit of power of the earldom of Glamorgan. Both were – like a number of the Benedictine houses before them – associated with a castle, and both helped to stamp political authority on their region. The first Cistercian house in Wales – indeed only the second in Britain



Map 2: *The Cistercians, Savigniacs and Premonstratensians in Wales*

– was also a Norman foundation. This was Tintern, established by Walter fitz Richard de Clare, a kinsman of the man who first bought the White Monks from L'Aumône (France) to England, Bishop Giffard of Winchester, founder of Waverley (Surrey). His relationship with Giffard may have influenced de Clare in his choice of L'Aumône as mother house of his new community. There followed two more Anglo-Norman foundations: Whitland by Bishop Bernard of St Davids (c.1140), and Margam by Earl Robert of Gloucester (1147).

Despite these early indications of connections with the Norman settlers in Wales, however, the Cistercian Order was to become the favoured choice of the native Welsh rulers. The White Monks changed the face of monastic patronage in Wales, for – for the first time – Welsh rulers themselves took on the mantle of foundation and endowment of reformed religious houses. From what we can tell the catalyst for change was political, not religious. In 1164 Whitland, which was to become the mother of a family of Welsh Cistercian houses, sent out its first colony to Strata Florida, which lies in the shadow of the Cambrian Mountains. The invitation had come from the Norman constable of Cardigan Castle, a man named Robert fitz Stephen, who would later play a prominent role in the Anglo-Norman invasion of Ireland. However, he was destined to play no further part in Strata Florida's history, for the following year Rhys ap Gruffudd (the Lord Rhys), lord of Deheubarth and a man of ambition, succeeded in taking Ceredigion from the Normans. With Ceredigion came the patronage of the young Cistercian community and, for a while, its mother house of Whitland. Rhys proved to be a generous patron and protector of the White Monks, and soon his example was emulated, as other Welsh rulers established Cistercian houses in their own territories: Owain Cyfeiliog, lord of southern Powys at Strata Marcella, and Cadwallon ap Madog, lord of Maelienydd, at Cwmhir. Both drew their colonies from Whitland, and so became sister houses of Strata Florida. However, it was Strata Florida itself that within fifteen years of its own foundation provided colonies for Llantarnam (1179) and Aberconwy (1186), the latter becoming the family monastery of the princes of Gwynedd. Cwmhir also gave birth to a daughter house, at Cymer.

Cistercian regulations required that a new house be staffed by at least twelve monks and an abbot, and this internal expansion within Wales is indicative of the buoyancy of recruitment and the appeal of Cistercian life to monks as well as to founders and patrons. The White Monks themselves were not slow to take advantage of Welsh enthusiasm for their order, for when Gruffudd Maelor brought monks from Strata Marcella to make a new foundation at Valle Crucis (1201) he evidently did so at the suggestion and with the encouragement of the abbots of Whitland, Strata Marcella, Cwmhir, and Strata Florida. We may be sure that in their decision to found Cistercian houses the Welsh rulers were encouraged by the example of their peers, and founders did not restrict their generosity to their own abbeys: an act of endowment of another ruler's house might also be an act of political alliance or networking. In the Cistercians

the Welsh rulers found worthy recipients of their patronage: houses that belonged to a powerful, European-wide, network; a monastic movement that – in the twelfth century at least – enjoyed the highest reputation for austerity and holiness; an order that was willing to plant its houses on marginal sites or those that appear to have enjoyed a deep and abiding spiritual significance from earlier times (such as Strata Florida) or political resonance (Valle Crucis); an order, moreover, that had no direct connection with English or Norman abbeys, as did the Benedictine houses of the south. In many ways, as we shall see, the Cistercian houses were in harmony with the political and cultural aspirations of the rulers of *pura Wallia*.

There were to be fourteen Cistercian houses for men in medieval Wales, and just two nunneries (see map 2). The preponderance of male over female houses in Wales is striking: as we have seen there was only one Benedictine nunnery, Usk, and no female houses of the mendicant orders. The two Cistercian abbeys for women were both associated with male houses, Llanllŷr with Strata Florida and Llanllugan with Strata Marcella. The abbots may well have been complicit in the foundation of these houses for women, and have retained oversight of their affairs, but both female houses are sadly poorly documented. We can be sure, however, that small as they may have been they were important in their own local communities and drew their recruits from leading families of their region.

The lay founder of Llanllŷr was the Lord Rhys, and he is also the link with the single Premonstratensian house of Talley. This foundation for White Canons also suggests the ambitions of Rhys to become a ruler of European status, for like the Cistercian Order that of Prémontré was a continental one, and moreover Rhys turned to the French house of St Jean of Amiens for the colony to bring canonical life to Carmarthenshire. It is likely that Rhys sought to transfer the assets of the ancient *clas* church of Llandeilo to Talley, thus extending the transformation of the Welsh church through patronage of the new orders, while retaining indelible links with the past.

