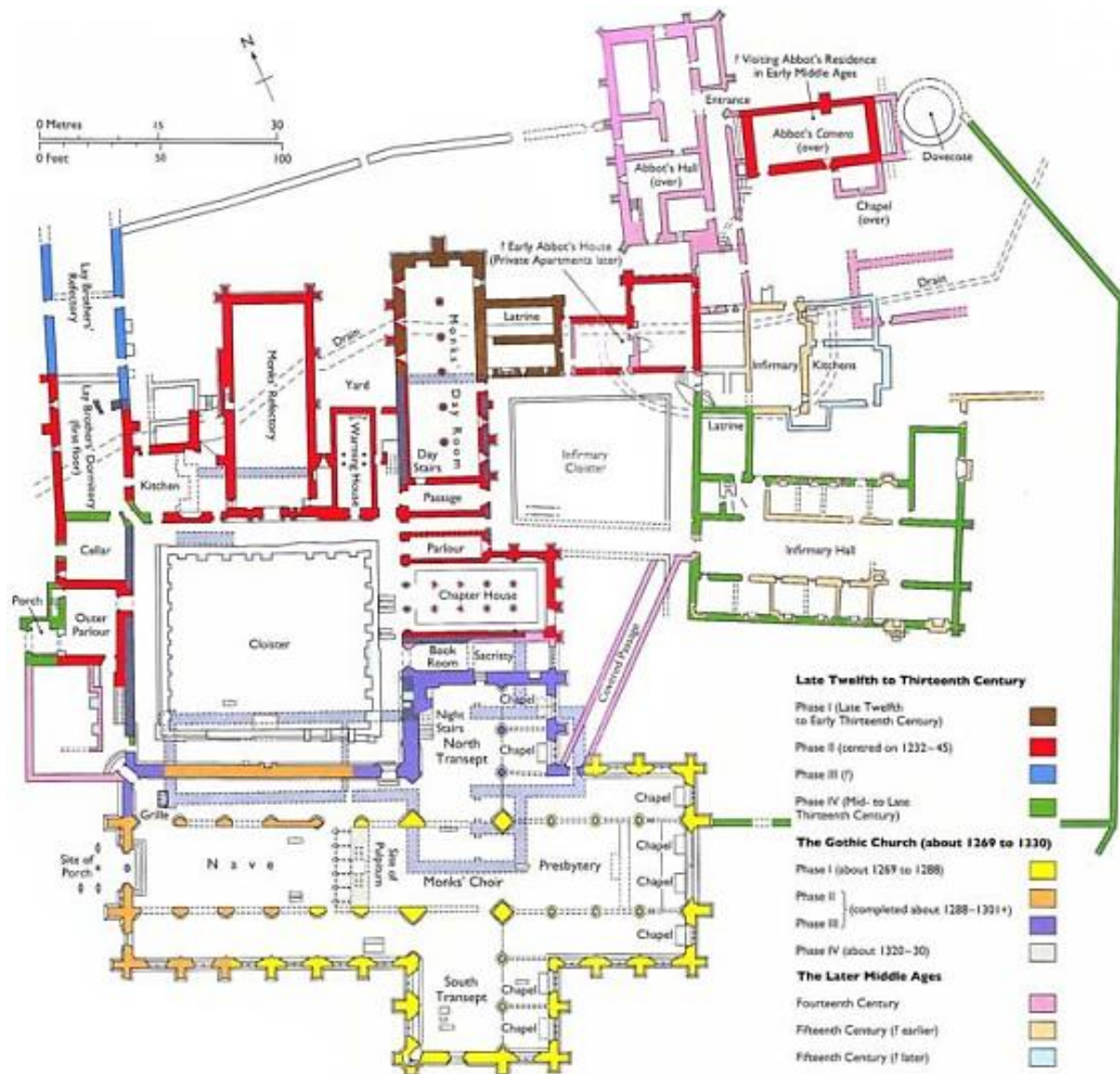


Assignment - Commentary Two – From Desert Myths to Sheep Tales: The Cistercians in the Middle Ages (HPHI5911)

