



MODULE CODE: HPHI5911/6911

From Desert myths to sheep tales: THE CISTERCIANS IN THE MIDDLE AGES

ASSESSMENT TYPE: PORTFOLIO (50%). COMPONENT WEIGHTING: 50%

WORD COUNT: 2500 Words

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[The first commentary is due on 11 November, second commentary is due on 25 November, essay is due on 13 January]

Section A

Project subject / task ' You are required to write commentaries on one short extract (1250 words), and one image (1250 words); together these assessments form 50% of the final module mark.'

Textual 'extract' Commentary Option 2 . . . ' The man of God, Alberic, however, after he had practised fruitfully regular discipline in the school of Christ for nine and a half years, went home to the Lord, full of glory in his faith and virtues, and therefore deserved to be rewarded by God with eternal life. His successor was a certain brother by the name of Stephen, an English man by nationality, who had also come to that place from Molesme, a lover of the Rule and of the place. During his time, the brethren and this abbot prohibited the duke of that land or any other lord from keeping his court at any time in that monastery, as they used in times past to do on the occasion of great feasts. Furthermore, lest anything remain in the house of God – where it was their wish to serve God devoutly day and night – that savoured of pride and superfluity or that would ever corrupt poverty, the safeguard of poverty, that they had chosen of their own free will, they resolved to keep no crosses of gold or silver ...

(Exordium Parvum)

Exordium Parvum . . . 'A Small Beginning'

The opening excerpt above can of course be traced to the description of that title written by the Cistercians constituting an account of the origins of the movement. Although such documents emanating from the Cistercians might summarise an 'after the event' process rather than an out-and-out manifesto,[1] together with the Charter of Charity, the document acts as a kind of constitution as well as historical basis.

The opening paragraph of chapter seventeen above is actually headed . . . 'Of the Death of the First Abbot and the Promotion of the Second and of their Institutes and their Joy'. But of course Exordium Parvum covers a wider perspective of the *raison d'être* for the movement within its eighteen chapters. Among these, it is evident that the Order had an underlying objective of not being beholden to any external power other than that, at least in theory, of the papal administration. Reference to past practice of the landed aristocracy keeping court in the monastery 'on the occasion of great feasts' therefore verges on a radical departure from the criteria contained within the Exordium and other tracts, or at least that is the message which the Cistercian movement wished to convey.

A tightening of the regulations?

As the Rule of Saint Benedict had been established a half millennium before the Cistercian Citeaux establishment, it seemed to be opportune to meet the challenge of review and redefinition. In the light of any laxity as suggested above, perhaps 're-establish' would be more appropriate. Ostensibly the Cistercian regulations are suggesting a 'back to basics' approach to monastic life

. . . lest there remain in the house of God, where they wished to serve God devotedly day and night, anything smacking of pride or superfluity, or anything that might at any time corrupt the poverty—guardian of the virtues— which they had voluntarily chosen, they resolved to retain no crosses of gold or silver, but only painted wooden ones; no candelabra except a single one of iron; no thuribles except of copper or iron; no chasuble except of plain cloth or linen, and

without silk, gold, and silver; no albs or amices except of linen, and likewise without silk, gold, and silver. As for all mantles and copes and did, however,

retain chalices, not of gold, but of silver, and, if possible, gilded; and a communion-tube of silver, and only gilded, if that could be so; only stoles and maniples could be of silk, without gold or silver. As for without pictorial ornamentation, and that the wine cruets be without gold or silver [2]

The general reaction to this is that austerity was to be a cornerstone of the Cistercian mission.

A radical departure or just a 'rebranding' and expansion ?

It could be argued that when reviewing the minutiae of the 'new order', or simply just 'Order' of Cistercians when looked at from a temporal distance does, in conclusion, seem less radical and more of a 'variation on a theme'. Inevitably, the twenty-first century psyche can only view the monastic movement as a phenomenon largely detached and even alien from contemporary everyday experience. Much of the detail of how the monk was to carry out his waking hours, even to the extent of corresponding sleep regulation, seems utterly mechanistic and systematic to the point of incredulity. But in fact comparison of the Cistercian 'rules' does not at first sight seem so far removed from the Benedictine edicts underlying the greater monastic culture, generally speaking. [3] The Cistercians may have adopted an undyed woollen cowl as their outer robe as a kind of disassociation with the black robed Benedictines but essentially they were 'in the same business', at least from the standpoint of prayer for the souls of mortals, so to speak. So what if any were the main aspects of the departure?

In her concise article, 'Who were the Cistercians', Janet Burton explains . .