URBAN SITES IN THE SOUTH, CULDEES IN THE NORTH: THE REGULAR CANONS

As we have seen, the Premonstratensian Order to which Talley belonged fused the way of life followed by the regular canons, itself based on the Rule of St Augustine, with the more austere features and the administrative framework of the Cistercians. Although in England abbeys and priories of regular canons were the most numerous of all religious groups and orders, in Wales the dominant force was the Cistercian Order, which outnumbered the canons by sixteen houses to nine. Yet the Welsh canons share something with their English counterparts, and that is their continued popularity among founders and the long period over which they were established. Whereas the expansion of the Cistercian Order in Wales was over by 1201 – only



Map 3: *The Regular Canons and Knights Hospitaller in Wales*

the late and problem-fraught foundation of Grace Dieu was to follow – Augustinian houses continued to be founded well into the thirteenth century. As described below (see below, Llanthony Prima) the canons first arrived on the very border of Wales, in the shadow of the Black Mountains, in the early twelfth century. Like Augustinian foundations elsewhere Llanthony Prima seems to have had its origins in a hermitage, its founders deriving inspiration from the solitary life. There was evidently a ruined chapel there, which was rebuilt, and under the patronage of archbishops and bishops, and the powerful Lacy family of Herefordshire, Llanthony flourished. For the next Augustinian foundation we have to move south and west, to the royal borough of Carmarthen. Here around the turn of the eleventh and twelfth centuries a Benedictine dependency was founded on the site of an earlier church dedicated to St Teulyddog, but two decades or so later the Black Monks were ousted by Bishop Bernard of St Davids and replaced by Augustinian canons. His reasons for so doing are not documented. He may have felt that canons rather than monks would better serve the pastoral needs of an urban population. Two further southern foundations followed: Haverfordwest, occupying a site just outside the walls of a town of growing importance, and St Kynemark's near Chepstow, about which very little is known. A striking phenomenon, however, is the arrival of the regular canons in the north, and their transformation, under the patronage of the thirteenth-century rulers of Gwynedd, of sites originally occupied by culdees. These sites are Beddgelert, buried deep in a valley of Snowdonia; Penmon, on the easternmost tip of the island of Anglesey; Puffin Island (Ynys Lannog) off the Anglesey coast opposite Penmon; Bardsey Island, off the southern tip of the Llŷn Peninsula, and St Tudwal's Island to its east. All occupied sites resonant with past associations and were guardians of venerable and respected traditions. The canons were also equipped to meet the needs of the Welsh rulers, through their engagement with their strategies for political and cultural modernisation.

PREACHING AND POVERTY: THE FRIARS IN WALES

As we have seen, the mendicant orders of friars brought a whole new dimension to the monastic tradition. The friars in Wales are poorly documented and it is not always easy or indeed possible to assign a date of foundation to individual houses. However, it seems that the first to arrive may have been the Franciscans (Friars Minor), who established their first Welsh base in Llanfaes on Anglesey around the year 1237 with the help of the Welsh prince Llywelyn ab Iorwerth (they had reached England in 1224). Two further Welsh Franciscan communities were to follow about fifty years later, in Carmarthen and in Cardiff. The second group of mendicants to appear, but actually the first to arrive on British soil, were the Dominicans. In 1221



Map 4: *The Friars in Wales*

the first Dominican friars arrived in England, and by the 1250s they had settled in Wales. They founded a total of five houses there, which made them numerically the strongest of the mendicant orders in Wales. We find them first in Cardiff, where they had established a small community by 1243. Further houses of Black Friars appeared in Haverfordwest (c.1246), Bangor (1251), Rhuddlan (c.1258), and Brecon (1269). The third mendicant order to make an appearance in Wales was that of the white-habited Carmelites. The Carmelites were among the last of the mendicants to arrive in Wales, and, along with the Austin friars, the least represented of them all, establishing only one single friary, at Denbigh, in the 1270s. The Austin friars, too, founded only one religious house in Wales: Newport, which originated in the 1370s, under the patronage of the earl of Stafford.

The friars were an urban phenomenon, but although medieval Wales was not a place of many cities, the friars soon became a familiar part of the country's religious fabric. As elsewhere in medieval Europe they were both respected and ridiculed: lay folk chose their houses for burial and supported the brethren, whose livelihood depended on the generosity and charity of lay society, but by the fourteenth century we find negative comments about friars in the literature, most famously in the poetry of Dafydd ap Gwilym, reflecting perhaps changing attitudes towards this religious group.

These are the monastic and religious orders that in so many ways affected the development of medieval Wales. There is one further house that should be mentioned, though it is the sole representative in Wales of another international order to emerge from that period of tumultuous change, the twelfth century. This was Slebech, a commandery of the order of the Knights Hospitaller. This was one of two orders – the other was that of the Knights Templar – produced by that radical movement known as the First Crusade. Launched in 1095 by Pope Urban II, whose sermons and letters rallied the elite of the West to go to the aid of the churches in the East, the Crusade succeeded in capturing Jerusalem and establishing crusader kingdoms. However, with success came challenges: how to hold these newly won lands, and how to protect travellers and pilgrims visiting the holy places. The Knights Templar were founded to offer protection to those on the road, while the Knights Hospitaller provided shelter and accommodation. Both groups were sustained, and their activities financed, by grants of land in the West, and it was because the Knights had to transport money and goods across Europe and beyond that they ultimately became the first international bankers. The two orders became great landowners, and in every country in which they acquired lands they set up small preceptories or commanderies to administer their estates. In Wales only the Knights Hospitaller appear to have gained a substantial foothold, and as a result they themselves created a commandery at Slebech. This was a wealthy house – indeed the third richest monastery in Wales by 1535. The Hospitallers appear to have acquired lands in Wales at an early date in the order's development, and this wealth was clearly the result of

sustained support and offerings through the years. The knights stationed at Slebech did more than administer estates, however, but were active there as elsewhere in Wales in the provision of care for the sick and for those on the road.

