

- 1 Walter Map among others accused the Cistercians of depopulation of existing settlements in order to create their own 'desert'. What factors affected the choice of Cistercian sites?

Ever faithful to their creed and Rule, Cistercians interlinked two different approaches, or distinctive but interlinked monastic traditions of Cenobites and Hermits, held the idea of a 'desert' close to their heart. The appearance of this specific term in The Rule of St Benedict may have also affected such perception by the external figures, such as Walter Map, who, as a prominent Church figure connected to the Crown, a man who in 1197 became an archdeacon of Oxford,¹ was very much an outsider in this case, with his own biased opinions. His accusations nowadays are considered a 'first-rate satire',² and whilst they may highlight a perspective outlook on the actions of the Cistercians, it certainly does not provide a complete picture.

The Cistercian Order, founded in the 12th century, is a monastic community rooted in the principles of the Rule of St Benedict. This rule, authored by St Benedict of Nursia in the 6th century, serves as the foundation for the Cistercian way of life, emphasising simplicity, humility, and devotion to God. The Cistercians sought a return to the fundamental aspects of monasticism as outlined by St Benedict. Their order emerged as a response to what they saw as the growing wealth, luxury, and deviation from a spiritual focus within existing monastic communities. The Rule of St Benedict, which advocates for a balanced life of prayer, work, and communal living, strongly influenced the Cistercians. They adhered to its principles with vigour. Cistercian monasteries were intentionally situated in remote and rural locations, often characterised by challenging conditions. This isolation allowed the monks to detach from the distractions of the secular world and create an environment conducive to spiritual growth. A vital aspect of the Cistercian interpretation of the Rule is its emphasis on manual labour, particularly in agriculture and craftsmanship, this of course required the right environment to function correctly, as establishing an abbey in a place without the potential to grow their own produce would go against their beliefs. Work was considered an essential element of the monastic life, fostering self-sufficiency and humility. This dedication to labour was intertwined with a commitment to asceticism and frugality. The Cistercians practised austerity in their daily routines, architecture, and liturgy, reflecting their desire for a simpler, more devout existence.

The general perception of Cistercians is contradicted by Walter Map in a very believable way. Margaret Sinex credits this achievement to the way he phrased his words, resorting to a direct narration, putting him in the centre of events that gave credibility to his opinions.³ He goes as far as to differentiate between "their God" and "our God", drawing a

¹ Margaret Sinex, "Echoic Irony in Walter Map's Satire Against The Cistercians", *Comparative Literature*, Vol. 54, No. 4 (Autumn, 2002), DOI: 10.2307/4125366, [Accessed 10 August 2023], p. 275.

² [Margaret Sinex](#) Echoic Irony in Walter Map's Satire against the Cistercians, p. 275.

³ Ibid, p.276

thick line between the attitudes and actions of the “White Monks” and the values held by the Church, which he believed were that much closer and appropriately realised by others.⁴

The most important of the accusations Map levelled against the Cistercians was their means of achieving new territories - by depopulation of the existing settlements and forcing people out. R.A Donkin, in *The Cistercian Order and the Settlement of Northern England*, states that the location of the Cistercian centres had no effect on the underdevelopment of the areas in the North, as their location was directly tied to the Landowners, and it was their decision to invite the monks rather than monks’ themselves.⁵ There were multiple factors influencing the location itself, and the monks were definitely holding onto the trend of mediaeval Landowners donating their belongings, in this case, land, to the Church and monastic organisations. Using the existing trend and the willingness of others, they were able to procure the land needed to build their lodgings. Further to this, Sinex in the Echoic Irony In Walter Map’s Satire Against The Cistercians states that “Further, the Cistercians were also linked with the phenomenon of depopulation, a result of the monks’ penchant for obtaining land for the order’s members to farm, and for turning out the original occupants.”,⁶ This directly connects with their need for solitude, and oftentimes, as this essay will discuss, this was not entirely their goal but rather a result of opportunity or simply an action taken by the landowner. It can be argued that Cistercians were noble only on paper and that the accusations made by Walter Map prove that the ideology and reality did not overlap in this case, but as with every organisation, saintly or otherwise, that deals in ownership of the land and attempts to be as self-reliant as possible, such a turn of the events and depopulation can only be expected, especially when taking into account the attitudes towards the Church held by the people, they were only too happy to provide the monks with what they needed. This said, not everyone, including the Pope, was happy with the Cistercian’s savvy ways. As Sinex further mentions that “Indeed, their practices stimulated Pope Alexander III to threaten to revoke the Cistercians’ exemption from paying tithes, which had originally been granted to the monks when they were struggling to establish their order earlier in the century”,⁷ which points to the prosperity of the monks during their times. Taking into account the wealth the Church possessed, it can only suggest that the Cistercian orders, due to their way of procuring their land, were known to limit their expenditure whilst expanding their wealth through cost-efficient means.