' The Cistercians went further, and over a period of time came to devise structures which bound individual houses together in a way that had not been tried before. The congregation of Cîteaux spread rapidly: monasteries sent out colonies, or daughter houses, to establish new foundations, and some existing monasteries adopted Cistercian customs. In order to preserve the unity of observance it was decided that each year the abbot of each Cistercian house should travel to Cîteaux to attend the Annual General Chapter. The Chapter became the legislative body of the Order ' [4]

The particular aspect which seems extraordinary in a retrospective sense is the apparent rapid spread of the movement outside its Continental origins into England and then Wales. But in hindsight, this expansion into Britain was essentially 'post-Norman', and the country was virgin territory and the potential for developing a new expanded agrarian enterprise would not have escaped

the minds of the pioneers of the movement. The resultant landed and property wealth ('real estate') might invite the comment that although the eschewment of gold and silver as quoted earlier may have been a fundamental overt criterion, what was not accumulated in precious metal might have been far outweighed in the values of donated property and the later recurring productive values of this.

Economic consequences

It is interesting to ponder that with the adoption and exploitation of a stratum of affiliate 'lay brotherhood' below the cohort of monks, and with a kind of 'general manager' or chief executive in the person of the abbot, the inquiry arises as whether the Cistercian order could be considered as a primitive form of capitalism. Initial 'start-up' investment in the form of land gifting and other donation could establish a new monastic site. The later production of sheep flocks in the English countryside as part of the product cycle was a relatively straightforward profitable consequence and a commodity in perennial demand prior to the cotton mills of the nineteenth century. As Michael Novak has suggested,

. . . 'The Cistercians, who eschewed the aristocratic and sedentary ways of the Benedictines and, consequently, broke farther away from feudalism, became famous as entrepreneurs. They mastered rational cost accounting, ploughed all profits back into new ventures, and moved capital around from one venue to another, cutting losses where necessary, and pursuing new opportunities when feasible. [5]



[6] *Quia unius veri Regis, et Domini, et Magistri, nos omnes servos licet inutiles, cognoscimus, idcirco abbatibus et confratribus.* Opening initial of the Carta Caritatis suggesting the brotherly love criteria encapsulated in the Cistercian records. The spirit of cooperation and collaboration was paramount.

The situation that Abbott Stephen inherited in the eleventh century has a certain fascination in that the small beginning could be a seminal moment in European history from which stems something resembling a system for living out one's life involving time considerations and limitation on activity, methodology of production and what might be considered a kind of socialism in the sense that ostensibly there are no external capitalists or feudal masters to which the community had to answer. In a sense, brother was answerable to brother in an environment of self-serving co-operation.

Notes

1

A critique or opinion forwarded by the author Constance Hoffman Berman 'proves that no reliable reference to Stephen's *Carta Caritatis* appears before the mid-twelfth century, and that the document is more likely to date from 1165 than from 1119.' The implications of this fact are profound. Instead of being a charter by which more than 300 Cistercian houses were set up by a central authority, the document becomes a means of bringing under centralized administrative control a large number of loosely affiliated and already existing monastic houses of monks as well as nuns who shared Cistercian customs [extracted from a contents summary /review of the publication by the distributor Amazon. com]

2 Exordium Parvum 5 -8

3 Professor Harriet Webster in her Course documentation from the UWTSD Module MODULE CODE: HPHI5911/6911, expounds the notion that successive versions of the Cistercian origins suggest an ongoing concern with their preoccupation with legality or justification of their movement

4 Burton : 'So how were the Cistercians different?', op. cit.

5 Novak, M. *How Religion Created Capitalism* in RELIGION AND LIBERTY, Vol 10, no.3 (2010: Acton Institute)

6 The opening text of the ***Carta Caritatis*** attributed to Stephen Harding, second abbot of the Order

Bibliographic, source readings, foundation reading section

Burton, J & Kerr, J The cistercians in the Middle Ages [Monastic Orders] {2011 Suffolk, Boydell Press}

Burton, J 'Who Were theCistercians?' in
<https://www.monasticwales.org/>

Hoffman Berman, C. The Cistercian Evolution: The Invention of a Religious Order in Twelfth-Century Europe (2010 University of Pennsylvania Press)}

Novak, M. *How Religion Created Capitalism* in RELIGION AND LIBERTY, Vol 10, no.3 (2010: Acton Institute)

Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance: *Carta Caritatis* [trans] 'The Charter of Love'

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Webster, Harriet: Course study readings and presentation documentation in UWTSD Module MODULE CODE: HPHI5911/6911, , 2022

<https://www.amazon.com/Cistercian-Evolution-Invention-Religious-Twelfth-Century/dp/0812221028>

https://www.klastervyssibrod.cz/_d/01/struct/Exordium-Parvum.

<https://www.acton.org/pub/religion-liberty/volume-10-number-3/how-christianity-created-capitalism>