WHY FOUND A MONASTERY?

It will have become clear that the establishment of a monastery needed more than a number of men and women who wanted to live the religious life. A medieval monastery might be a major investment, and even a small and modest house (like some of the Benedictine priories of south Wales) would have required a commitment of resources. Medieval monastic life was made possible by those who were not monks themselves, but who were willing to give land and other assets to ensure the daily performance of the liturgy, and to allow men and women to fulfil their aspirations. Why did they do this? Why did they give of their substance to provide monks, canons, friars, or nuns with a site on which to construct their buildings, perhaps to contribute to the cost of building, and to furnish the means for the religious to live from day to day, clothed and fed, and with books for their services and for reading and contemplation, and ornaments for their churches? The most important answer to this question takes us back to the opening words of this Introduction: prayer. Medieval men and women founded monasteries because they hoped to receive the prayers of the monks or nuns, canons, or friars, and trusted that these would be an aid to salvation in the world to come, when life on earth was full of dangers of disease, war, and the temptations of the flesh. To be the founder of a religious house carried a responsibility and a privilege generally known as patronage, and the role of patron usually passed down from the founder to future generations of his or her family. Sometimes, for all manner of reasons, it could change hands or even revert to the Crown. Although prayer was the most prized benefit that accrued from the possession of monastic patronage, there were other advantages to be enjoyed. Relations between monasteries and their patrons were not always harmonious. There might, for instance, be quarrels when a patron thought a predecessor had been too generous with grants of land and tried to take them back, or when he or she wished to secure for a protégé an office such as abbot (abbess) or prior(ess), and found the community resistant. However, when things went well the relationship was one of mutual advantage.

IN LIFE AND IN DEATH

During his lifetime a patron normally supported his or her religious house by making donations to the community, which might range from tracts of land or profit-making properties that could be leased out, to items of greater or smaller value such

as books, religious objects, vestments, furniture, or even a relic. Patrons might also support their religious communities in other ways, for example by protecting them against harassment from outside (by bothersome neighbours, perhaps), or by promoting their status, or pleading on their behalf with secular or ecclesiastical authorities. In return a patron received benefits that could last a lifetime: from education of the young within the monastery, to hospitality when required, to financial help (when well-to-do monasteries could assist patrons who were experiencing problems), to political support, and finally to the provision of a place to die and a place of burial. Sometimes monks offered their 'special friends' the right to take the monastic habit just before they died in a ritual known as *ad succurrendum*.

Burial in a monastery was popular with people from all walks of medieval life, but as a rule, the wealthier the patron, the more visible his or her tomb. Sadly much of our physical evidence – the actual tombs – has disappeared over the centuries, but some splendid examples still survive in Wales, such as the magnificent effigies of the Hastings family and others in Abergavenny Priory. In some cases a religious house might become the dynastic mausoleum of a family, as Aberconwy did for the princes of Gwynedd, or Strata Florida for those of Deheubarth. At Valle Crucis the founder and his descendants were offered burial, and some striking tomb slabs are now preserved in the former monks' dormitory. Even where we no longer have the physical survival of tombs, we may find evidence of burials in surviving documentary evidence such as wills or references in poetry or chronicles like the *Brut y Tywysogion*, which notes the burial of descendants of the Lord Rhys at Strata Florida. Members of the Marshal family who succeeded the Clares as patrons of Tintern found burial there: these included Isabella, countess of Pembroke (d. 1220), her sons Walter and Anselm, both of whom died in 1245, and her daughter Matilda (d. 1248). The relationship between a monastery and its patrons was thus one that might endure from the cradle to the grave.

MONASTERIES, IDENTITIES, AND POLITICAL ASPIRATIONS

The presence of tombs within a monastic church or precinct would have furnished the monks and canons of medieval Wales with a visible and continual reminder of those to whom they owed the origin and sustainability of their community, and of the broader network of association they enjoyed. To a certain extent the identity of a community might be tied up with the identity of its patron. As we have seen, monasteries were founded with the assistance of the political elite. Although it is sometimes problematic to draw a clear line between 'Welsh' and 'Anglo-Norman' monasteries in medieval Wales, it seems clear that in terms of their patronage the religious houses of medieval Wales can be roughly divided into

'native Welsh' and 'Anglo-Norman' monasteries, the former including the northern houses of Augustinian canons (among them Beddgelert, Penmon, and Bardsey) and the Cistercian abbeys of *Pura Wallia* (such as Strata Florida, Aberconwy, Cymer), the latter including the great Cistercian abbeys of Margam and Neath. In a politically fragmented society such as Wales, overshadowed by a bigger and often aggressive polity like England, these shared identities carried major resonances. A monastery such as Margam would not only have been seen as a Cistercian monastery, a member of that renowned international order, but as a monastery in the patronage of the earls of Gloucester. This would have affected how it regarded itself and how it was viewed by others. Chronicle references to the destruction of monastic property during periods of conflict between the English and the Welsh show clearly how monasteries were closely identified with their patrons. There can be no clearer example of this than King John's order in 1212 for the destruction of Strata Florida because it 'harbours our enemies'.