R. A. Donkin mentions in *The Cistercian Order and the Settlement of Northern England* that “By 1152 (when the general chapter called a halt to the foundations of new colonies), no fewer than 333 houses had been established through Europe.”⁸ and further elaborates that “The First houses in northern England were Rievaulx and Fountains, [...], and all but one of the northern monasteries were in existence by 1152 [...]. By comparison, only

⁴ Ibid, p.276

⁵ R. A. Donkin, “The Cistercian Order and the Settlement of Northern England”, *Geographical Review*, Vol. 59, No. 3 (Jul., 1969), DOI: 10.2307/213484, pp. 403-416, [Accessed 10/08/2023]. p. 403.

⁶ Margaret Sinex Echoic Irony in Walter Map's Satire against the Cistercians, p. 287

⁷ Ibid, p.287

⁸ R. A. Donkin, “The Cistercian Order and the Settlement of Northern England”, p. 403.

two-thirds of the total of English and Welsh houses had been founded by that time.”⁹. This points to the fact that the expansion continued past the year of 1152, he also mentions the aspect of depopulation which Walter Map accused the Cistercians of - “[...] and in the last two instances the settlements were promptly depopulated and transformed into granges farmed by lay brothers. The remaining houses occupied more or less vacant land”,¹⁰. Donkin continues to state that the monks “favored sites that stood apart from existing settlement”¹¹. This ties directly with the Rule of St Benedict, which describes four types of monks and the elevated status of Hermits and Cenobites, interlinking these two. This provides the Cistercians with the ability to culture their own land, be self-reliant and be far enough from the society that they would not be tempted by the so-called ‘earthly desires’. Donkin further states that there was a clear procedure for how the place for the settlement was to be chosen, with the focus being on the “close inspection of the ground”,¹² it is unclear whether it was the defining factor, but what is known is the “Twenty-nine Cistercian houses in England and Wales (that is, more than one-third of the total) changed their sites at least one”,¹³ it is apparent that, as each move was dictated by the “physical conditions and poor economic prospects”,¹⁴ that the monks were very reliant on the fruits of their physical labour, namely their ability to provide for themselves by working the ground surrounding their settlements.

Another factor that ties in with the previous paragraph would be the monks’ beliefs, particularly the approach to upholding the Benedictine rule, following simple life and focusing on manual labour, as much as separation from other established settlements. As much as it was mentioned in the previous paragraph, it also had its downfall. The monks, albeit a learnt society, had limited knowledge when it came to the assessment of lands. Donkin refers to this as their ignorance interlinked with “scant attention at first in the prevailing mood of asceticism and religious zeal.”,¹⁵ He further states that this was a cause for the change in the location of the settlements, as the monks tended to move when the conditions of the area or the quality of the soil became too much for them to feasibly uphold the values that they swore to live by and protect.

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Another interesting reason for their choice of locations would simply be opportunities presented to them by the turn of events current to their time. An example of this would be the devastation of Yorkshire by William I during the winter months of 1069

⁹ Ibid, p.403.

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 403.

¹¹ Ibid, p.403.

¹² Ibid, p. 404.

¹³ Ibid, p.404.

¹⁴ Ibid, p.404.

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 407.

and 1070.¹⁶ Monks took advantage of this and, even if not relocating, chose to expand their already vast areas even further.