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A commentary of 1250 words on the following image:



The image depicts a ground plan of Tintern Abbey, the 'first Cistercian house to be founded in Wales'.¹ In AD 1131 monks from the French mother house, L'Aumône Abbey, were brought to the banks of the river Wye, near their new patron, Walter fitz Richard de Clare, Anglo-Norman lord of Chepstow.² Today, although it stands in ruin, a far cry from its heights of gothic glory, it remains impressive, protected by Cadw.³

Lying on the border of Wales and England, the abbey witnessed political turmoil in the years between its founding and its eventual dissolution via the English Reformation.⁴ It also underwent its own alterations during that time. The plan attempts to make these changes easier to perceive via the use of bright colours and a key divided into three sections: the initial abbey complex; the gothic church; and later additions.

The key does not refer to the first stone buildings of the early twelfth century, the remains of which either were incorporated as part of the alterations or knocked down and the stones reused. However, part of the original building outline is marked in pale grey, and clearly shows the cross shape of the church, and some walls of the domestic buildings.⁵ Because the Cistercians did not begin building in stone till the mid-1130s, it follows that the first oratory, dormitory, refectory, and guest house were constructed in wood and wattle, and the stone church and replacement essential buildings built during the following decade.⁶ The Cistercians claimed intention to follow a similar building layout on each site, a 'simplified framework for religious life', more austere than the 'Benedictines and Cluniacs'.⁷ Although the land was gifted by their patron founder, the monks often chose the position of the abbey complex with a view to spiritual harmony, water supply and waste disposal.⁸ Evidence shows that the orientation of many abbeys took into account not only the immediate landscape, but the horizon.⁹ Here at Tintern, a location close to the river was deemed suitable and the desired 'true east' alignment appears adjusted by approximately sixteen degrees to ensure that the equinoctial sun rise shone through the east window.¹⁰ The drainage system is marked on the plan, but having not survived the water supply pipes from the river are not.

¹ Janet Burton and Karen Stöber, *Abbeys And Priories Of Medieval Wales*, (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2015) p. 204.

² Ibid. For the political motivation behind the founding of religious houses by the Anglo-Norman or Anglo-Welsh elite see Burton and Kerr, *The Cistercians In The Middle Ages*, p. 45.

³ Llywodraeth Cymru, *Cadw: Tintern Abbey*, (2022) <<https://cadw.gov.wales/visit/places-to-visit/tintern-abbey>> [accessed 11th November 2022].

⁴ For a map of the Tintern Abbey estates in both Monmouthshire and Gloucestershire see David M. Robinson, *Tintern Abbey*, (Cardiff: Cadw: Welsh Historic Monuments, 2002), p. 13.

⁵ Burton and Stöber, *Abbeys And Priories Of Medieval Wales*, p. 205.

⁶ Janet Burton and Julie Kerr, *The Cistercians In The Middle Ages*, (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2011), pp. 64-71. For the estimated building time of the first stone church see Janet and Stöber, *Abbeys And Priories Of Medieval Wales*, p. 208.

⁷ Glyn Coppack, *The White Monks: The Cistercians In Britain 1228-1540*, (Stroud: Tempus Publishing Ltd, 1998), p. 23.

⁸ Burton and Kerr, *The Cistercians In The Middle Ages*, pp. 69-70. Whilst most Cistercian cloisters were south facing to benefit from maximum sunlight, being on the south side of the river the Tintern Abbey complex was built north of the church to facilitate the design of the water system, p. 69.

⁹ Bernadette Brady, Darrelyn Gunzburg, and Fabio Silva, 'The Orientation Of Cistercian Churches In Wales: A Cultural Astronomy Case Study', *Citeaux: Commentarii Cistercienses*, 67.3-4 (2017), 275-302 (p. 300).

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 286. The alignment for the first church was 105.3° and the gothic church was 106.2°, p. 287.