There can be no doubt, however, that such extremes were only reached in times of heightened tension. Research over recent years has demonstrated that to see a clear divide between those who endowed and indeed those who entered abbeys and priories that were primarily affiliated with either Welsh or Norman patrons can be misleading. The Poll Tax returns of the 1380s show that some houses had personnel with English and Welsh names – the monastic population showed an ethnic mix – and Anglo-Norman houses in the south, such as Margam and Neath, acquired lands from Welsh as well as Anglo-Norman benefactors.

Nevertheless the associations between monastic houses and their patrons continued to be an important factor in the political development of Wales, and in many ways the Cistercians aided the Welsh rulers in their political aspirations. The Cistercians patronised by the Lord Rhys, for instance, put their resources (sometimes financial, sometimes in terms of their personnel) to the cause of the modernisation of his government and administration. Several decades later Rhys's own house of Strata Florida rather than Aberconwy was complicit in a great political set piece when in 1238 Llywelyn ab Iorwerth, ruler of Gwynedd and patron of Aberconwy, gathered all the princes of Wales in order to make them swear allegiance to his son Dafydd, which they did in the nave of the abbey church of Strata Florida. Cistercian abbots acted as envoys and peacemakers, for instance, travelling to London in 1248 to ask for the body of Llywelyn's elder son, Gruffudd ap Llywelyn, to be returned for burial at Aberconwy. That some of the Welsh monasteries, and again it is the Cistercians that take centre stage, were involved in the political life of medieval Wales in more peaceful ways is shown by the occasions on which heads of religious houses supported their political leaders, as in 1274 when several abbots of northern Welsh monasteries wrote a petition to the pope in favour of Llywelyn ap Gruffudd defending him against the accusations of Bishop Anian of St Asaph; further, they offered their premises for political meetings.

When a man or woman entered a monastic house he or she took vows after a period of training known as the noviciate. They promised stability (that they would remain in the monastery for the rest of their lives), conversion of their former way of life, and obedience to their superior. Their new life was symbolised by putting aside their own clothes and taking the monastic habit. They entered a new life, one that set them apart from family and friends, and from their former identity. Such attempts at distancing themselves from their past must have been testing at the best of times, but in Wales even more exacting during the difficult political circumstances of the period from the thirteenth to the fifteenth century. The conflicts between England and Wales that ultimately led to the end of Welsh independence with the Edwardian Conquest, and later still the rising of Owain Glyn Dŵr in the opening years of the fifteenth century, occasionally caused monks to be drawn into secular conflict. The key to understanding this lies perhaps in the close-knit nature of medieval Welsh society from which, after all, the personnel of Wales's abbeys and priories was recruited. Nevertheless, while outwardly withdrawn from the world and its politics, members of the monastic order were often all too keenly aware of the bitter conflicts and wars that ravaged the land outside their monastery walls. In some cases, as we know from the documents that record them, they were just unable to remain passive and detached from the events outside – one imagines that a monk must have felt, just as keenly as any other man, anger at seeing his village, or his family home, destroyed by warring troops. A notable example of an abbot who took direct political action was John ap Hywel of Llantarnam who in 1405 joined a Welsh attack on Usk castle, during which he lost his life.

MONASTERIES AND SOCIETY IN MEDIEVAL WALES: A PLACE TO STAY

In the Middle Ages travellers would have known that on their journeys they could always be sure of a place to stay within the precincts of a monastic house. Those on the roads might be other monastics (abbots and monks out and about on the business of their house), bishops and other churchmen, royalty, the elite of lay society, or the humble pilgrim. While the aim of religious communities (the friars aside) was in some measure to recreate the solitary life of the desert and withdraw from human habitation and the hustle and bustle of an increasingly urban society, in reality monks, canons, and nuns did not cut themselves off entirely from the rest of medieval society. Rather, they existed, in many senses, on its margins, whether physically in their rural and secluded valleys, or psychologically in their enclosures within urban centres. Indeed the various monastic rules stipulated certain types of contacts between religious communities and the outside world and offered guidance for such occasions. One such was how medieval monastic communities should react when travellers turned up expecting to be accommodated. St Benedict in his Rule was quite clear on

the answer. He states that 'all arriving guests should be welcomed like Christ, for He himself will say "I was a stranger and you welcomed me"' (*RSB* 53). The monks were not to be tempted to preserve their seclusion by turning guests – or Christ himself in their persons – from their gates. The Rule further instructs the brethren on how guests should be greeted and treated: they should wash the guests' feet and look after their spiritual and physical needs, always ensuring, however, that they 'do not disturb the work of the brothers'. Here we see Benedict attempting to create a compromise: hospitality was a sacred duty but potential disruption could and should be minimised. One of the monks (or nuns in a female community) was given the office of guest master/mistress to ensure compliance with the Rule in this respect.