The White Monks, in their ever-existent aim to be self-reliant, chose their sites based on what was available to them at the time. When presented with an opportunity and a way, they would buy the necessary land or would simply receive it as a gift.¹⁷ This, when properly executed, allowed them to limit their interactions with people of the surrounding land, giving them autonomy and the ability to realise their ideology of self-reliance and disconnection from the earthly realm. Taking into consideration the fact that the Rule of St Benedict included specific rules for interaction with anyone outside the Abbey and the need to live under the absolute control of the Abbot,¹⁸ limiting the outside influence was essential to their ability to uphold such ideologies, as for the monk, the Abbot was the absolute ruler, second in power only to God.

Additionally, the Rule of St Benedict itself provides an insight into the requirements mentioned above - if the way of Cenobites was linked to the way of Heremites and these two were two sides of the same coin, with Cenobites living as a self-reliant community and Heremites learning in such a community to prepare themselves for their lonesome life outside, such an environment and learning opportunities would only be possible in a strictly controlled or otherwise carefully picked and prepared environment. Such an environment would have to be sterile enough to prevent any interference from the outside so as not to disturb the life of the monks and allow them otherwise unachievable skills. Taking into consideration the fact that people in settlements would often exchange what they had with their neighbours based on their needs, a less-than-sterile environment would lead to the ability to trade and procure what was needed (which still occurred from time to time) rather than the ability to provide for oneself.

Following the devastation of York, another key factor became crucial in the location of the Cistercian sites, who often founded or relocated their Abbeys based on invitation. It was the desire of the landowners to rehabilitate the land and improve its agricultural status.¹⁹ Following the policy of consolidation, which led to the depopulation of the already occupied areas,²⁰ Following the policy of consolidation, which led to the depopulation of the already occupied areas, suggests that the most important of all factors in the location of the settlements was the opportunities for growth, expansion and agriculture it provided, not to mention the ability to procure it relatively quickly. This could be perceived as a reason behind the halt to expansion, which was dictated but further straying away from the Rule. Nevertheless, even with the decision issued by the Charter, monks continued to expand and, in turn, move further away from the values they originally intended to keep. Not only were they progressively less reliant, but they were also upholding the Rule of St Benedict in the

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 407.

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 408

¹⁸ The Rule of St Benedict

¹⁹ R. A. Donkin, "The Cistercian Order and the Settlement of Northern England", p. 409.

²⁰ Ibid, p. 412.

name, not in the spirit, as “early fourteenth century, [...] the monks adopted a new economic policy that involved leasing a large part of their estates”²¹.

One of the best descriptions of the choice of locations would be the following quote by Donkin “The Cistercians neither settled in towns nor encouraged towns to develop outside their walls”.²² This points to the recurring theme of solitude and isolation by choice, even if only in theory (inclusion of lay brothers). The White Monks were masters of cultivating the soil and creating a somewhat self-reliant economy focused on providing their settlement with the necessary produce to survive. They learned to use the opportunities given to them and, as stated above, often utilised what was offered to them without due research into the area, resulting in a place unfit to meet their rigorous requirements. One thing is certain, regardless of the factors influencing their choice, Cistercians greatly impacted the area they decided to settle in, partially due to the opportunities presented to them and partially through the knowledge they cultivated through the Rule of St Benedict and the necessity of manual labour. This, in connection with the idea of divine inspiration and obligation to do God’s work, served as a motivator to work the land and improve their lodgings.

To conclude, albeit in a satirical way, Walter Map was not wrong about the Cistercians, at least not in regard to their way of procuring new land by depopulating the area and expanding their monastic empire to further their own agenda. As true as this may be, the important question for this essay was to establish the factors used by Cistercians when choosing a new place for their abode. This could be summarised in terms of opportunity, possibility, wealth and seclusion. Each of these factors played an important role in the choice of a place for the settlement. Oftentimes, a new settlement would take the place of a previously vacated one, which further simplified the procurement process. Unfortunately, each of these factors alone did not constitute success, as the relocations of Barnoldswick or Fors proved.²³ Only through the choice that considered multiple of these factors were the monks able to choose a place that would serve them for many years to come.

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²¹ Ibid, p. 412.

²² Ibid, p. 415.

²³ Ibid, p. 404.