The first section of the key, 'Late Twelfth to Thirteenth Century', points to four building phases shown in brown, red, bright blue and green respectively. Phase one was the removal of the end wall of the dormitory and an extension to twice its original length, an upper story, and an adjoining latrine. This became the monks' day room with the dormitory above. Next, the refectory, which ran along the side of the courtyard area opposite the nave, was replaced by a longer one perpendicular to the cloister area, leaving room for a kitchen and warming room. During the same time the chapter house was built down the east side of the courtyard, meeting the transept of the church, and the lay brothers' dormitory was built on the opposing western side, enclosing the open cloister garth where the monks read, meditated, washed, did laundry, and dried manuscripts.¹¹ Finally, phases three and four saw the completion of the essential complex with the lay brothers' refectory added to their dormitory and an infirmary hall created separately away to the east, along with an outer wall enclosure.

Beginning in AD 1269 an ambitious upgrade for the church began to unfold. This rejection of simple Romanesque architecture, the unadorned pillars and 'shallow, square east end' fit for a plain wooden altar that was enforced in earlier times, attests to the breakdown of Cistercian uniformity and the Annual Chapter.¹² The diagram shows in yellow that when construction of the new gothic church commenced it was around the old church so that it could still be used for worship. Next, in orange, came its partial demolition and more building work. With generous donations from Roger Bigod, often called the second founder, the final stage, in purple, took place. This saw the original church wholly removed and completion of the new around AD 1301, when it was consecrated.¹³ The diagram shows the new church to be much wider, no longer aisle-less, and its eastern end had room for chapels in addition to those in the transept. The cloister was also remodelled with double rows of 'trefoil-headed arches'.¹⁴ Indeed, the abbey stood as a testament to the gifted lands, monetary grants, and the many pilgrims' offerings that came the abbey's way, it being on a 'major route'.¹⁵ Apparently the stain glass windows expressed gratitude by displaying the coat of arms of their patron.¹⁶

Funds were also found for a substantial upgrade, shown in pink, to the accommodation for both the resident and visiting abbots, and other benefactors, to enjoy at the end of the fourteenth century. Despite 'financial difficulties' in the early fifteenth century, due to the fighting between Welsh rebels and the English crown, building work was unhalted.¹⁷ Improving hygiene standards via new internal infirmary walls may have been prompted by the Black Plague which saw numbers of up to sixty resident monks in AD 1139 down to

¹¹ Robinson, *Tintern Abbey*, p. 48.

¹² Christopher Brooke, *The Monastic World*, (London: Paul Elek Ltd, 1974), pp.152-153.

¹³ Burton and Stöber, *Abbeys And Priories Of Medieval Wales*, p. 208.

¹⁴ Robinson, *Tintern Abbey*, pp. 30-31.

¹⁵ Burton and Stöber, *Abbeys And Priories Of Medieval Wales*, p.207. An additional draw for pilgrims was the abbey's venerated statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary, p. 208.

¹⁶ Robinson, *Tintern Abbey*, p. 46.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 16-17. A plea to the pope for financial help with building maintenance was made in the late fifteenth century, see p. 37. For the abbey's status as the wealthiest in Wales by the time of its suppression see Burton and Stöber, *Abbeys And Priories Of Medieval Wales*, p.207.

fifteen in AD 1395.¹⁸ The presence of the infirmary cloister and kitchen, in pale blue, suggests that this part of the abbey accommodated elderly residents, not just the sick, and for serving the abbots hall.¹⁹ This kitchen concluded the building work.

The plan is accurate, with orientation enabled via a north pointing arrow, but it lacks scale. With clearly labelled buildings it aids on-site identification of the spaces and is a basic educational tool.²⁰ It adequately demonstrates the building phases via the colour key and the grouping of building phases makes the sequence of alterations easier to comprehend. Overall, it presents Tintern Abbey not only as religious house complex, but as a lived-in project, making the ruin an accessible piece of history, and illustrates this Cistercian house's systematic move away from humility and poverty towards grandeur.

¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 14-16.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 62.

²⁰ For an example of a plan of Tintern Abbey aimed toward education rather than tourism see Burton and Stöber, *Abbeys And Priories Of Medieval Wales*, p. 205.

Bibliography

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