The granting of hospitality was only one way in which monasteries performed a social function. Closely allied to this activity was the provision of charity or almsgiving. So important was this function in a medieval religious house that a monk, canon, or nun, would be given a special office, that of almoner, to oversee the dispensation of food, drink, and other necessities to those in need. Gerald of Wales considered the Cistercian monks of Margam to be particularly noteworthy in this regard, and records a story of how, in a time of famine when the poor and needy gathered at the gate of the abbey, the monks sent a boat to Bristol to collect grain to feed the crowds.

The importance of monastic hospitality is further confirmed by the existence, at some sites, of the remains of monastic guest houses, and by references to such buildings in medieval written sources. In smaller houses guests might be accommodated within the claustral precinct, but the Cistercians, being anxious to exclude lay people from the central core of their abbeys, generally placed the guest house at the extreme margin of the site, usually outside the west range. Traces of what was probably the guest house at Tintern lie in the vicinity of the present-day pub to the west of the abbey. Sometimes there appear to have been more than one building accommodating guests. Gerald of Wales famously complained about the inadequate treatment he felt he had received from the Strata Florida monks, who lodged him in the quarters designated for 'ordinary' guests rather than granting him special treatment in what seems to have been the medieval equivalent of Strata Florida's first class suite.

The costs of hospitality could be overwhelming, and houses, particularly those on more well-trodden lines of communication, might from time to time complain of the burden. In the case of the Cistercians this demand could be the result from the pressures of attendance at the General Chapter at Cîteaux. The abbeys of Whitland, Margam, and Tintern, and Basingwerk in the north, all reported from time to time the presence of Irish abbots who stayed there during the course of their journey to Burgundy. It is clear that they sometimes overstayed their welcome, leading the General Chapter to issue instructions limiting the length of their stay. Visiting abbots would not be accommodated in the guest house but in the abbot's lodgings.

That monastic hospitality was highly valued by lay folk, and could indeed be lavish, is the impression we get from the poetry of later medieval Welsh bards like

Guto'r Glyn, Gutun Owain, or Tudur Aled. After the Edwardian Conquest of Wales in 1282–3, the defeat of the Welsh prince Llywelyn ap Gruffudd, and the destruction of the Welsh nobility, the Welsh court poets found themselves out of a home and in search for new patrons. The men who stepped into the breach were the abbots of some of the Welsh Cistercian houses, most notably Strata Florida and Valle Crucis, and thanks to these circumstances we now have the privilege of a unique, if undoubtedly highly elaborated, insight into otherwise shadowy aspects of medieval Welsh monastic life. What these poets emphasise in their lively descriptions of monastic hospitality is the generosity of the abbots, who are invariably described as wise and learned men. In the poems we are told of the plentiful food and drink served to the bards in the Cistercian abbeys that lodged them, of a table allegedly groaning under the weight of large quantities of roast meat, exotic fruit, and French wines. The poets also provide – less fanciful – descriptions of elements of the monastic buildings and of some of the activities they witnessed in the houses. They mention the lead on the church roofs, the glass of the windows and the impressive stone walls of their host abbeys; they also refer to the singing and prayers they heard the monks perform, and to the educational activities of the religious communities. Fanciful they may be, but they provide a unique view of things that otherwise elude us now, over half a millennium later.

MONASTERIES AS PATRONS OF VERNACULAR CULTURE

Offering hospitality to poets was not the only way in which the Welsh monasteries – and first and foremost the Cistercian abbeys – contributed to native culture. It was in their *scriptoria*, moreover, that much of medieval Welsh literature was produced and copied, including both religious and secular material, both in Latin and in the vernacular. Welsh monks were prolific manufacturers of texts of both prose and poetry, and although it is now not always easy – indeed, not always possible – to determine with certainty the provenance of a medieval manuscript, we know in many cases (because of references in the text or margin, or identified hands of scribes), where a manuscript was copied or kept. Arguably the most famous of the medieval Welsh chronicles, the so-called *Brut y Tywysogion* or *Chronicle of the Princes*, for example, was written in the *scriptoria* of one or more Welsh Cistercian monasteries, including Strata Florida Abbey. The White Monks of medieval Wales, then, were key players in cultural production and keepers of national memory. However, neither the Cistercians nor the other abbeys and priories in *Pura Wallia* had the monopoly of copying and transmitting vernacular writings to the future. The Augustinian canons of Carmarthen, a royal borough, were responsible for the production of the Black Book of Carmarthen, a collection of Welsh language poetry and prophecy.

CULTS OF SAINTS AND PILGRIMAGE

Religious houses were often erected on sites that already had a previous religious significance, be that a former church or a place associated with a holy person, a holy well, or a miraculous event. Medieval Wales had many such places. Particularly outstanding, perhaps, is the great number of saints that were (and are still) commemorated across the land. In fact, according to ancient traditions, Wales was home to a very large number of holy men and women, some better known than others, and all in some way remembered in local toponyms. The most famous such site, recording none less than Wales's patron saint, is the small city of St Davids in Pembrokeshire, home to the cathedral of the same name and alleged burial site of the saint himself. However, there are countless other places besides that either commemorate one or several saints (as do the many places beginning with the element *llan*- referring to a holy place, followed by a personal name, such as Llanbadarn or Llandeilo), or are traditionally associated with the presence of holy men without bearing their individual names. An example for the latter is the ancient island site on which the Augustinian priory of Bardsey came to be erected in the thirteenth century, where 'a vast number' of saints were said to lie buried.

