

SESSION TWO

The foundation of Cîteaux and the formation of a Cistercian identity

Remember that the *Rule of St Benedict* had assumed that monasteries would be self-governing, autonomous institutions. The Cluniacs had moved a stage further by banding their houses together into a loose confederation. The Cistercians formed what was arguably the first true monastic order. They were the first religious group to develop a closely-knit, hierarchical, structure for their monasteries and to draw up regulations – which went far beyond the *Rule of St Benedict* – for the uniform conduct of everyday life which had to be followed at all Cistercian houses. Moreover the White Monks (as the Cistercians are also known) devised governmental machinery to make sure that their rules were followed. In these sessions we will be studying the narrative accounts of the foundation and expansion of Cîteaux and the Cistercian order in its early years, and what these have to tell us of:

- (i) How the Cistercians perceived themselves, and
- (ii) How they presented themselves to others.

The narratives we are studying are:

The *Exordium Parvum*, the account of the secession of a group of monks from the Benedictine monastery at Molesme to found Cîteaux (1098), and the shorter version of the narrative, the *Exordium Cistercii*. You will find a link on Moodle to a web page where you will find an English translation of this key text.

There has been much scholarly controversy about the dating of the early Cistercian documents and this is summarized in Knowles, *Great Historical Enterprises*, Waddell, in Sommerfeldt 1978:30-61, in Burton, *Monastic and Religious Orders* (1994), and in C. Holdsworth's article in Norton and Park, *Cistercian Art and Architecture in the British Isles* (1986). For the most up-to-date discussion and summary of the debate see Burton and Kerr, *The Cistercians in the Middle Ages*.

It is important to understand the nature and significance of the debate, because many historians have talked of a decline from 'ideals' to 'reality', in other words, they have claimed that 'documents of practice' reveal that the Cistercians did not always live up to their 'documents of theory'. It is therefore crucial to try to ascertain when that 'theory' developed. For the most recent, and controversial treatment, see Berman, *The Cistercian Evolution* (2000) and the reviews listed in the bibliography. The most recent edition and translation of *Exordium Parvum* and *Exordium Cistercii* is that by Chrysogonus Waddell in *Narrative and Legislative Texts from Early Cîteaux*, pp. 199-259, pp. 417-40 (EP) and 137-61, and 399-413. Waddell suggests that the *Exordium Cistercii*, which appears in a sequence with *Summa Carte Caritatis* and *Capitula* was probably the work of Raymond de Bar, abbot of

Cîteaux from 1134/5 to 1150, and was probably composed early in his abbacy as an introduction to the second recension of the Cistercian customary (p. 398). He suggests (p. 417) that *EP* was originally written by Stephen Harding (Prologue, chapters 1-2, 4-14) when the order began to expand in 1113. His hypothesis is that it was expanded and updated around 1147 by Raymond de Bar. The purpose of the updated *EP* was to act as an introduction to the order's customary of c. 1147.

Reading:

Texts: *Exordium Parvum* and *Exordium Cistercii* – link supplied

Matarasso, *The Cistercian World*.

Booklist section (iv), especially Lawrence, *Medieval Monasticism* (1989, 2001); Lekai, *The Cistercians* (1977) (available from JB); Sommerfeldt 1978, Bredero 1984. On the attitude of the Cistercians to the *Rule of St Benedict*, see the short article by L. Lekai, 'The Rule and the early Cistercians', in *Cistercian Studies* 5 (1970), 243-51. Berman, *Cistercian Evolution*.

Read the *EP* and think about the following points:

- 1 How did the abbey of Cîteaux begin? (see chapters 1, 2, 3, 4)
- 2 What difficulties did it encounter, and why? (see chapters 5–8)
- 3 What indications are there, in the text, that the foundation of Cîteaux sprang from (a) dissatisfaction with existing monastic practice, and/or (b) a new religious outlook?
- 4 What use is made of the notion of the 'desert'?, or solitude?
- 5 What seems to be the attitude to the *Rule of St Benedict*?
- 6 Is there any indication of roughly when *EP* might have been written?
- 7 Is there any indication of why it might have been written?
- 8 Is it likely to be a reliable source?

On the relationship between *EP* and *EC*:

- 1 Compare *EP*, sections I–XIV and *EC*
- 2 Compare the statutes or institutes in *EP* XV and XVII and Institutes IX–XVI