The presence of a saint, or of his or her relics, or even the mere association of a place with a saint, was potentially very beneficial for a religious community as, on the one hand, it greatly enhanced its religious significance and prestige, indicating continuity, and on the other it created the possibility of turning a monastery or a church into a profitable pilgrimage site. Pilgrims were on the whole welcome guests who boosted the economy of a monastery and confirmed its importance, enhancing its reputation, and therefore religious communities tended to be keen to possess a relic of some sort – and if it was a miracle-working relic then all the better! We do not know of many such objects in medieval Wales, but there was the miracle-working fountain at Holywell, which had miraculous healing capacities and that is in fact visited for this very reason until the present day (see figure 7 and colour plate 1). This was in the guardianship of Basingwerk Abbey, as the holy well of Penrhys in the south was in the custody of the monks of Llantarnam.

As well as creating an association with a saint through the physical site of a monastery, a link was also forged through the dedication of an abbey or priory to a particular saint. Most popular in this context was the Virgin Mary, to whom all Cistercian monasteries were dedicated (although a small number had a secondary dedication), as well as a large number of monasteries from other religious orders, including the Benedictine priories of Cardiff and Chepstow. Other dedications included, for example, St Michael (Ewenny Priory), St Clarus and Mary Magdalene (St Clears Priory), and St John the Baptist (Brecon Priory).

KEEPING RELIGIOUS IN ORDER (OR WHAT HAPPENED WHEN THINGS WENT WRONG?)

For the vast majority of those in religious orders in medieval Wales – as elsewhere – life would have been a continual, and to modern perceptions perhaps monotonous, routine of prayer, manual work, and private devotions. Day in, day out, they followed the Rule, spending much of their time in silence. Abbots would leave from time to time, taken away from the cloister on the business of their house, or perhaps on sensitive political or diplomatic missions for a ruler or for their patron. Cistercian abbots would have journeyed to the General Chapter (though how frequently they did travel to Cîteaux is difficult to ascertain given the patchy nature of the records). The Rule of St Benedict also foresaw occasions when monks would have temporarily to venture into the outside world. However, for most their existence was an ordered one, framed by the church and the cloister.

Yet we know that there was potential for things to go wrong both on an individual and a collective level. As we have seen, the Cistercians introduced a novel method of keeping their abbeys on the straight and narrow: the annual visitation of a daughter house by the abbot of the mother house. Minor transgressions would be dealt with there and then, but more serious matters might be taken to the General Chapter. It is the records of this body that allows us a glimpse into problems that might beset houses of White Monks. In Wales it is clear that by the late twelfth century there were some issues with discipline among the *conversi*, the lay brothers whose function was as workers, and about whom more is said below. A common phenomenon across Europe in the late twelfth century was unrest among these men, unrest that the order tried hard to quell. In 1190 the General Chapter heard complaints about the *conversi* of Margam and their excessive beer-drinking on the abbey granges, and five years later its attention was drawn to the behaviour of those of Cwmhir, who had stolen the abbot's horses when he attempted to cut their consumption of ale. It is a measure of the self-confidence of the General Chapter that it could order the miscreants to journey to Clairvaux (mother house of Cwmhir's mother house of Whitland) to do penance. Whether they did so or not we cannot tell: we have written record of the order, but not its execution.

Cluniac houses were also subject to visitation by members of the order, as might be Benedictine dependencies of larger abbeys. The houses of Black Monks were self-regulating, but there emerged a system, formalised at the beginning of the thirteenth century, of periodic visitation, by a bishop or archbishop, of the religious houses of his diocese. Orders such as the Cistercian, having their own methods of preserving discipline, were exempt. A bishop would announce an impending visitation, then visit a monastery either in person or by proxy, and finally record his findings with any orders for reform. These visitation returns have to be treated with caution. It is easy to see them as catalogues of misdemeanours and paint a picture

of corruption in monastic life. We need to remember, however, that bishops tended to record what was wrong, and not to mention what was right. And, like Archbishop Pecham of Canterbury, who visited a number of Welsh religious houses in 1284, they had high standards and expectations. Nevertheless these sources do give an indication of where the problems lay: financial mismanagement, failure to observe silence at due times, sexual incontinence, or relaxation of the boundaries between monks, nuns, or canons, and the outside world. You can read more of what Pecham found at individual houses below.

MANOR, CHURCH, AND GRANGE: FINANCING THE MONASTERY

Monastic men and women needed to be supported, financially, in their life of prayer and withdrawal from the world. One result of the foundation of monastic houses in medieval Wales from the eleventh century onwards was a large scale transfer of land and other economic assets to the monastic order. We can build a picture of the economic basis of individual houses from their own archives, where they survive, that is, from the charters in which grants of land to them are recorded, and also from surveys for the purposes of taxation. Here the two written monuments are the *Taxatio ecclesiastica*, an enquiry into the taxable assets of religious houses ordered by Pope Nicholas IV (1291), and the *Valor ecclesiasticus* (1535), an investigation of the wealth of the monasteries of England and Wales on the eve of the Dissolution. These are useful indices of relative wealth and poverty, although they should not be taken as accurate in all respects. They are only snapshots after all – a monastery may have been experiencing a temporary fall or (less likely) a rise in fortune at the time a valuation was made. Moreover abbots and priors may have sought to underplay their assets, particularly if they were being assessed for taxation. However, these surveys can give us an indication of the nature of the lands and other sources of income enjoyed by individual houses.

What stands out clearly from the documentary record is that the Benedictine houses of the south tended to rely on traditional forms of income, such as small parcels of land or manors, but overwhelmingly on what historians term *spiritualia*, that is, income derived from parish churches. It was suggested above that a number of bishops were complicit in the establishment of the first generation of monastic houses after the coming of the Normans, and that they may have urged founders to endow these houses with parish churches to bring order to the parochial system. Appropriation of parish churches to monasteries made that house responsible for the cure of souls in the parish, either through one of their own number or through the appointment of a chaplain or vicar. The church was also a source of revenue, for appropriation brought with it all the income from tithes and

other dues. For houses such as Brecon and Monmouth *spiritualia* was their major source of income.

Cistercian legislation warned the White Monks against the possession of churches and tithes. Although some houses, like Valle Crucis, did come into the possession of a number of churches, for the Welsh Cistercians most of their revenue came from the possession of land. The White Monks' own rhetoric talks of the desert, and they have the reputation in Wales as elsewhere as pioneers, opening up to cultivation lands that had hitherto lain unused and unexploited. Although historians now tend to see this as a distorted view, it remains that the Welsh Cistercians came to possess wide tracts of land, much of it mountain and scrub, and that they were successful in exploiting its potential. The General Chapter laid out a blueprint for the economic activity of its abbeys. Lands were to be consolidated around farms known as granges, and these were if possible to lie far from the lands of lay people. The assets were to comprise land for arable and farming, but the possession of manors and mills (both a source of revenue deriving from the work of others) was forbidden, as indeed were *spiritualia*. The granges were to be staffed and run by *conversi*, or lay brothers, men who took vows but who were not themselves monks. Rather than prayer, their role was manual labour and administration of the grange. This is the 'classic' picture of the Cistercian economy and the Cistercian grange, but we are now recognising that not all Cistercian abbeys operated in this way. Indeed it would not have been possible for the General Chapter to regulate economic activities at houses located across Europe and beyond, in vastly differing locations and terrains, and endowed by their patrons and benefactors with a range of economic assets.

Nevertheless, there is no doubting the economic success of a number of the Welsh houses of the order. Gerald of Wales contrasted their achievements favourably with those of the Cluniacs. If the Cluniacs are given good lands, he stated, and every advantage, they merely squander it; if the Cistercians are given a barren plot in dense forest they soon create 'splendid churches there and fine monastic buildings, with a great amount of property and all the wealth you can imagine' (GW *Journey*, p. 106). By the late twelfth century the White Monks in Wales had established themselves as sheep farmers on a large scale. By the second decade of the thirteenth Strata Florida was trading in wool with Flanders, and from there on there is plentiful evidence of Cistercian involvement in the transport of wool within Wales, across England, and to the Continent. Some houses had their own ships. Flemish importers of wool in the thirteenth century and Italian merchants of the fourteenth listed Welsh houses with wool for sale, and top of the list was Neath. At the Dissolution monastic lands passed to the new gentry and in many cases their estates were identical to the monastic ones that preceded them. The economic transformation wrought by the monastic order was carried through into the early modern period and beyond.

THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

The gazetteer that follows give details of fifty-eight religious houses in Wales that were in existence between the eleventh and the sixteenth centuries. The survival of the physical evidence in terms of standing buildings has been patchy. The houses of the mendicant orders have survived least well. They occupied urban sites, which must have been much in demand once the friars vacated them. There is therefore very little physical trace of Wales's friaries. At some monasteries we have the church alone, often rebuilt in a later period, which survived because at the Dissolution it retained, or was granted, a parochial function. This was the case with a number of the Benedictine priories, and at Cistercian Margam. The survival of the claustral complexes varies; at some archaeological excavation has helped us to understand the use of space and movement across monastic space; at others such investigation is ongoing. The standing remains of individual houses are discussed below. What follows is a brief introduction to the main buildings of the medieval monastery.

The church lay at the heart of a monastic complex and as the locus for communal worship, the *Opus Dei* or work of God, it was the most important building. Churches were generally cruciform, or cross-shaped, and the monks' choir generally lay under the crossing (where the long and shorter arms of the cross intersect) and in the easternmost bays of the nave. The nave itself would have been used by visitors or by parishioners where the nave had a parochial function, and, in Cistercian churches, by the *conversi*. The east end of the church was reserved for the high altar. The monastic buildings generally lay around a cloister that was most often on the south side of the church, though famously at Tintern it was located to the north. The claustral design was a standard monastic plan, but where monastic buildings have not survived we cannot assume that there would have always been a cloister, particularly in houses such as the northern Augustinian houses, whose layout may have been influenced by the culdee establishment that preceded them.

Around the cloister lay what may be described as the domestic rooms of the monastery. In the east range on the ground floor there was generally a vestry, the chapter house, and a day room, perhaps with provision for the novices. After the church the chapter house was one of the most important rooms in the monastery for here it was that the monks met together once a day to discuss the business of the monastery. Here abbots preached sermons, important lay visitors might be admitted for special occasions, such as the granting of a charter, and wayward monks would be disciplined. Abbots were frequently buried in the chapter house, and the significance of the room is often marked, as at Valle Crucis, by the ornateness of the entrance. On the first floor of the east range lay the monks' dormitory, where the brothers slept side by side until the bell summoned them to the night office, the first

office of the day in the early hours of the morning. They accessed the monks' choir directly via the night stairs at the north end of the dormitory. Remains of night stairs can be seen at Neath.

The dominant building of the south range, opposite the church, was the refectory. This was also a highly significant room, for great emphasis was laid on the communal meal, which was taken in silence to the accompaniment of a suitable reading. The Rule of St Benedict appointed weekly readers for the task. In early Cistercian houses the refectory was generally built on an east–west axis, but by the second half of the twelfth century it came to be reorientated north–south, and this is the pattern that we see in surviving Welsh Cistercian cloisters such as Basingwerk and Tintern. Alongside the refectory we often find the kitchen and the warming room, generally the only part of a monastery (apart from the kitchen) where a fire was allowed. In Cistercian cloisters the kitchen was commonly shared with the *conversi*, whose refectory lay to the south end of the west range. Indeed, the whole west range was given over to the *conversi*, with the refectory and storage areas on the ground floor and dormitory on the first floor. The large size of some west ranges, notably Neath, is indicative of the buoyancy of recruitment to this class at least in the twelfth century. Neath also preserves traces of another significant feature of Cistercian architecture, and this is the 'lane', the wall that separated the *conversi* from the monks. The early Cistercians professed to treat the *conversi* as their equals in all things saving the name of monk, but in practice the two components became more polarised, and this segregation is manifest in the architectural setting.

Outside the cloister there would have been other buildings necessary for the smooth running of the monastery, though the number, size, and placing of these would have varied according to the size and wealth of the community, and its physical location. Such would have been an infirmary for the sick and elderly monks and perhaps an abbot's house – a good survival of both is at Tintern – and a guest-house. There would also have been a host of workshops, stables, perhaps a mill and a woolhouse. Investigation of the monastic precinct at Strata Florida is suggesting a complexity of arrangement within a precinct that was much larger than has hitherto been thought.

THE END OF MONASTIC LIFE IN MEDIEVAL WALES

Those who established the monastic houses of Wales, whether they were the Norman settlers of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, or the Welsh rulers of the twelfth and thirteenth, probably thought they were founding and endowing houses that would go on for ever, whose monks would pray for their souls in perpetuity. But in general fashions changed. In the later Middle Ages monasteries

were not the sole, indeed maybe not the most obvious, targets for a man's or woman's generosity. Increasingly they turned to other forms of commemoration: to individual chantries in parish churches, perhaps, or the endowment of schools and, in England, universities. Numbers in monasteries fell, perhaps never recovering fully after the trauma of the Black Death of 1348/9. Some parts of the monastic complex, like the east range of Valle Crucis or the chapter house of Strata Florida, show signs of adaptation in the later Middle Ages, which reduced the size to accommodate a smaller monastic population, or to create spaces with new functions. The French wars of the fourteenth century had been a first indication of the vulnerability of priories with a continental connection, but some disappeared even earlier. Bassaleg probably did not survive beyond 1252, and another early casualty was Cardiff, the traditional date of closure of which is 1403 but it is not recorded after the end of the thirteenth century. In the fifteenth century the endowments of Llangenydd and St Clears were granted to All Souls College, Oxford, those of Llangua to the charterhouse founded by Henry V at Sheen, and those of Goldcliff to the college established by Henry VI at Eton.

The wholesale end of monastic life in England and Wales was, however, the result of the political will of King Henry VIII, who both decided to break with the Roman church in order to secure his second marriage, and cast envious eyes on the wealth of the monastic order. The *Valor ecclesiasticus* of 1535, a survey of monastic assets, was a preliminary step. The following year the Act of Suppression ordered the closure of all houses valued at under £200 per annum, on the grounds that immorality and poor observance was more likely to occur in small establishments. Most of Wales's monasteries fell victim to this first round of suppression and had ceased to exist by 1537. Three Benedictine houses survived for a short while longer, and were closed along with their English mother houses at a slightly later date: Cardigan with Bisham in 1538, Kidwelly with Sherborne in 1539 and Pembroke with St Albans in the same year, and Ewenny in 1540. All the Cistercian houses were closed in the first round of suppressions, except for Neath, Whitland, and Strata Florida, which were reprieved until 1539. Among the houses of canons only Llanthony Prima remained until 1539. All the houses of friars were surrendered in 1538. Thus by 1540 all monasteries had ceased to exist, their buildings and estates granted to secular owners. But for four centuries and more the religious houses of medieval Wales had been a force in the land. They have left their footprint on the landscape. Many of their churches are still in use today, and to them we owe the survival of much of medieval Welsh vernacular culture.

